

**2008**

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## January 1, 2008 – New Year's Greeting



There will be no shortage of greetings for a new year. Each new year is a unique opportunity to pause and reflect, to make changes and to offer our best wishes to others. So let me add a few wishes for your new year.

There are those who will wish you good health in 2008. And health is indeed a blessing. However, my wish for you is that you develop the ability and courage to live with chronicity. Each of us has one or more chronic conditions - things that cannot change. It may or may not be labeled by society as a disability. Perhaps it is a persistent pain or merely the inability to do something that you once did with ease. Your chronic condition may require medical treatment or it may be something for which there is no treatment. The few people who have no chronic conditions will one day develop one. So this new year may your itches be scratched, until you find the one that cannot be scratched - then may you learn to live with the itch.

There are those who will wish you the blessings of family in 2008. And family is one of the deepest blessings of life. But I want to be clear that the blessings of family come in families of all sizes and shapes. One thing that can be learned from reading the Bible is that there is no one "ideal" configuration for family. There are families without children and families with single parents and families formed by adoption and families that have been blended. There are individuals who form a household of one and people who have no permanent place to call home. My new year's wish for you this year is that you will discover the joy in the family that you have. Real families have real relationships and

real relationships are often confusing and complex and result in a wide variety of feelings. But real families also are a source of real joy - the kind that suffering cannot turn back - the kind that no one can take from you. May your family be real.

There are those who will wish you peace and contentment in 2008. And being content is a good thing, but it often does not lead to peace. So I send to you my wish for a measure of discontentment in the year to come. May you recognize the conditions that make for peace - justice, equity, and sharing. May you become discontent with injustice, inequality, and selfishness. May you recognize these things in yourself and in others and take positive steps to create the conditions for change. May you have enough rest to be healthy and enough restlessness to participate in changes for the better.

There are those who will wish you wealth and prosperity in 2008. So, in its place, may I wish that you have time to walk with those who are poor. When I work with congregations who are planning, I often ask them to tell me about the best times in the history of their church. Invariably, the "best times" that they recall are times when the congregation faced financial challenges. Despite our fantasies, wealth can be as deep a burden as it is a blessing. The lives of the wealthy are not necessarily better or happier. In the year to come may you learn the joy of living without some of the things that money can buy and may you have opportunities to walk with those others label as "poor." Your worth will not be measured by what you acquire or build or buy, but in what you give. "When all you've got is nothing, there's a lot to go around." May your wealth be measured not by counting money, but by your capacity to share.

There are those who will wish you success in 2008. But I have found that failure is often a better teacher than success. May your new year hold enough failure that you have good reasons to continue to learn and grow and change. When 2009 comes and you look back at the year that has passed may you find it to be momentous and memorable and filled with adventure.

Happy New Year!

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## January 2, 2008 – The Tree



Folks were working hard yesterday to take down all of their Christmas decorations. As we drove across town in the evening there were noticeably fewer homes with their outdoor lighting displays turned on. The yard waste recycling dumpster in our neighborhood is filled to overflowing and the sites in the parks in town have huge piles of Christmas trees. For many, New Year's Day marks the end of the Christmas season.

But at our house the tree is still up. And it will remain up through next Sunday. January 6 - Epiphany - is our traditional day to take down the tree. That allows for Christmas to be celebrated throughout the twelve days of the season. Our tree isn't in our home longer than our neighbors. We're often the last in the neighborhood to put p the tree. Popular culture isn't big on the distinction between Advent and Christmas and so Christmas decorations tend to go up Thanksgiving weekend and come down on New Year's day.

Most years I am reluctant for Christmas to end. This year is no exception. We've had a wonderful celebration in our home, with family and friends and a few days with a slower pace than our usual. I've had some days when I could nap or sit and read a book without having to meet a deadline or feel too uncomfortable about the unfinished work on my desk. There is plenty of work to be accomplished and the next couple of days will be full with a newsletter to produce, meetings to conduct, a budget to plan and a host of other projects that are time sensitive. But there is a fresh energy having had time to take a bit of a break for Christmas.

Epiphany is the traditional day to celebrate the arrival of the Magi bearing gifts to the infant Jesus. It has also become a time when Christians celebrate the gifts of light. We remember the star that guided the travels of the wise men. We celebrate Jesus as the light of the world. Our celebrations have both secular and sacred roots. Before the arrival of Christianity, many northern hemisphere cultures had a mid-winter celebration of the equinox and the gradual lengthening of days. Bonfires were lit to celebrate the return of the sun's light. In some areas the bonfire is incorporated into Epiphany celebrations - including the tradition of gathering and burning the Christmas trees as part of a twelfth night celebration.

Our Epiphany celebrations will be a bit more muted, but we do have the joy of Epiphany landing on a Sunday this year, so we will have a special worship service at the church to mark the occasion. And we'll have a little special family time in the afternoon and evening as we remove the ornaments from the tree and place them in their boxes for storage until next Christmas.

It is sort of fun to be slightly out of step with the majority - to put up our tree a little later and to wait a few days longer to take it down. It gives us the opportunity to be a bit more intentional about our celebrations instead of just being caught up in the waves of popular culture. We've still got our Christmas music playing and get to hang on to the warmth of Christmas for a few more days. The neighbors think we're a bit eccentric, but don't mind it at all. We've been around long enough that they know what to expect for the most part.

Christmas is the celebration of a joy that lasts the entire year. It's good to have the tree up for a few more days.

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## January 3, 2008 – Nine Ladies Dancing

twelfth day of Christ mas my true love gave to me Twelve drum-mers drum-ming, 'leven  
ls a' - leap - ing, Nine la - dies dan - cing, Eight maids a' - mil - king, Se - ven swans  
se a - lay - ing, Five gold\_\_ rings, Four\_\_ cal  
ch hens two\_\_ tur - tle doves, and a part - ridge\_\_ in a pear tree

On the ninth day of Christmas, my true love gave to me Nine ladies dancing . . . The popular Christmas song seems to be just a collection of nonsense verses about fantasy gifts. Every year someone tries to estimate the financial worth of the gifts for the twelve days of Christmas. The 2007 Christmas price index estimated that the total cost of goods and services for the twelve gifts to be \$19,507.19, although the computation of the number contains a fair amount of speculation. There are various versions of the song in which the order of the gifts is slightly different, and at least one version with fiddlers fiddling instead of lords a leaping.

There are various versions of the history of the song. It does appear that the song was used, in part as a fun way to teach counting. The practice of counting backwards reinforces the memory. One legend attributes specific teachings about Christian doctrine to each of the twelve verses, although this legend does not appear to be very old and probably represents meaning that was added to the song after it was written rather than meaning that was originally intended in the song. The song seems to have originated in the 1780's in England. The list of symbolic meanings seems to be a product of the modern internet. It is unlikely that the song was ever used as a formal catechetical tool to teach doctrine. Like many other forms of art, the song collects meanings that are different from those originally intended.

I've received several e-mail versions of the "hidden meanings" in the song. In each of these the nine ladies dancing are said to represent the nine fruits of the spirit listed in

Galatians 5:22: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. The nine fruits are a different list than the seven gifts of the holy spirit that appear in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12: prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading and compassion. Those are said to be symbolized by the seven swans a swimming.

Debating the “true” meaning of the song is probably pointless because the reality is that there are many layers of meaning for most works of art, and who is to say that it is right or wrong to add a layer of meaning? I suspect, however, that as a tool for teaching Christian doctrine, the song is not very useful as the meanings attributed to it are indeed “hidden” and not immediately obvious. It would be easy to memorize the song without retaining any of the symbolic meanings. The song once again becomes a fun children’s counting song, which is probably the way it has functioned for more than a couple of centuries.

As the father of a daughter who studied ballet for many years, nine ladies dancing brings to mind memories of years of ballet recitals and dance programs and driving our daughter to and from the dance studio for lessons. It is a pleasant memory and indeed a gift for the holiday season, often celebrated by attending a performance of Tchaikovsky’s “The Nutcracker.”

There are many layers of meaning in the traditions of Christmas, some ancient, some modern. Part of the joy of looking through the layers is determining the age of various traditions and interpretations. It is clear that the tradition is a living one and that new layers of meaning are being added. The Internet allows for rapid distribution of myth and legend as well as accurate information and requires a bit of additional search for those who seek historical accuracy.

So yesterday, on the ninth day of Christmas, I had visions of ballerinas in toe shoes dancing the Tchaikovsky’s music. Today, whether it be “lords a leaping” or “fiddlers fiddling” or the ten commandments of Exodus, I will find delight in the season as well as a sense that, as usual, it is passing all too quickly.

We’ve only a few more days to wish “Merry Christmas” before the bright lights of Epiphany are upon us.

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## January 4, 2008 – Sorting Memories



Our family has had several amateur photographers who have collected images of family and church events, travels, scenery and every day life. A couple of generations ago, he preferred method of organizing photographs was the keeping of albums of prints. We have several albums that are now quite old. There are wide discrepancies in terms of organization in the albums. Some are in roughly chronological order. A few have accurate captions identifying the people in the photos. Some reflect the artistic nature of the person who compiled the album. Captions like “the gang at the lake” might have been interesting to the original viewers of the albums, but have little value to grandchildren trying to identify who is in the picture. We have discovered that sometimes there are identifying labels on the back of photographs and are learning to carefully remove them from albums so that they can be scanned and preserved as computer files.

During the second half of the twentieth century, many of us took color slides. Almost every family gathering had a time of setting up a slide projector and looking at pictures. Slides were collected in slide trays and carousels and sometimes in metal boxes designed to store large amounts of slides. Sometimes a carousel would be labeled and a few slides have labels written on their cardboard frames, but many of them have no identifiers on the individual pictures. A tray of forty slides may have only a label such as “Vacation 1968” on the box. One collection of slides was at one time carefully organized with each slide numbered, but we do not have the index and the numbering system doesn’t give much of a clue as to the contents of the pictures.

But the pictures represent the memories of our family. And we are working to collect, organize and preserve those pictures in some way that will make them accessible and useful to future generations. Like the collecting of memoirs, biographies and oral histories, there is a sense of urgency to our project because many of the images can be identified by our elders and without their help we may not every be able to know why a particular photograph has been saved for so long or what its meaning is in the story of our family.

I have been trying to scan a few color slides into the computer each evening. At the rate I am going, the project will take several years. We've set up a special hard drive and back up system for the digital photographs and I have set up a cataloguing system that allows me to attach captions and keywords to each image so that they can later be sorted in a variety of different ways. I add dates and locations when I have them. In a few months, I should have some of the images organized so that we can show them at family gatherings and collect more information from the memories of family members.

Sorting through memories is always a big task. Each generation is charged with choosing what to retain and what can no longer be kept. Our family is full of savers, who attempt to keep as much as possible, and sometimes the quantity of what has been saved becomes a burden as we deal with storage and organization. It is not sufficient to have kept family memories, they need to be organized in ways that make the accessible to others. And in each generation we have to accept the reality that there is loss. We cannot keep everything.

Developmental psychologists teach that integration is one of the tasks of the aging years. A lifetime of experiences and memories need to be seen as a whole and not just a series of random events. Sorting and organizing and making sense of memories becomes important as individuals discern the meaning of their lives and consider the legacies that they leave to future generations.

Our generation has an added challenge of technology. We have grown to expect technologies to become quickly obsolete, so it is difficult for us to choose the format or media on which to store our memories. We are aware that time and use cause the deterioration of photo albums and color transparencies, but we know that digital media may not preserve our memories any better. Who knows if the latest DVD will be a format that can be played by future generations. Hard drives don't seem to be permanent storage devices. They fail and copying digital information from one drive to another seems to be a ritual that accompanies every computer purchase. The Internet is a good way to share some images, but it is transient and continually changing - hardly a place of permanence.

And with all of the new technologies, our skills at reading and writing are fading. We no longer have the skills at passing on oral traditions that were common among our ancestors. And each successive generation has a longer lineage than the preceding one - we are trying to retain more images and information than ever before. One of the challenges of our photograph organization project is that it isn't just our snapshots that we are attempting to organize. We are sorting through the images of at least three generations.

So along the way we are trying to save more than photographs. We are also trying to create a layer of written stories and of oral stories that can be passed from generation to generation. And we know that each generation will inherit the task of sifting and sorting. But perhaps some great grandchild who is yet unborn will one day discover an image from our time and treasure it as much as we treasure the picture of a grandmother's grandmother that hangs in our guest bedroom.

So we won't bore you by getting out our slide projector - but have you seen our latest DVD? And our kids probably have a YouTube video that they'd like to show you.

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## January 5, 2008 – Nature’s Light Show



Yesterday afternoon as I was driving home the skies over the hills were putting on a great light show of orange and blue and silver and gold. The day had been warm - nearly 60 degrees - enough to remind us that spring will one day come. We know that it is not yet spring and that there is still more snow and cold, but it is nice to get a little break from the cold. The next two months can be our coldest and some years our wettest as well and we need the moisture and know better than complaining about the snow.

The sky was glorious. Not being a photographer, the snapshots I took look a lot like others I've taken before, but remind me of something far more beautiful than the image on my computer.

I wondered as I drove if the drivers of the other cars headed out the road were noticing how truly beautiful the sunset was. Or were they too preoccupied with traffic and getting home and plans for the evening to notice? One of the problems with the style of dream chasing that has become popular in our culture is that people get so focused on where they are going that they fail to recognize the wonderful place they presently occupy.

We are so fortunate to live in the hills. The Lakota were right in their understanding that they are sacred. From nuthatches and chickadees to turkeys and eagles, from chipmunks and squirrels to deer and elk, the rich bounty of nature surrounds us. And we

often take it for granted. There is no way to place a value on the breath of pine-scented air that greets us as we open our doors or the glory of a Black Hills sunrise.

Of course God is everywhere and there is no place that one could go that would make one distant from God's presence. But surely God is in this place. Surely we stand on holy ground each step we take. We tell the ancient stories of Moses on Horeb and forget that the ground we tread every day is every bit as sacred as the places our grandmothers and grandfathers encountered the presence of the Most High.

I belong to a transient people. In the last dozen generations, we have not occupied the same place for more than a couple of generations. In a way it is funny that we called ourselves settlers when we came to this continent, for we have not settled in any one place since leaving Europe and we were hardly settled in the old country either. In the games of politics and power our people were, for the most part, not on the side of wealth and winning.

The place where I live is not the land of my grandparents and it is unlikely that it will be the place of my grandchildren. We are a people on the move. So it is a good thing that we discovered long ago that God is not attached to any single place. Way back when grandfather Abraham and grandmother Sarah took off from the land of their ancestors in search of the land that God would show them, we learned that you can leave the land of your birth, but you cannot leave God behind.

With all of this moving about, it is important from time to time to pause and take a look at the place where we are. Late yesterday afternoon, suspended between a day of appointments and errands and a delightful evening with church members and friends, God gave the gift of a magnificent sunset. I was glad I was there to see it. No laser show or display of fireworks has ever been as extravagant with the interplay of light and color as was the particular combination of hills and clouds and sunshine of yesterday's sunset. And it was a once-in-a-lifetime event. If you weren't looking you missed it. Tonight's show will be entirely different and no less extravagant.

I have a friend who often signs his correspondence, "God bless!" Indeed God has blessed and continues to bless. I'm just glad I was there to see it.

## January 6, 2008 – Epiphany



Today is Epiphany - the first day of a season that is sandwiched between Christmas and Lent. The season of Epiphany is literally sandwiched, varying in length depending on when Easter occurs on the calendar. Epiphany means revelation - and epiphany is and "Ah Ha!" moment - the time of gaining insight. Life is filled with epiphanies, both large and small. The epiphany for Christians involves a dramatic shift in the way that we understand God, especially the way we understand salvation. The shift in thinking is so dramatic that two millennia later, we still are adjusting.

For generations our people had a notion that we were in need of a savior. We had suffered military and political setbacks, our government was filled with corruption and when it collapsed the governments of those who conquered us were filled with oppressive rules and unfair systems of justice. Our people became trapped in poverty and forgot basic rules of living together such as care for widows and orphans or welcome for strangers. Things weren't going well. But our history had taught us that God was capable of bringing about change. The story of our exodus from Egypt and the way that our people escaped the bonds of slavery through the direct intervention of God was our most important piece of history. We taught it to our children over and over - we told the story to each other - we made an annual holiday filled with rituals so that we would never forget that story.

We needed salvation. We knew that God was capable of bringing salvation. We prayed to God to save us. We never lacked the faith that God would one day save our people.

What we couldn't understand was that God intended salvation for the whole world, not just our people. From God's perspective, it never has been just about us.

It took the visit of strangers from outside our community who came to us and reported their observations of the heavens and their interpretations of a belief system that was entirely foreign to us for us to begin to understand the nature of God's salvation in a new light. The Gospel of Matthew reports that these strangers were "wise men from the East," They were students of the night time sky, watching the movements of planets and the position of stars in the sky. If you had asked us before their visit if they could understand our concept of God, we would have certainly not believed it. We prayed to the God of our ancestors - the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who was revealed to us in the events of our history. How could the people who made star charts and studied the heavens possibly understand our God? How could they recognize the long-awaited gift of salvation for our people?

Slowly it began to dawn on us that God's gift of salvation was for the entire world - not just for us. Our salvation was intimately linked with the salvation of the widows and the poor and the estranged of other languages and cultures and belief systems. We do not hold the keys to salvation and we have not been appointed gate keepers who are allowed to judge others. If we are to participate in God's gift of salvation we must be willing to share that gift with everyone - even strangers from a strange land far from the place we have known as home and familiar.

The epiphany was so radical that we still do not fully understand the depth of its impact. We still want to claim a salvation that is smaller and easier for us to control. We create creeds and enumerate beliefs that one "must" hold in order to receive salvation. We assume that our church - our small group of people - is somehow more important than the salvation of those with whom we disagree. We want to be able to shout "God is on our side!" even when we know fully that God doesn't take sides.

Like the annual telling of the Exodus story established from the time of Moses, we need to tell the story of our Epiphany over and over again - precisely because we often act as if we don't get it. So each year, right after we celebrate the birth of Christ, we remind ourselves that Christ came for the whole world and not just for us.

And every once in a while, as we tell the story over and over again, one or more of our people suddenly understands the story in a whole new way and shouts "Ah ha!"

## January 7, 2008 – Boxing Day



Boxing day is a holiday observed on the day after Christmas in many countries of the Commonwealth. It began as a tradition of giving gifts to the poor and to employees on the day after Christmas and is observed as a public holiday in England, Scotland, Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and many other countries. The name has its roots in a tradition of placing a small clay box in artisan shops. Customers, apprentices, masters and visitors would place donations into the box, somewhat like a piggy bank, which was shattered on the day after Christmas and the contents shared by the workers in the shop. The term evolved so that “Christmas box” is the common term for a holiday bonus paid by employers to employees. In modern times, the day has become a shopping day with various sales and specials giving ample opportunities for employees to spend that bonus.

Boxing day has never become much of a tradition in our lives. Our employment is not the kind of job where Christmas bonuses are paid and we try to plan our charitable giving so that it is paid out over the course of an entire year, not focused on any one season.

But Epiphany, January 6, has become a day of a different kind of boxing day for us. It is the day that we lovingly remove the Christmas decorations from our tree and from around our home and carefully pack them into boxes for storage until the next Christmas. Some of the ornaments are fragile, so our boxing day involves lots of tissue

paper and newspaper to pack around the various items. Over the years, a system has developed with certain ornaments being packed into the same boxes year after year.

Packing allows us to reflect on the story of our family and the years that have passed. We have ornaments that have been collected over the years, some made by our children, some received as gifts, some given as gifts to each other. We have ornaments that mark various stages of our lives, reminding us of the places we have lived and the people we have known. There is a certain amount of healthy nostalgia as we accept the simple fact that the seasons change and Christmas does not last forever. The special decorations will come out of the boxes next Christmas, but part of what makes them special is that they are hidden - packed away in boxes - for most of the year.

Living near the forest, we cut a live tree for our home each Christmas. After Christmas, the tree is taken to a recycling site where it is run through a chipper and made into mulch for the parks in our area. Our trees are fresh and we keep them watered, so they don't shed too many needles, but there are always a few and moving the tree out of the house leaves a bare spot in the living room that creates an opportunity for a thorough cleaning and a rearranging of the furniture in that room. The new season gets a fresh start with a bit of house cleaning.

Since yesterday was Sunday and filled with activities and events at the church, we started to pack away our decorations but have not yet completed the task. Today will give the opportunity to finish, run errands and prepare for a very busy week ahead.

Our "boxing day" has very little connections with the traditions of sharing with those who have less than we do and perhaps it isn't appropriate to use the name at all, but the name seems to fit the activities of this change of seasons in our lives.

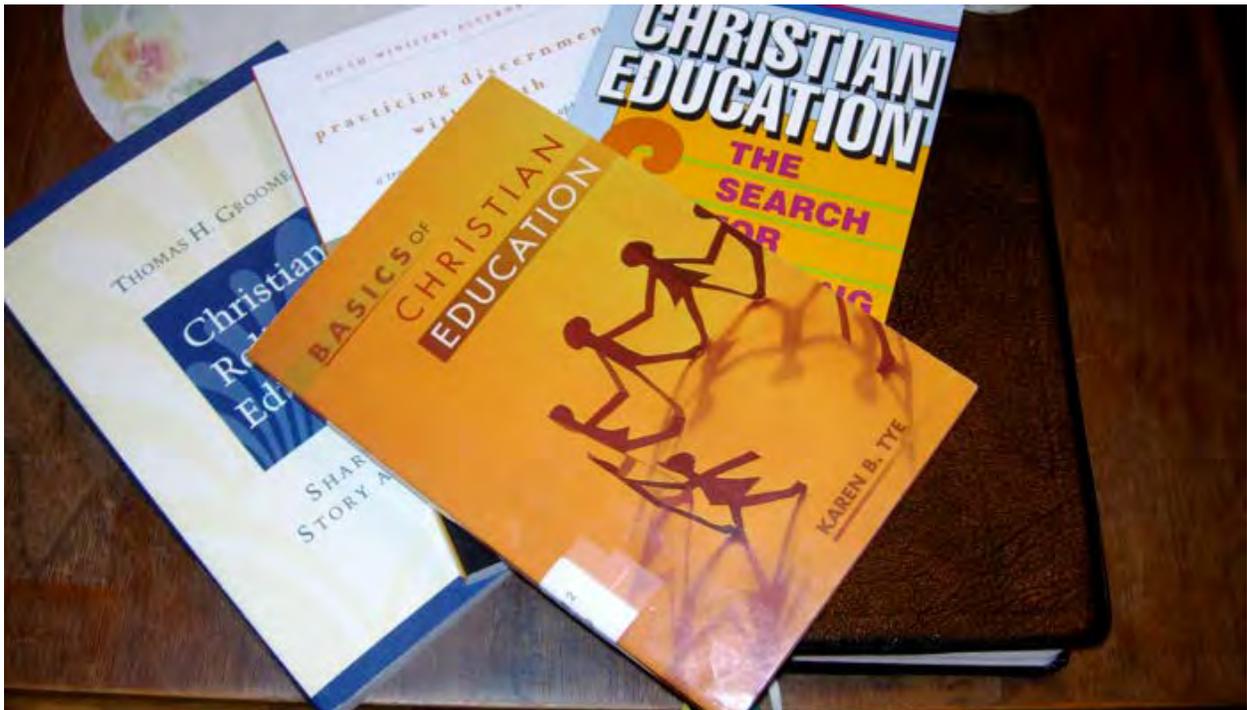
It is appropriate for us to think of generosity as we move from one season to another. Generosity can be expressed in the ways we manage our financial resources and plan charitable giving into our family budget, but generosity of time and talents and spirit are also important. Planning our participation in volunteer projects and activities in the community can be another way to recall the generous gifts of the Magi and respond with our own generosity. As I scan my calendar for this week, I have meetings of a local arts group, an agency that provides services to persons with disabilities, our local support system for survivors of suicide, and Habitat for Humanity. Of course there are church meetings, both for our local church and for our state conference. So I'll be pretty engaged in volunteer service.

In the midst of all of the activities and busy times, it is good to pause, reflect and remember. Packing the ornaments into the boxes one by one is just the opportunity to pause that we need.

Our form of "boxing day," continues to be a meaningful tradition.

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## January 8, 2008 – Hitting the Books



Ever since the time of Paul Christians have understood that we do not belong to just one congregation. Being Christian carries with it a relationship to other Christians who live in other places. In my life this has been acted out through service in other settings of the church: Conference, Region, and National. And, over the years, we have developed an important sense of connection with our sister church in Costa Rica.

On Thursday, Friday and Saturday, I'll be on the road with a Conference meeting in Yankton, SD, a regional educational consultation in Lincoln, NE and a couple of days teaching a class in Hastings, NE. The class is one that I have taught before in North Dakota, South Dakota and this will be my third time teaching the class in Nebraska. I have, however, made some significant changes each time that I have taught the class. This time, I have changed one of the textbooks for the course, shifted class experiences to include more theology and learning to think theologically, and changed the course assignments to provide a better way of evaluating my students.

The class is a part of a program of training for lay persons and candidates to become licensed ministers. As the shortage of seminary-educated clergy dwindles and the size of congregations shrink, there is a considerable gap between the cost of having a full-time pastor and the ability of some congregations to pay. The result is a growing demand for part-time clergy and increased lay leadership. The increased lay leadership demands that we develop and administer significant educational programs to equip them for these new leadership roles.

Those changes have meant that I have had to “hit the books.” There is a significant amount of reading involved in evaluating and selecting new textbooks. And there is a significant amount of work involved in preparing new lectures, designing new classroom experiences and developing new assignments and plans of evaluating students’ work. Most of this work has to be done “one the side,” as the normal demands of my job and family life are on-going. I still have the same number of meetings. It still is the time that we are preparing annual reports for our congregation. and I still have sermons to prepare, visits to make, and a church to administer. We are still building a Habitat for Humanity house and commissioning missionaries to Costa Rica this week.

One of the ways I deal with the extra work load is to eliminate some elements of popular culture from my life. I’ve never been a fan of television and when I get busy I simply don’t watch any. When I was in college, I taught my self to set aside novels and recreational reading in order to complete the reading required of my education. I have stacks of un-read books on many topics outside of the church, so this is a discipline that I can endure only in short bursts, but I can lay aside novels and books about other topics. (Well, except for the three books I agreed to review for a boat-builder’s magazine.) And I never had much interest in shopping and the post-Christmas search for bargains that keep the parking lots at the shopping mall full.

Still, there is a bit of a sense of panic this morning when I realize that in two days I’ll have to be driving early in order to make the various appointments and meetings that lie ahead. And there are plenty of tasks to accomplish before I hit the road. Most of my meeting arrangements are in place, but there are a significant number of documents to prepare and copy for my Thursday meeting and I need to assemble packets for the students.

But somehow the work will get done. And soon I’ll be in front of the class. Teaching is a role that I enjoy and the topic, Christian education, is one that is dear to my heart. The mandate and challenge of passing the heritage, traditions, experiences and resources of faith that have been collected over generations to a new generation of church leaders is significant. Discerning the roles and responsibilities for teaching to continue even when the size of the congregation is small and the resources are limited can be difficult. But every pastor is also a teacher. We have been ordained to preach and teach the Gospel. It is an essential calling.

In the meantime, I’ve got a bit of reading to do.

## January 9, 2008 – Teaching Peace



President Bush leaves today for an eight-day trip to the Middle East, his first ever visit to Israel and to the West Bank. Initially the White House tried to raise expectations for this trip, but lately seems to be down playing the significance of the trip. World sentiment seems to have low expectations for the impact of a lame duck US President with no political heir apparent. It seems to almost be a political tradition for US Presidents to devote a certain amount of time and attention to the Palestine-Israel conflict late in their terms of office. At this time, only two-party talks are taking place and they are more like an airing of grievances than serious negotiations. The US has no high-level negotiator devoting full-time attention to seeking a lasting and meaningful peace.

The truth is that we have seen our hopes for peace dashed so many times in our lives that we approach every set of peace talks with skepticism and low expectations. The Oslo Interim Agreement, the Wye River Plantation Agreement, the Camp David Accords - all have raised our hopes only to see a resumption of violence. The generations of children that have grown up in the midst of conflict seem to insure that there is a fresh supply of potential suicide bombers and others who seek revenge and find violence as the only political tool they know.

How can it be that Jerusalem - the city whose very name means peace - the city dedicated to bringing the peace of heaven to this earth - continues to be the center of such overwhelming violence and injustice? It stands as a living tribute to the failure of

the best efforts of some of the world's most brilliant minds. And we find ourselves not really expecting peace.

For many who live in the area, the visit of another world leader creates additional problems and difficulties. The entire West Bank will be sealed for the duration of the president's visit meaning that people will not be able to make the trip between their homes and jobs, will be cut off from relatives, and will suffer hardships because of the tightened security measures. Bethlehem, the place of Jesus' birth is right next to a contested settlement, cut off by a huge security barrier, and its citizens are forced to live in isolation and poverty. The increased security means decreased freedom and decreased access to basic supplies for those who live in Bethlehem.

But we refuse to give up on the vision of peace. Because peace seems to continue to lie in the future and not in the presence, the education of youth is essential in our quest for peace. Critical thinking skills, balanced and fair history of the conflict, skills of negotiation and alternatives to violence all are essential tools that will be needed by emerging leaders. Programs such as the Palestine/Israel Education Project, Quaker Palestinian Youth Project, and the World Alliance of YMCA's Israel/Palestine Youth Project often seem more capable of producing meaningful change than the exchanges and speeches of diplomats and politicians.

It is not just a matter of the education that is provided to Israeli and Palestinian youth that is essential. As citizens of the United States, we have a vital role in the conflict and in the possibilities of peace. What we teach our own children is critical to developing the climate for peace in Palestine and Israel. Understanding the cultures of the region, examining the dynamics of the relationships between our countries, being aware of the financial and military links between the US and Israel, and developing an appreciation to the people involved in the conflict - all of these are essential to the complete education of youth in the United States.

We must teach that peace is possible and that it is a worthwhile investment of our time and energies.

In the meantime, I will continue to pray for peace and believe in peace while our President travels and when he comes home. May his trip be one small step in a much bigger movement that brings justice and peace to the people in Palestine and Israel.

## January 10, 2008 – Remembering Dr. King



I have sometimes commented to my family that there are a couple of annual concerts that I have listened to on the radio for years that I would one day like to attend live. One is the New Years Day concert of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. This concert is an annual tradition that dates back to Johann Strauss himself and is one of the most widely broadcast concerts in the world. It is not likely that I will be attending an event where the tickets sell out a year in advance and tour operators command prices as high as \$6,500 per person. And the concert is accessible via radio and television.

Another great annual concert is the Choral Arts Society of Washington, DC's annual tribute to Martin Luther King, Jr. This concert, at the Kennedy Center for Performing Arts, is accessible with ticket prices at \$20 this year. In addition to the intentionally low ticket prices, hundreds of free tickets are distributed through Washington DC area schools, homeless shelters, youth and mentor organizations to assure a diverse audience. It is also widely broadcast, but one day I intend to travel to Washington, DC to hear the concert live. The concert will be this coming Sunday, January 13, this year. Guest artists are brought in to perform with the Choral Arts Society making this event one of powerful music and memory. It has been an annual tradition since the Martin Luther King holiday was created in 1989.

Part of the reason why I would like to one day attend the concert is that it is consistently one of the best choral concerts I hear each year. The precision and practice of the choir, the guest artists, and the rich diversity of musical selections make the concert a truly

great event. But there is more than great music. The concert is also a time of powerful collective memory.

We have a spiritual legacy in our nation's remembering of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. A powerful and effective leader in the cause of justice and equity, Dr. King's prophetic voice called our nation to conscience and moved us to meaningful change. Dr. King's refusal to submit to violence even when violence was used against him gave him a power that was even stronger than the violence of his opponents. He was unafraid to express his deep Christian convictions and his spiritual strength moved individuals and institutions toward a vision of justice and equity.

The famous 1963 "I have a dream" speech has been printed, broadcast and quoted so much over the years that it has become a part of our national fabric - it has reached beyond the vision of one man to become our shared vision. Like all visions, it is lived out imperfectly. While the military and most educational institutions are more fully integrated, there is still discrimination based on race in our society. Racism still divides communities, and is a factor in poverty and injustice, but we have made significant progress since the days of Dr. King's life.

The audience at the concert at the Kennedy Center is one expression of Dr. King's dream. Rich and poor sit together in the audience. Residents of homeless shelters sit next to senators. The audience reflects a wide range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds and the music they listen reflects the many styles of American choral music and the rich diversity of choral traditions of our culture.

While we continue to struggle with injustice and continue to work for a nation that is more fair and where opportunities are equally available to all, we pause once a year and allow music to express feelings too deep for words. For a brief concert we lay aside the divisions of political parties and the rancor that is the normal way of life in our nation's political capitol. Distinctions like Republican and Democrat, conservative and liberal, rich and poor, blue and white collar are laid aside so that all can listen to the music and remember the man who not only led a nation toward increased justice, but gave his life that others might live in a better world.

Many eloquent words will continue to be written and spoken about the contributions of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The ways he has influenced our lives will continue to be made visible as we commit ourselves to working for justice for all. And once each year we pause and listen to great choirs and allow the music to wash over us in ways that touch our emotions deeply and allow us to remember a dream that we must never allow to die.

I won't be at the concert this year, but I will download the podcast and listen to it several times. It is good to have the inspiration in the face of the day to day struggle for justice and peace. It is good to be reminded that we still have a dream.

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## January 11, 2008 – On the Road



The main activity of the day for me yesterday was driving. I drove from Rapid City to Yankton for a meeting of the South Dakota Conference Annual Meeting planning committee, about a six hour drive. After the meeting, I drove another 3 1/2 hours to Lincoln, Nebraska, where I have a meeting this morning before heading to Hastings where I will teach a class this evening and tomorrow before heading home late Saturday afternoon. In the winter, with short days, this means that I do quite a bit of driving after dark. Fortunately the weather has been mild and the roads have been dry, so I can make good time.

The practical way to make a trip like this one is to stay in motels. I chose a motel near the Nebraska Conference office for last night and it is a very quiet place. A mid-winter Thursday doesn't seem to be the height of their season, and there are a lot of vacant rooms in the motel. It has all the amenities I need and it is quiet, so one might expect a good night's sleep. But the bed is strange and the sounds are strange and even though I was tired, I woke frequently during the night. I'll probably sleep better tonight after the activities of the day.

As I look around the motel room, there is a sort of silent commentary about life on the road. The motel is in an industrial area and I suspect that most of its guests are business travelers. The room's prominent features are a bed, a television, a refrigerator, a coffee maker and a microwave. I've noticed that many motels have upgraded to larger television sets lately and the TV in this room is larger than the one we have at home. It

is as if next to sleeping, the main activity of the room is watching television. I'm sure that it has a cable connection and long list of available channels. The bed is the only piece of comfortable furniture. It is clear that the bed is where one sits to watch television in this room. There is a small, round table and a single chair, but the table is a ways away from an electrical outlet and the lighting is poor. It is clear that the room isn't set up for studying or reading or working at a portable computer. I can make do, but I suspect that the interests of most guests are quite different than mine. I would have traded the television, refrigerator and microwave for a sturdy desk with good lighting and a place to work. The motel does have free Internet access, so I know I'm not the only guest who uses a computer to stay connected.

It makes me grateful that my job and lifestyle allow me to be at home most of the time.

Occasionally when I travel I have the opportunity to stay at a monastery. The cells reflect a different set of priorities. In most monasteries, the room would be much smaller, have a small bed and a chair and desk for reading and writing. That is all. Quiet contemplation and sleep is what one does in the room. Eating and entertainment take place in rooms that are shared with others. There is no need for an individual refrigerator, microwave or coffee maker. Food preparation and eating don't take place in the sleeping area. Life is centered around prayer, so distractions such as television are often not present.

I feel more at home and more welcomed in the monasteries where I have stayed than in a motel. But monasteries are not "conveniently located for the business traveler," and require more careful planning than this trip affords. I do have a friend who lives in Lincoln, but my visit is too short to give the time and energy that friendship requires.

I enjoy traveling and although I do not prefer to travel alone, I don't mind it, either. The time driving has given me the gift of contemplation and time to think. And there is much to see on the road when driving during the day. My attention has been focused on the class I will be teaching and nearly 10 hours of lectures and learning experiences that I need to lead, but the drive home tomorrow will give time to think about less demanding subjects. I have books and many projects to occupy the time when I am not driving or sleeping.

But I am already eager to return home.

I'll never meet or have a meaningful conversation with the other people who are staying in this motel. We may say "good morning" as we meet in the room where the motel offers breakfast, but we will never know each other's names or life stories.

Life on the road is an interesting little interlude - a necessary part of serving a church that has congregations in many different locations and needs for leaders who can plan,

organize, and teach and who are able to travel around to make those activities possible on the prairies and open spaces of the middle of our country. I don't travel as much as a Conference minister or others whose calling is different from a single local congregation.

I am called to serve, but I am grateful for home.

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## January 12, 2008 – You Know it is a Hospital



Yesterday I stopped for a cup of coffee in Lincoln. About a block away from the coffee shop was a modern building with a large helicopter parked on the roof. I didn't need a sign or any other identifying item to know that the building is a hospital. Helicopters have become an essential tool of regional medical centers in the wide open spaces of rural America. A good helicopter with a well-trained crew will allow a hospital to provide emergency services to an area with a radius of 200 or more miles. In the event of automobile and farm accidents, heart attacks and other life-threatening events, helicopters save lives.

The use of helicopters for rapid transport to surgical facilities was pioneered in the Korean war and refined in Vietnam. Modern technologies have improved the speed of helicopters, their capacity to lift weight, and their abilities to travel in marginal weather.

It is easy to recognize a hospital. It is a modern well-maintained building with millions of dollars worth of equipment. We have grown to expect state-of-the art technologies from hospitals and, for the most part, medicine is practiced with a "spare no expense" attitude.

There was a time when the most expensive and showiest building in any town or city was its church or cathedral. Religion dominated the culture of the day and commanded respect, power and wealth. The culture has shifted over the years. The "cathedrals" of modern cities are health care facilities. In the large cities of America the skyline's tallest

buildings are often related to a business connected with health care: insurance. This shift is not all bad and not really surprising when we think about it.

Excessive wealth is not compatible with the theology of the church. When churches become too wealthy they forget one of the core messages of faith: care and concern for the poor, the orphan, the widow, the stranger. Throughout the history of the church, we have often been more faithful in times of financial crisis than in times of wealth and security. Many health care facilities grew out of the concern of the church for those who suffer. Healing was an essential religious art for most of the history of medicine. The gap between modern, scientific medicine and the church developed in part because of the church's attempts to retain power and control and its assumption that it somehow had a corner on the truth. Scientific methods produced a different way of knowing the truth and a divide developed between scientific method and theology.

I don't believe that the divide is necessary, nor do I believe that the church has been right in many of the conflicts, but a church with less power and influence can be a good thing. We are by nature counter-cultural. Christianity developed among the poor and powerless people and each time it becomes mainstream it makes compromises of belief and practice.

Healing has become a slave to wealth in our time. We have convinced ourselves that the best health care is the most expensive health care and we have created a health care system that is the most expensive in the history of humanity. Like the cathedrals of gothic Europe, our health care institutions have discovered that our fear of dying is an effective tool to separate us from our wealth.

The truth is that we will all one day die - regardless of how expensive, elaborate and efficient our health care systems become. The good news is that we don't need to fear dying. And it doesn't take the right health insurance plan or the latest diagnostic tool to liberate us from the fear of dying. The hospital administrator who claims, "Without this new helicopter (or MRI machine or other technology) people will die!" fails to mention that with the best technologies people will continue to die. Accepting our limits and understanding our essential humanity opens us to our relationship with that which is far bigger than ourselves. We may attempt to separate faith from modern science, but faith is the only tool to truly free us from fear.

The truth is that effective healing and faith go hand-in-hand and neither require being centers of wealth. Poverty can help both religion and health care to discover their true priorities and the deep joys of caring for people without manipulating their fears. Being released from the pressure of continual growth - always bigger, always more expensive, always grander than before - can be genuine liberation and lead to deeper faithfulness to what is essential.

Just as history has judged the excessive wealth of the baroque church, it will judge the excessive wealth of late 20th and early 21st century American medicine. In the meantime, the shift of power and wealth away from the church is a blessing. It often doesn't feel like a blessing. Struggling with budgets and facing cutbacks is not a pleasant process. But the truth is that God has always provided for the genuine needs of the church and God will continue to provide for our needs. Our calling is to live joyously and abundantly with what God has provided. Focusing our attention on what we do not have can blind us from seeing what we do have. And what we have is sufficient for the ministry to which we are called.

This is a good time to be the church. May our faithfulness be as visible as the helicopter on the roof of the hospital. May our faithfulness endure long after the helicopter and the hospital have been replaced.

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## January 13, 2008 – Teaching



I returned from Hastings, Nebraska last evening after teaching the first ten contact hours in a course on Christian Education for students in the Nebraska Education for Lay Ministry program. The course of study is delivered in two weekends with a month between the weekends. There is a reading assignment before the first weekend, assignments between the weekends and a final project assigned after the second weekend. It can be an intensive time of teaching and learning, but the hours are limited and the amount of content to cover always exceeds the available time.

The students are highly motivated and arrive eager and willing to learn. They are ready participants in the process and the setting is conducive to learning. But as I teach I am aware that for some of the students, this will be their one and only formal class in education and how people learn. The two textbooks, twenty hours of classroom activities and four essays that I will have them write hardly constitute a solid background in educational theory. We skim over the general topics, but don't have time to dwell on multiple intelligence theory, brain research or developmental psychology. The students will be going into ministry - mostly in small and rural congregations and there will be days when they discover that they are woefully inadequately prepared for the work that is ahead of them.

Of course the same is true for those of us who entered the ministry through the route of a college degree and a graduate education. We find ourselves to be inadequately prepared for the real-world experiences of the ministry. I am a fan of the academy. I enjoy being a student and I think that there is a unique quality to full-time residential study that cannot be replicated in other settings. The lay ministry students are grateful for the love and support of their learning community, and we work to establish and maintain that love and support. In college and seminary, we lived in the same building, ate our meals together, and saw each other in class and social activities almost every day for years. Our learning community was much more focused with far fewer distractions of outside jobs and family distractions.

University education is a wonderful process. And it is a process that these students cannot afford at their phase in life. And the church cannot afford to pass up the leadership that they represent. So we do the best that we can. Some teaching and learning is better than none. And occasionally the seeds are planted for further education, research and learning. I am constantly aware, as I teach, that far more important than the content that I am able to convey in the time we have together is the resources I provide for the students to engage in meaningful self-guided learning outside of the classroom. I try to facilitate their building of a personal library and a more extensive bibliography of resources to which they will be able to turn in the future. I try to facilitate relationships to which they will be able to turn later when they need support or additional information. I try to share the joy of learning and the excitement of continuing to grow.

Like every teacher, there won't be much feedback on how well or poorly I have done my job. I can get a few clues from class discussion and from the essays the students write. But the real test of the quality of their education is the ministry they perform in their community and that is something that I will only glimpse on rare occasions. Evaluation in education is rarely precise. Evaluation in faith education is largely not within the scope of human abilities.

Teaching requires a teacher to live in hope.

It is not that we are hostile to scientific method, just that there is much more to this world than the things we are able to observe from our limited perspective.

The students will have a little work to do in the next month. They will write essays on topics they have selected from a list of possibilities that I provided. I have a lot of work ahead - I need to re-work the syllabus and adjust the content of the next ten hours of learning experiences in the light of the first ten hours we have spent together. And I have to anticipate some of the future scenarios in which these students will find themselves and try to place the resources they will need in places where they will be able to access them. It is a challenge of monumental proportions.

As usual, the teacher is learning along with the students. Multiple degrees and three decades of real-world experience are inadequate preparation for the teaching I need to do. And my job is to teach teachers. The truth is that we can never be fully prepared. But I try to walk into the classroom with as much preparation as possible each time I teach.

Sometimes the best jobs of this life are the biggest ones.

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## January 14, 2008 – Cost Rica Dreaming



Our friends and fellow church members, Chuck and Sybil Rounds leave for Costa Rica this morning. In the next six weeks they will be working with Vacation Bible School, helping with some repairs and improvements at the church, help with some much-needed work at the home of missionary partners Bob and Ann Jeffery, and participate in the life of our sister church. There days will be full and there will be plenty of hard work, but they are no strangers to work.

For the most part, we live the experiences of our Costa Rica church vicariously. Our home is here and we make occasional visits and much of our visits are filled with special events and activities that are out of the ordinary for Pastora Dorotea, her family and the congregation. Participating in baptisms, weddings, communion and dedication of infants has strengthened the ties and sense of connection between our congregations, but when we are present, life for our hosts is far from routine.

Our sister church is like any other church. It is imperfect. Life in Costa Rica can be frustrating and the church has dynamics that make its journey unsteady. People come and go. Feelings get hurt. Leadership shifts. Budgets represent compromises. The vision of the church is difficult to discern. And when a vision emerges, it is enacted imperfectly. There are times when we tend to idealize Costa Rica and its people, but the everyday struggles of our sister church have taught us that the bureaucracy of the Costa Rican government can be endlessly frustrating; the mode of doing business can create incomprehensible delays in almost any project; and poverty is only romantic to

those who are looking in from the outside. Costa Rican children can be frustrating, mischievous, ill mannered, and they make some incredibly poor decisions, just like children everywhere.

Of course, the flaws and failings of the people in our sister church are part of the reason we remain so connected. They are human just as we are human and our faith is rooted in Jesus who is God come to us in human form. God's message to Jesus at his baptism is a message we all need to hear: "This is my son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Since we are united by the baptism we share in Christ, we are also united in the blessing of Christ we share: "You are a child of God. You are beloved." Like our life in the church in our home, we do better with our life in our sister church when we lay aside judgement and simply love the people that God has given us.

And God has given us this connection with the Community Christian Church of Los Guido. Chuck and Sybil will participate in the 21st consecutive Vacation Bible School where members of our congregation in Rapid City have been present. This presence has been the personal project of two couples whose generosity of spirit has opened the way for groups from our congregation to visit and for us to host members of our sister church in South Dakota.

Unlike some other mission projects that are equally important and equally valuable, the bridge between our two congregations has always been primarily people. Although significant monies pass between us and we continue to be heartened by the incredible generosity of our people, the basis of the relationship has been and always will be the friendships of the people.

Pastora Dorotea has shared some of the trials and joys of her ministry with me in some amazingly frank and intimate conversations. Our children have met her children. I have a treasured photograph of my daughter holding Dorotea's grandson, Noah, when he was only a few days old. Last summer, I waded into the pool and joined her in the baptisms of eleven children. I wrote part of the ceremony for the wedding of her daughter and officiated at the wedding of her son. She has prayed with and for my family and I have prayed with and for her family. Our friendship is one dynamic of the connection between our churches.

So, over the next six weeks, as is true of most weeks, I'll be doing a bit of Costa Rica dreaming. I'll wonder about what is going on and I'll eagerly anticipate the e-mails and pictures that Chuck and Sybil will send and I will be deeply aware that we are not in this ministry alone. We have partners - some of whom live in distant locations. And the gospel we share is the same gospel.

"Vaya con Dios" and "Adios" are two ways we say "good bye" in Spanish. The first means "Go with God," the second might be literally translated "to God." Indeed God is in

every parting. But when we go with God and when we return to God we are assured that we remain connected even when we are apart.

Vaya con Dios Chuck and Sybil. As you travel, our thoughts and prayers go with you and while you are in Costa Rica there will be even more Costa Rica dreaming in Rapid City.

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## January 15, 2008 – Budget



According to our best projections, our church will have less income in 2008 than it had in 2007. It is the result of the deaths of some very prominent members and some changes in the health and circumstances of others. Income growth is a challenge in congregations because, in general, new members do not support the church at the same levels as those who have been participating in the church for many years. As our members age and new members come into the life of the church, financial growth is not always assured. But this is the first time in my career as a pastor that this particular situation has occurred.

We are so accustomed to growth as the only model for financial management that anything else feels like failure. But there is not failure in our particular situation. There is no one to blame. Our situation is the result of a unique set of circumstances and there is no evidence that it is a trend. The congregation continues to be very generous and we have been abundantly blessed. The next year will probably see a resumption of financial growth.

The truth is that our congregation is well situated for this reality. We carry healthy reserves and we have managed our finances well in past years. We have no debt and all that is required is an adjustment of the budget for the coming year. And we have a great team of intelligent and well-qualified leaders on our Department of Stewardship and Budget.

Across the board cuts don't work in an organization such as ours. We have no control over the cost of utilities. Insurance costs continue to rise. Even with a slow rate of inflation, modest increases in salaries are required to keep from having our employees face decreases. Our budget is approximately 50% salaries. The discretionary portions of the budget are small.

A responsible budget is emerging. Hard work and careful thinking are enabling us to develop a financial plan to present to the congregation. Those of us who have been working on the budget are feeling positive about it and are convinced that it is a good plan. But we will have to be careful in our presentation to the congregation.

Our decrease in spending is not the result in a decrease in generosity and we need to be clear in our communications that we are grateful for the gifts of our congregation. Our faith is that God provides for our needs and indeed our needs are being met by this budget. Beyond that, abundant living is possible for us. We can live joyously and fully with the gifts of the people of God. And our budget represents the potential to do a lot of good work together. The percentage of mission and outreach remains the same as in previous years. All program areas are funded at a level that is higher than our 2005 spending. Each department of the church has the ability to manage its own budget to accomplish its most important priorities.

There are many ways to measure growth. And financial growth is not the most accurate measure of faithfulness. The circumstances of our congregation in 2008 promise the opportunity to grow in faith, mission and ministry as we continue to be responsible and faithful with the gifts that have been so generously provided for our work.

It promises to be a very good year. My prayer is that when it has passed that we will be able to look back on this year as a time of growth in faith and ministry.

January 16, 2008 – Uncle Ted



My great uncle Ted, whose name I received, could fashion almost anything out of sheet metal. For most of his life he was a parts man, working at an automobile dealer and later for my father's farm machinery dealership. He had a good basic understanding of machinery and of the process of replacing broken parts. But he came from a time when mechanics actually made repairs as opposed to replacing components, which is much of the way repairs are made today. In his time basic metal fabrication was a part of making repairs. One needed to know how to weld, solder, rivet and make metal connections. Even simple castings and blacksmith work was common.

Uncle Ted rarely threw anything out. He could find a use for things that ended up in other people's garbage cans. He saved pieces of string and twine, and rubber bands. Old inner tubes were cut into strips for elastic bands. Expired license plates were fashioned into dustpans and other household items. He had a set of cubbyholes for small parts that was made out of vegetable cans that were riveted together. He made a string dispenser and a dispenser for masking tape for the shop and then made others for our home and his. When our shop acquired the tools to set metal studs in tires for increased winter traction, Uncle Ted made himself a pair of shoes with metal studs for walking on ice. He was always tinkering, repairing and inventing new things.

His creativity and inventiveness were applied to many different aspects of his life. He had his own way of creating "instant coffee." He would boil down coffee until it was the consistency of mud, store it in a jar in the refrigerator and when he wanted a cup of

coffee, he'd take a teaspoon of the sludge, put it into a cup and pour boiling water over it. His inventions gave more pleasure to his family than his coffee.

Uncle Ted didn't have many tools. He had a vice and ballpeen hammers of various sizes. And he had a pair of tin snips. He had fashioned a couple of jigs and brakes for bending sheet metal in straight lines, but these were home-made tools. Cutting metal by hand is something that I have never mastered. As you cut the metal, the edges that you have cut have to bend slightly to clear the sheers. The longer the cut, the bigger the problem with the parts that have been cut. They create binds on the sheers and inevitably push the sheers off of the line. Attempts to correct and straighten the line can result in small slivers of metal being turned up or even cut off of the piece. Cutting a simple straight line is very difficult.

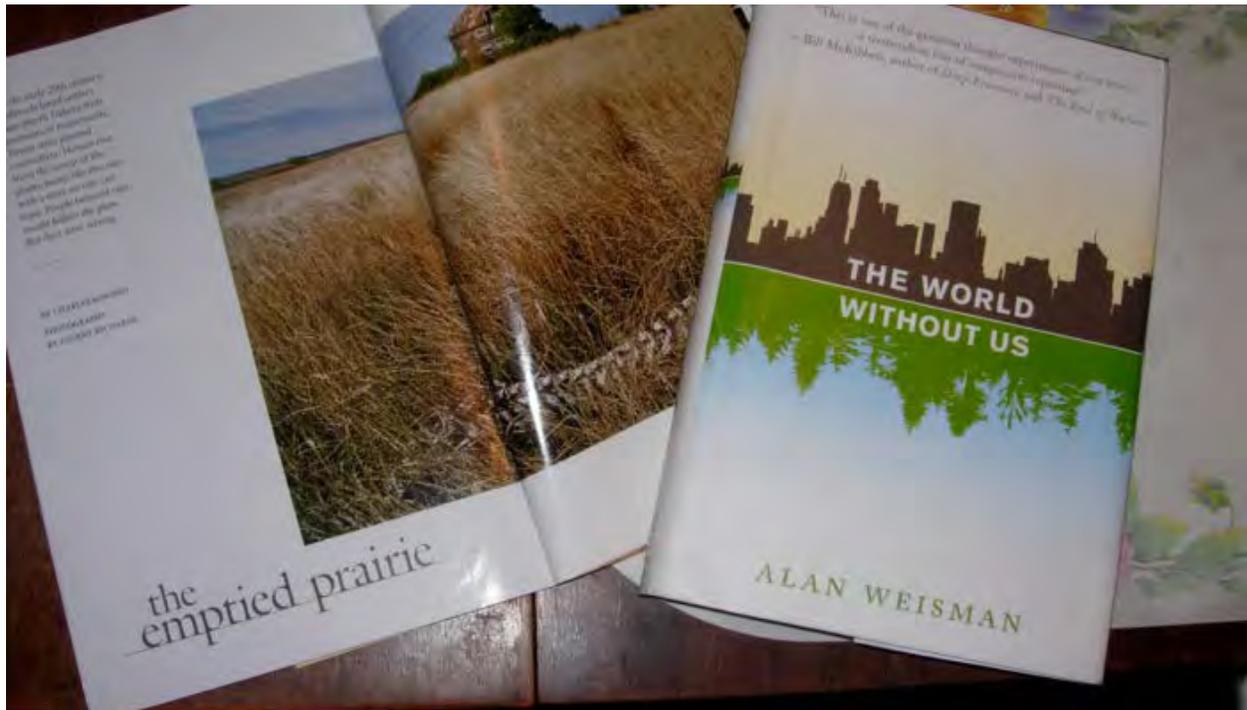
Uncle Ted didn't have any trouble cutting straight lines. And he didn't have fancy, levered shears like mine. He was a master at sharpening knives and shears and I am sure that his tin snips were always sharp, but his ability to cut straight lines wasn't the advantage of special tools. It was his eye, his hands, and his understanding of metal. Uncle Ted wasn't much for teaching, at least in the years that I knew him. He would gladly show you how something was done, but not many words were exchanged in the process. If he remembered how he acquired his skills, he didn't share that information with me. When I couldn't do a task right, he was more likely to do it for me than tell me how to do it.

But every time I need to use a pair of tin snips, I remember Uncle Ted, and how he moved them precisely and carefully to cut an exact line; how he maintained constant pressure to cut evenly; how he guided the sheers and the metal so that the shape he wanted emerged.

The true legacies of those who have gone before have very little to do with possessions. I have a couple of hand tools with Uncle Ted's brand on them. He used to stamp VIII, the Roman numeral 8, on his tools to identify them. Far more precious to me than the tools I have are the memories and the stories.

Tomorrow, weather permitting, I will be cutting some metal as we work on the soffits and fascia of the Habitat home we are building. I will try to make my cuts straight and true so that the pieces fit precisely. And, best of all, working with the metal will remind me of Uncle Ted and the lessons and values he taught me, mostly by example.

## January 17, 2008 – Empty Spaces



Some of the folks in North Dakota are up in arms. People who have kept every issue of the National Geographic magazine since the 1960's have cancelled their subscriptions. Their collections are complete. They will add no more. They have written to the editor and registered their complaints and registered their outrage and indignation. Of course, declining subscriptions in rural North Dakota is not news in the editorial offices of the magazine. That trend has been going on for decades.

The article that got folks riled up appeared near the end of the January, 2008 issue. Titled, "the emptied prairie," Charles Bowden's words and Eugene Richards' photographs tell a story of rural and isolated towns that continue to decline, homesteads that have been abandoned as ranches get bigger. There really isn't any news in the article at all for those of us who know, love and used to live in those places. I wrote an entry in this blog last spring about attending the church centennial in Hettinger, and speculating if there would be enough people to celebrate the church's 125th anniversary. The basic facts reported in the article are true.

What made folks upset is that they are by nature optimists and the article is depressing. The folk who continue to stay in the small towns of North Dakota have always believed in next year. "It isn't usually like this. Next year we'll have more rain." "Next year, there'll be more kids out for basketball." "Next year, we'll attract some new business to town." It isn't that they are unaware of the decreasing population and the abandoned homesteads. It is that they have invested their entire lives in looking for the best in their

situation and in the land where they live. They say the same things as the article in the National Geographic, but when an outsider makes the observations they are hurt and offended. Their public image - the side of their lives that they show to visitors and outsiders - is a far more rosy picture.

“They didn’t talk about the energy boom, the abundant coal and oil, the new mines or the new businesses that will be coming to town,” one of my friends complained. “They make it sound like life around here is hopeless.” And after seven years of living in one of those small towns, I can testify that hopeless is not an accurate description of the folks who are still there. But, then, I left. We moved away in 1985.

It is interesting that the conversations with folk in North Dakota came while I am reading Alan Weisman’s thought experiment, “The World Without Us.” About three years ago Weisman wrote an essay that was published in Discover magazine that speculated about what would happen if there were no humans on the planet. He expanded his speculation into a book that imagines how long it would take cities to deteriorate and dams to crumble if there were no humans around. How long would it take for dramatic changes in the environment to occur? What is the true impact of humans and how long will it last? The book is pure speculation, of course. For better or for worse, we are a part of this planet and will be for some time to come.

Humans will continue to inhabit the prairies and open spaces. Even if the number of people shrinks, there will be folk around to enjoy the dramatic sunsets and sunrises, to test their mettle against the blizzards and hard times, to listen to the birds and to observe the passing seasons for generations to come. It is likely that they will be optimistic folk who will be offended when others describe them as lonely, isolated, or depressed. And the National Geographic magazine will know about them because, I suspect that a number of them will subscribe to the magazine and read about the world. They will travel to distant places and visit them and then return to the prairies with an incredible will to survive and an impressive capacity for the hard work that survival on the prairies demands.

The generations will pass and our stories will fade into history. A few of our possessions will be treasured by grandchildren or great grandchildren. Some will be sold in antique stores and will be treasured by strangers. Most of them will slowly deteriorate and go back to the land like the crumbling houses and falling barns that dot the prairies.

Our family is lucky. The homestead in North Dakota has no buildings left. The land is farmed by a large operation that plants thousands and thousands of acres each year and manages to stay in business in part by pursuing a strategy of increased efficiency of larger and larger machines and fewer people to operate expanding production. There are a few relatives who have remained and who can get pretty worked up over the way

their state appears in national media. But most of us have left, and those who remain aren't getting any younger.

The truth is that as hopeful as we might be about the future, it is not about us. Our place in this world is our own generation. And the legacies we leave to the future probably have little to do with location and place. Alan Weisman can make a bold speculation about a planet without humans, but I have to be honest enough to admit that one day the world will get along without me. I am not depressed by this thought, in fact some times it comes as a relief. But that day is not today.

Today there are people that I need to visit, stories that I need to tell, faith that I need to share. Today there are new houses to be built for those who live in substandard housing, grieving families who have lost loved ones, and all of this takes place in the grand, on-going story of the relationship of God and humans on this planet. As Ross Snyder once wrote, "I may not be much, but the cause I serve has greatness." Whether or not people in the future remember my life, I intend to live my life so that people in the future will know the joys of forgiveness, the warmth of Christian community, the love of Christ, the hope of our faith, and the power of resurrection.

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## January 18, 2008 – Hats



For as long as I can remember, I have loved hats. Over the years I have had many different hats in many different styles. I've gotten advice from a dermatologist to wear a hat whenever I am out in the sun, but even without that advice, I would like hats. I've got a couple of western hats, a hat I brought home from Australia, another I got in Costa Rica, a dress fedora and others. I have several caps with advertisements for different products and companies that I wear from time to time as well. Certainly there are more hats in my closet than any one person could need.

Hats are often used as a metaphor for the different roles we assume in life as well. In that sense, I wear a lot of different hats: father, husband, son, minister, friend, committee member, teacher, trustee, citizen, taxpayer - the list goes on and on. Most of the time these roles are fairly well-defined and evident to others. Sometimes I meet someone who is surprised to see me in a different role than they expected. The guy who wears jeans with holes in the hem when he volunteers at Habitat for Humanity can clean up pretty good when he makes an appearance at the Black Hills Chamber Music Society or officiates at a funeral.

Occasionally, the roles need a bit of careful clarification. I am a pastor, but I am also the spouse of a pastor. Usually this is a very easy blending of roles as we are called by and work for the same church. Occasionally there can be a bit of confusion when I need to make a sudden switch from the leader of a project to the supporter of another. When

there is criticism of a program in which Susan is involved, I can take it as personally as if I were being criticized.

Not long ago, I commented to someone that I had been at a meeting of church leaders. The moderator of the South Dakota Conference was there, and the regional educational consultant. Also present was our state's representative on the board of the national Local Church Ministries board of directors. The chair of the annual meeting planning committee was in attendance as well as the pastor of the largest congregation in the Black Hills Association. And I was the only one in the room.

I wear a lot of hats.

There are days when I have to decide which hat to wear. And the choice is often a bit more difficult than whether black or brown best compliments the clothes I'm wearing. Do I speak as pastor of a congregation that hosts many arts events or as a member of the board of directors of an arts agency? Am I pastor first or should my role as a member of the Conference Board of Directors take precedence? Sometimes the choices present the risk of conflict of interest and are clear. When I joined the board of directors of local church ministries, I stopped accepting honoraria for my work as an educational consultant. When a human rights case is presented to a committee on which I serve that involves a member of my congregation, I recuse myself from deliberation of that case.

But there are times when the right balance of roles is more difficult. I am finite and there are only so many hours in a day. Often the roles compete for my time and I have to make difficult decisions about what I can and what I cannot do. Most nights I go to bed with undone work and sometimes tasks are simply not accomplished at all because other jobs are more pressing. There are emergency phone calls that mean less sleep and sometimes less time with my family.

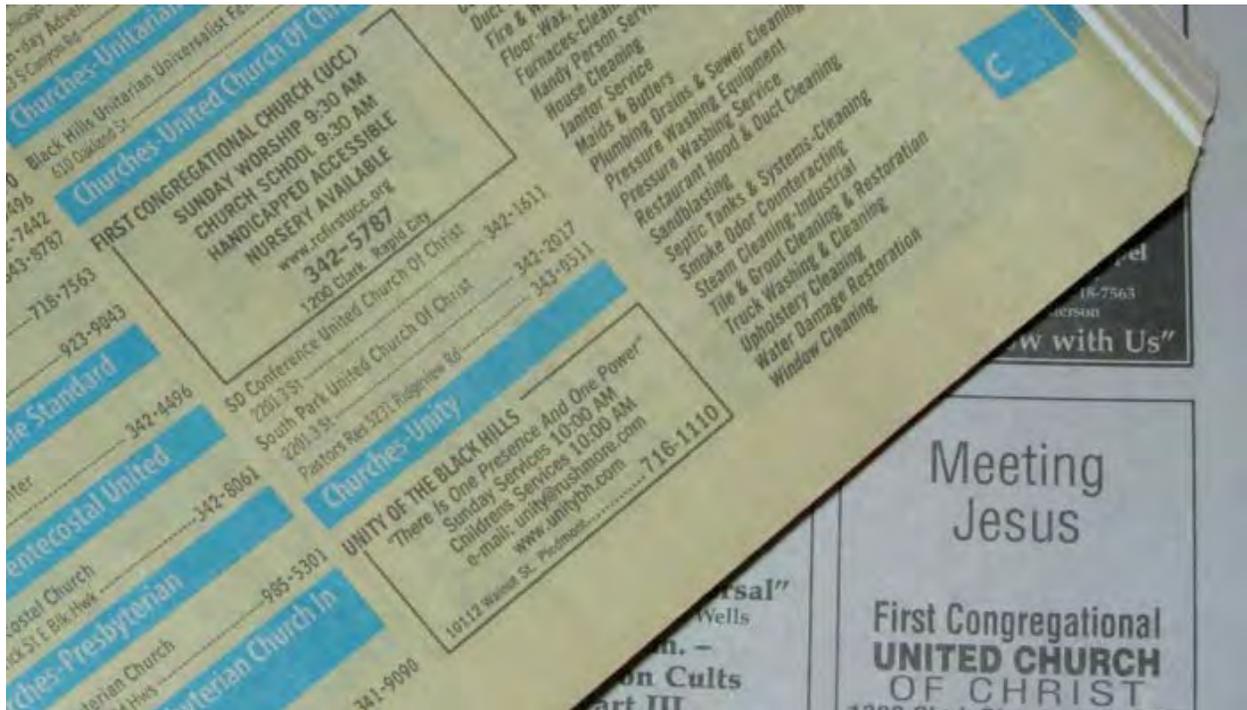
The obvious solution is to get rid of some of the hats. Fewer hats means fewer conflicts and easier choices. But I have always loved hats. Taking on just one more seems like a simple thing to do. "Yes, I could serve on a nominating committee - that would mean only one or two meetings and a few phone calls." "Yes, I have always wanted to serve on the board of one of the church's national ministries and I have a passion for the work of the Local Church ministries board." "Yes, I can give the invocation at your banquet." "Yes, I can make a meeting at 8 a.m. on Thursday." "Of course, I'll stop by the hospital on my way home."

I've never been one for doing only one thing at a time. And with a closet full of hats one is rarely bored. And occasionally, I can wear the same hat all day long. There are some roles that I never take off. I am always a husband, always a father, always a minister.

So, if you see me wearing a different hat it may mean that I've been to the store. It may just mean that I picked up the telephone and said "yes."

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## January 19, 2008 – Getting the Word Out



For most churches, advertising means print advertising. The thought was that when people were looking for a church home, they would look in the phone book or the newspaper. Churches stayed away from billboards, radio and television advertising because costs of effective advertising in those media are higher. Most churches did little evaluation of the effectiveness of the advertising, assuming that it was a necessary cost of doing business. Many congregations did not separate telephone book advertising from the phone bill, reporting the expense to their members as part of the utility bills.

Times are changing, and congregations are looking at advertising and its costs. Our community has more than 120 churches. Less than a dozen run weekly display advertisements in the newspaper. Display advertising in the telephone book is decreasing, too. An evaluation of the effectiveness of the ads seldom produces measurable data about the benefits.

Part of the change comes from the change in the media themselves. Instead of a single phone book in a community, many communities have four or five choices of phone books and the cost of advertising is very similar. Each new phone book raises the total cost of participation in phone book advertising. Or to put it another way, each new phone book decreases the number of people who look in any one phone book, while the costs remain the same or go up. Newspaper advertising has a similar change in impact. Circulation of newspapers is decreasing while advertising rates continue to rise. Each year advertisers pay more money to reach fewer homes.

Discretionary income for mainline churches is declining. Maintaining a constant presence in print advertising means spending an increasing portion of the church's budget each year. And little data exists about the effectiveness of advertising in attracting new members or helping people to find a church home.

The truth is that most churches run ads in the newspaper because their own members notice it. Loyal and faithful members who do not need the advertisements to locate a church or to tell them how to find a church want the ads to appear next to the ads of other churches as a public display of their church's position in the community.

More and more churches are turning to the Internet as a place to get the word about about their ministries and to invite others to participate. While using the Internet is not free, there are a variety of low cost ways to create a presence. In most cases the volume of information that can be distributed over the Internet is much higher than other forms of media.

But the truth is that the best way for churches to get the word out is person-to-person. Individuals telling the story of their church and inviting their friends to participate in its ministries is the best way for churches to grow. This has been the case from the earliest days of the Christian church. The personal stories of people whose lives have been touched by the ministries of the church are the most effective way for others to learn about church life.

Churches simply are not the same as other businesses. There are people within churches who see them as engaged in a competitive enterprise where success is measured by comparing statistics with other churches. In their eyes the church with the largest building or the one with the most members must be the best. From that point of view, advertising might make sense. But faithfulness cannot be measured by counting. Humility is never developed through self promotion. More importantly other congregations are not the competition, but rather partners in bringing the good news to people.

It is likely that our church will be engaged in seriously re-thinking its advertising this year as we wrestle with decreasing our spending to match the realities of our income. I am looking forward to these conversations. The generosity of our members requires that we always be careful with how their money is invested in the ministries of our church. Faithful stewards are conscious about allowing the faith to influence their decisions.

For each member of the church the question remains: "How have you shared your faith with another?" And a second question is similar to the first: "Who will you invite to share the blessings of your church this week?"

The legacy of the church is never printed on paper - it lives in the lives of the people the church serves.

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January 20, 2008 – Time



My mother has a large digital clock that uses a radio signal to check its accuracy from time to time. The only adjustment for time is a switch on the back that can be used to display the correct time zone. Otherwise the clock adjusts itself to the correct time. The clock was a gift to my mother from my sister, who chose it for its large, easy-to-read display.

We were thinking of time last night because our electricity had been out for about 20 minutes during the day yesterday. It was quite cold and though the cooperative that supplies our electricity is very reliable, it took a few minutes for them to repair whatever went wrong yesterday. The power was soon restored with little inconvenience. But we had to re-set all of the digital clocks around our house. The kitchen alone has plenty of flashing displays - there is one on the stove, another on the microwave oven and a third on the kitchen radio. The alarm clocks in the bedrooms have batteries to back up the clocks and the mechanical clocks don't need electricity to function. But in the kitchen, we had to re-set clocks and it is difficult to get them all to read exactly the same time. There were a few adjustments after the first round of setting clocks.

Actually, there is very little in our lives that demands to-the-minute accuracy. We eat our meals at approximate times, depending on when the food preparation is complete. Some days I jump out of bed quickly. Other days I linger beneath the covers for a few minutes before rising. We are pretty good about getting to appointments on time or

within a few minutes one way or another. We rarely need to know exactly what time it is, The approximate time is good enough for much of our lives.

Of course people lived for millennia without knowing the exact time. The development of accurate time pieces was driven by the need for accurate navigation when sailing ships began to travel greater distances far away from shore. Time is a human invention, devised to help us predict certain natural events, such as the rotation of the earth, the rising and setting of the sun and the seasons. The custom of dividing the day into 24 hours, the hours into 60 minutes and the the minutes into 60 seconds has become dominant, but the number of divisions is arbitrary. A system with ten hours of 100 minutes each would make it easier to compute, but the current system has nearly universal acceptance on this planet. And when we think of the vast distances of the universe beyond our planet, we realize that time is relative and that the perception and measurement of time is dependent on sharing a common perspective.

The ancients were aware of some of the issues of time. Biblical texts speak of the variations of time, noting that God's time and human time are not the same. Different events in our lives make the passage of time seem different to us. For a two-year-old, the next birthday is half a lifetime away. The child's grandparents experience the passage of a year in an entirely different manner. An hour waiting for a late appointment feels different than an hour in pleasant and stimulating conversation. Not all days feel like they are of the same length.

We have agreed on a particular way of noting the passage of time that allows us to share community events, count the days of vacations and set the start of meetings. For the most part it works. But it is important that we understand that our way of counting the passage of time is only part of the story. An archeologist trained in carbon dating and geological time can have trouble conversing with a Biblical literalist who tries to place a date on the beginning of time through interpretation of the counting of genealogical lists. It requires human intervention to get the cat to go to the veterinarian for an appointment. We have to establish what language we are using and what system of measuring time before we can have meaningful conversation. Shouting that I am right and that everyone else is wrong rarely advances the common good.

So we re-set the clocks. And we used the large digital clock as the authority on time for our household. It should be close enough to get us to church on time.

## January 21, 2008 – Winter Weather



We received a couple of inches of snow yesterday. It is light and powdery - the kind of snow that skiers love. It came down slowly, taking all day for two or three inches to accumulate. It may not represent a very significant amount of moisture for the forest, but it seems like the right kind of weather for this time of year. Temperatures are around zero as I write this morning.

I have been fortunate this winter that the days when I have had to drive have been days when the weather is good. Other than going to the church, I don't have to go out much in this weather. The snow is beautiful and it changes the way sound travels around the neighborhood. It is a cozy feeling to be warm inside our home when the weather outside is so chilly.

Going outside and doing things isn't too much of a challenge. We have plenty of warm clothes and though it takes a bit more time to get bundled up, it is also kind of fun to put on all of the layers and go out for a bit of fresh air. I had the driveway all cleared late yesterday afternoon and I'll get to shovel a bit more this morning. It is a challenge to keep the steps and sidewalks from being slippery while it is snowing, but once it stops, we get them cleared up quickly. The car is in the garage so we don't have to clean the snow off it before we go out.

I've got a half bag of cracked corn and a bunch of sunflowers in the shed so we will have plenty of turkeys for entertainment once the sun comes up. There's plenty of firewood if the electricity goes off. We're set for winter weather.

Of course not everyone has it so easy. The snowplow operators have had to work long hours and people who have to travel to work or for other reasons have to allow more time for traveling. I spoke to Louie Blue Coat on Saturday and while their wood supply is holding out well for now, there will be shortages of fuel up at Eagle Butte if the temperatures stay around zero for too many days. It's January and we never know. February and March can bring plenty of winter to the hills and plains. We have quite a bit of firewood stacked behind the church and we could get a splitting party together and make another delivery if there is need.

For today, the snow is simply beautiful. People who live in tropical places never get to experience this. Millions of delicate snowflakes, each unique, forming a blanket of white that covers the plains, flocks the trees and shimmers in the light. This universe goes so far beyond utilitarian in the way things work. There is an extravagance of beauty in the natural world. And we have been given the gift of consciousness and the ability to appreciate the beauty. What a joy to have eyes to see and a brain to appreciate what we see.

I cannot fathom the reason for such an extravagance of beauty. It is not something that we earn, it is simply a gift.

Sometimes the best pray is simply, "Thank you!"

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## January 22, 2008 – Colors



We expect children to learn the names of colors. I can't remember a time before I knew the basics of red, blue, yellow, purple, green, orange. But when it comes to choosing paint for a room in our basement that knowledge is insufficient. Even if we wanted to paint the walls white, we would need to choose between Navajo White, Divine White, Pacer White, Antique White, or Welcome White. Or perhaps Queen Anne's Lace, White Mint, Biscuit, Cherish Cream, Full Moon or Morning Sun would be better choices. All of those colors are mixed in a base called "Extra White." Maybe we could just purchase the base color and leave it untinted. It is a good thing that the paint store supplies samples, because we would never know what the colors are from their names. Is Yarrow lighter or darker than Curry? What color is Trinket, or Frangipane, or Serape? Is it better to go with Bagel, Whole Wheat or Baguette? Would you prefer Relish, Sprout, Celery, or Ryegrass for the walls in the hallway? How would Afternoon look in the morning light? Would Summer Day brighten a foggy autumn morning? When it comes to paint, there are a lot of choices.

And before you make the choice, you are urged to consider the LRV, or Light Reflective Value 6 means the room will be dark, 85 means it will be bright. I didn't ask if zero is pitch dark and 100 is bright as the sun. Maybe 0 and 100 don't really exist in paint, but are ideals beyond the possibilities of paint.

I am told that the languages of people who live in the far north have many different words for snow, and that tribal languages from near the equator have multiple words for

hot. What does it say of our culture that we have forty nine words for the shades between yellow and orange?

I guess it means that we want our homes to be individualized - different from all of the other homes. We want our home to be unique and special and a custom color is one way to express our taste and preference. Or is it simply that we demand choices in order to make a purchase. I wonder if any paint store has ever mixed every color on the charts.

Sometimes we accept the illusion of choice in place of genuine choice. We have the choice all of the colors we can imagine, but very few choices when it comes to the quality or price of the paint. And the paint comes home in quarts or gallons regardless of the size of the room.

So we pick a color and we paint the walls and within a few weeks we forget the name of the exact color and refer to the color of the room as blue or green or yellow or white. And we are no less or more happy than if we had chosen a slightly different shade. The true joys of a home come from the people who live and visit and not from the color of the paint.

Still, we ponder the choices until one day we simply make a decision. Would you go with Gardenia or Flan for the kitchen?

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## January 23, 2008 – Turkeys



We used to feed the birds on a regular basis at our home. We have a variety of feeders and we enjoy having the birds visit our deck. But one day the turkeys discovered our feeders and a new strategy began to develop. Turkeys weigh too much for our songbird waterer and they are a lot more messy than the other birds. And they go through any amount of seed in a few minutes.

But they are fun to watch.

So a few feeders for songbirds were suspended in places where the turkeys can't or won't reach. And the other feeders are filled on occasion, mostly with sunflower seeds, occasionally with a bit of corn. When it is very cold or the snow is deep, I put out food for turkeys more often. Our neighborhood has a band of turkeys who visit our yard a couple of times each day. The band ranges from 15 to nearly 30 turkeys.

I have heard that Benjamin Franklin wanted the turkey to be our national bird. He wrote a letter to his daughter from France in January of 1784 in which he questioned the choice of the Bald Eagle as the bird for the national seal. There is no indication that he intended his letter to become public and it came more than a year late - after the Bald Eagle had been adopted for the Great Seal of the United States. His letter appears to have commentary on the fact that the Bald Eagle for the original seal was poorly drawn and looked more like a turkey.

"For my own part I wish the Bald Eagle had not been chosen the Representative of our Country. He is a Bird of bad moral Character. He does not get his Living honestly. You may have seen him perched on some dead Tree near the River, where, too lazy to fish for himself, he watches the Labour of the Fishing Hawk; and when that diligent Bird has at length taken a Fish, and is bearing it to his Nest for the Support of his Mate and young Ones, the Bald Eagle pursues him and takes it from him. "With all this Injustice, he is never in good Case but like those among Men who live by Sharping & Robbing he is generally poor and often very lousy. Besides he is a rank Coward: The little King Bird not bigger than a Sparrow attacks him boldly and drives him out of the District. He is therefore by no means a proper Emblem for the brave and honest Cincinnati of America who have driven all the King birds from our Country . . . "I am on this account not displeased that the Figure is not known as a Bald Eagle, but looks more like a Turkey. For the Truth the Turkey is in Comparison a much more respectable Bird, and withal a true original Native of America . . . He is besides, though a little vain & silly, a Bird of Courage, and would not hesitate to attack a Grenadier of the British Guards who should presume to invade his Farm Yard with a red Coat on."

--excerpted from a letter dated January 26, 1784, from Benjamin Franklin to his daughter, Mrs. Sarah (Sally) Bache.

I am not convinced of Franklin's observations about the courage of turkeys. The ones who visit our yard seem to be easily frightened, and our cats get entertainment by hiding at the base of our patio doors on the inside of our home and when the turkeys come close, they spring up scattering all of the turkeys on the deck, who don't seem to have any memory that this event has happened the day before and that the cats represent no real danger to the turkeys. Franklin is right, however, in his observation that turkeys are silly. About their vanity, I have no knowledge.

It is strange that we give human attributes and intentions to any birds. Their lives and their thinking must be quite different than ours. The difference in size of brains alone might indicate that humans and birds experience the world in radically different ways. Whether the bald eagle or the turkey better symbolize human courage does not change the essential nature of human courage, which is a quality far beyond either bird. The ability and willingness to freely and intentionally sacrifice to save another or for the good of the community appears to be a distinctly human quality. The realities of human actions and the stories of our people carry far more inspiration and provide more motivation than any bird drawn on a symbol.

Bald eagles do visit of our neighborhood. We occasionally see one flying overhead, hunting in the nearby fields or perched on a tree. They seem to prefer areas closer to the water and are inclined to eat fish rather than the fare at our feeders. We've yet to observe one landing on our deck and don't expect to. So we watch the turkeys. And

occasionally we speculate on the qualities they exhibit that make us think of humans. They are clumsy and comical. They can be quite greedy and selfish. They have trouble sharing. They don't seem to inspire much nobility or greatness.

For now, we will continue to look to the stories of people for our inspiration and watch the turkeys for entertainment.

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## January 24, 2008 – Vacation Bible School



Today is the last day of the regular classes at Vacation Bible School at our sister church in Costa Rica. There will be songs and additional events on Sunday, but today is the last day in this year's program for the crowded classrooms, the incredible noise and the stifling heat in the church. It will be a day of energetic songs, heartfelt hugs laughter and joy.

It is a day that I can only imagine, as I am nearly 2700 miles north in Rapid City. But I know I will soon be receiving news of the day's activities from the people who are there. For the volunteers working in the VBS, it will be an evening to rest and relax a little and look back at a big job that has been accomplished.

There will be many lessons learned, some of which can be applied next year. There will also be frustrations with things that cannot be changed - or at least that will not be easily changed. In Costa Rica, one has to learn to live with levels of bureaucracy and services that move slowly at best.

Our worries have been heightened this year by a string of news stories about increasing crime in the city of San Jose. A French couple had their suitcases stolen from their car, there have been shootings on the city busses, banks are limiting the size of transactions in US dollars, there is a new story almost every day that reminds us that life is filled with risks. We have confidence in our mission partners in Costa Rica - they have good street

smarts and enough experience to avoid many of the more common problems that inexperienced tourists face. They are cautious and take precautions to avoid problems.

But there is nothing in life that is totally free of risk.

And even if we would remove all of the risks for our mission partners, life would still be very dangerous for the people who live in Los Guido. They don't have the option of riding into and out of their community in a private car when the busses become too dangerous. They can't pack up and come home in a few weeks. They are forced to live with the bureaucrats and the long lines and the changes in rules and regulations and the inefficiency of established businesses and governmental practices.

They must practice their faith in an unpredictable and sometimes dangerous world. It is the story of most of the world's Christians. The news is filled with stories of dangers and threats for innocent people in Gaza, Kenya, Nairobi, Kosovo, Calcutta, Pakistan, and a thousand other locations. If we think of all of the problems in the world and all of the places where people suffer indignity and injustice we become overwhelmed with the immensity of the problems and immobilized by our relative powerlessness.

So we have formed a special relationship with a particular place. One small church in one city in Costa Rica has become a point of connection for us. We have grown to know its pastor and members and they have come to know us. We have sought to demonstrate that we are in this relationship for the long-haul, surviving the ups and downs - the good times and the bad. And we share a small amount of the risk and frustration and worry.

We know that our worries for our partners in Costa Rica is not the same as the worries of a single mother who has discovered that she can no longer control the behavior of her teenage son. We know it is not the same as Pastora Dorotea who wonders about the leadership of the church when she becomes too old and too tired to walk the streets, to deal with the problems, to live in the neighborhood. We know it is not the same as Ann and Bob, who have invested their lives in the people and the church of Costa Rica.

But we are partners in all of these worries. And some days they make the problems we encounter in our comfortable church in Rapid City seem small by comparison.

So today we will celebrate the end of a week of Vacation Bible School. We'll think of the children and anticipate looking at the pictures when the opportunity comes. We'll thank God for the gift of eager learners and a message that is worth sharing. We won't overestimate the impact of our programs, but we won't underestimate their power for good, either.

And we will pray for Costa Rica. Always we pray for its people and its children. May the journeys of faith, hope and love that we have witnessed continue to carry the good news to yet another generation that has such a great hunger for meaning and purpose. May the ministries that we share bring forth futures for all of God's children.

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January 25, 2008 – Choco



The name “Chuck” is difficult to pronounce if your native language is Spanish. Over the past seven years and nearly a dozen trips to Costa Rica to work with our sister church, Chuck has gone through several different versions of his name. Sybil, the name of his wife, seems to be easier for our Costa Rican friends. So, for a long time, Chuck was simply, “Marido de Sybil” - “Sybil’s husband.” After a while, there were attempts to use his name and pronounce it correctly, which usually sounded like “Chook” to the ears of those of us whose first language is English.

Chuck didn’t mind and learned to answer to whatever he was called. We gringos mispronounce plenty of words in Spanish, and quickly learn that communication can be accomplished even when language skills are not fully developed. And Costa Rica is a land with a lot of mixed heritages and languages. The children at the church have names from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds, just as you would find in an urban neighborhood in the United States.

Chuck assumes a lot of different roles in the church, when they are in Costa Rica, from general handyman to photographer/videographer, assistant to the “Crafty lady,” helper in the kitchen, director of traffic, plumber, painter, electrician, engineer. He carries a lot of packages from the store to the apartment, from the apartment to the church, in and out of Bob and Ann’s pickup, and to the church. It is the kind of position that is ideally suited to a volunteer like Chuck - you couldn’t find someone who would be willing to do that kind of work for pay.

This year, Noah, grandson of Pastora Dorotea, who was born in the summer of 2005, has decided that Chuck should be called “Choco.” It sounds right to Noah and is fine with Chuck, and the rest of us think that it is a charming name for our friend. After all, there were a lot of different ways of saying the name “Charles” even before Chuck started to go to Costa Rica. Living in a family where Charles is a generational name, Chuck’s family has used Charles and Chuck and Charlie. The states that are named after England’s King Charles the 1st are North and South Carolina. They had to go through the Latin version of Charles, “Carolus” to get to Carolina. I suspect that Chuck likes Choco better than Carolina or Carolus, both of which might be easier to say in Spanish.

In the church, we often use Isaiah 43:1 to speak of vocation and of the purpose of one’s life. “I have called you by name, you are mine.” Sometimes, at confirmation, I use a specific name and quote the phrase as a reminder that we are known and loved individually by God. The text, however, actually has a different meaning, with more of a sense of being called and claimed as a member of a community. That “you” that is called in the Isaiah passage is the people of Israel. And there have been many names over the years for the people. The descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob sometimes referred to their lineage as a source of their identity. And, through Jesus, we share that lineage. But Jacob received a new name from God, “Israel.” It was to be the name by which all of his descendants were to be known.

In contemporary times, Israel is the name of a country, whose citizens come from a wide variety of ethnic heritages and who practice several different religions. Over the years, “Israel” has been an individual name, the name of a religious community, the name of a nation, the name applied to refugee people spread out over many different countries, and the name of a promise for future generations.

It would appear that God has called Chuck by name and the name is sometimes “Choco.” It isn’t confusing to Chuck and it isn’t confusing to God.

Los Guido is an area where there is a scarcity of reliable male role models. The community is largely a community of women and children with men who come and go. The Spanish notion of macho or machismo is often a negative concept in Central American neighborhoods. It reflects a mistaken notion about the superiority of males over females and translates into unfair social roles that delegates work to women in disproportionate ways and leaves men free of normal responsibilities. A faithful adult male who sticks with his family, shares in its care and assumes a leadership role in the community is often hard to find. And some of the little boys and teenage guys and young adult men think that it is their destiny to run away from responsibility and to live a life of pursuing pleasure without obligation. They aren’t inherently bad, but the community doesn’t have very many role models.

In a culture where prayers are often addressed to “Señor,” a mistaken notion about the role of males in the community can lead to misperceptions about the nature of God, who is always faithful and just. And there seem to be no lack of churches and para-church organizations that are quick to take advantage of mistaken notions about the nature of God and misuse religion for personal gain.

Our little church needs Choco and others like him. And his presence is far more important than which name he is being called this year.

We have learned that there are many different gifts in the community of Christ. There are many different ways of being generous. Chuck and Sybil are incredibly generous people. They offer many gifts to the community of the church. One of those gifts that is so deeply treasured is the gift of presence. Many of the things that are purchased with the money that we send to Cost Rica will soon be worn out, discarded and forgotten. The people and the relationships, however, endure. Little Noah will not forget Choco and Chuck will not forget Noah and his family.

God says, “I have called you by name, and you are mine.” The name might be Chuck or Charles or Chook or Choco. However you say it, God’s claim is evident in his life. How grateful we are for God’s gift in our community.

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## January 26, 2008 – Called by God



Photo by Kenny Putnam

The youth in our church go on a “destination unknown” adventure about once a month. The event is a surprise to the youth, not a secret from their parents. Usually the destination involves a visit to some place in our community and a meal. Often the destination is the place of work of one of our members. This week we visited the graphic arts business of an adult who has been a mentor for one of our youth in the confirmation process. Kenny, the business owner, took a photograph of the group and demonstrated how digital images can be manipulated. There is only one hat and only one youth was wearing a hat in when the picture was taken.

Our culture is making some really strong claims on the lives of our young people. By the time they are ten or twelve years old, they represent a unique consumer group. Teens, aged 12 to 19 spend hundreds of billions of dollars on clothing, cosmetics and consumer electronics. There are market research firms that target teens exclusively. They are bombarded by advertisements that communicate expectations about their role in society. And what is expected of them is that they spend money. Even teens whose parents closely watch their television and movie attendance know the names and roles of all of the popular characters and see the connections to fast food, entertainment and other consumer products. One researcher has estimated that the average American adolescent encounters approximately three thousand discrete commercial messages every day.

Our culture has a message for adolescents and it has taught it clearly: "Your role in our culture is to buy." By age 14 or 15 most teens have their sights set on jobs and evaluate jobs largely in terms of the income that they will produce. The notion of vocation - seeking a life that conforms to God's calling - has been transformed into seeking a life that enables one to purchase the goods that are being sold. Jobs are sought in terms of their power to give the ability to have the cars, electronics, clothes and homes that the advertisers have taught the teens to want and need.

Unfortunately, many church groups have bought into the consumer culture model of youth ministry. They seek to outdo each other with entertainments, measure success by counting numbers, and sell youth everything from ski trips to identity clothing to electronic entertainment. The popular vein of youth ministry in contemporary America is in general trivial in its message and makes extremely short-term claims on the lives of the youth. Attend this event - participate in this program - come and be entertained. Most contemporary youth ministry programs do not engage youth fully in the life of the Christian community, lack theological sophistication, do not engage in faith formation and in general are more focused on short term experience than life-long commitment. Youth who participate in most church programs are not likely to remain engaged in church or to see faith as a more important part of their lives when they become adults. Church has, for them, become just one more voice competing for their time and money.

The real message of faith is quieter and more subtle. God values all people, including youth, in ways that transcend consumer-focused culture. Earning power, buying power, and the ability to fill a stadium is not the true vocation of a Christian. The gospel reaches beyond the Starbucks-Target-Nike lust not to condemn, but to call youth to a higher vocation - a path of service - a life that is evaluated not in terms of how much one gains, but how much one gives.

True vocational discernment with youth cannot be mass produced or mass marketed. It is relational. One youth at a time, adults who can be trusted who are willing to invest, programs that respond to the needs of the youth rather than the needs of the institution - these things and more stand in stark contrast to mass-produced consumer culture.

It isn't the brand of the church that matters, but rather the genuine connection with the youth, their innate wisdom and God's claim on their lives for a deeper purpose. Discerning and fulfilling a Christian vocation is a slow process - a lifelong work. In our tradition it begins with baptism and never ends. Far more meaningful than creating special programs for youth on the edge of the church is creating ways for youth to become engaged in the center of the church. Perhaps we learn as much about our own vocation when we engage youth in discerning their own.

I am occasionally asked whether or not our church has a large youth ministry program. The answer is no, we don't. But we have a few youth who are deeply engaged in the

heart of our church and we have learned to make room for their leadership in worship and planning our common life together. And we have a group of young adults who are making a difference in this world by living their faith in ways we never imagined.

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## January 27, 2008 – Annual Meeting



Today is the annual meeting of our congregation. An important part of the heritage of Congregationalism is the process of local control of congregations and the exercise of that control through democratic processes. We meet and we vote. I have been attending annual congregational meetings as a pastor for thirty years now, and I attended as a congregational member for years before my first annual meeting as a pastor in 1979. I'm probably a bit more relaxed about annual meetings now than I was when I was beginning my career, but they still make me nervous. I'm not sure why, because an annual meeting rarely holds surprises for a pastor. Most of the decisions made by annual meetings are based on recommendations from boards or committees in the church and there are plenty of indications about how a congregation will decide. It is possible that there can be talk relating to the evaluation of the pastor's work, but most discussions about job performance occur in other settings.

I think that my nervousness comes primarily from the simple fact that I care. The life of the congregation is important to me. Having its members participate in that life makes a difference. Perhaps the biggest disappointment of annual meetings over the years is that they are generally lightly attended. Many members don't participate in the meetings. And democracy assumes participation. Those who don't participate are as bound by the decisions of the the congregation as are those who do. The quality of our decisions improves with increased participation.

Whatever the results of today's meeting it will be over this afternoon and I am looking forward to that time. It will mean another milestone passed - another new year in the life of the church begun. There will be a few new faces at board and department meetings and changes in leadership that will bring new vision and new challenges to our life together. And, when we compile the statistics for next year's annual meeting, there will be members who have died and new members who have joined. The list of events in the life of our church in the past year will be as impressive and interesting as the year that has just passed. We will all be a year older and perhaps there will be a bit more collective wisdom when we gather next year. But we will have lost a bit of our communal memory with the loss of elders who die during the year.

So I write a bit more quickly and a bit more briefly this morning, in anticipation of a day that will be interesting and inviting - a day that will require my best skills as a listener. With a prayer I place this day in God's hands, knowing that each day belongs to God. May we discern God's call of our congregation through the processes of our annual meeting and may we be prepared to answer that call.

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## January 28, 2008 – Bananas



Our diets are substantially different from those who lived on the plains a century ago. We have grown to expect fresh fruit in the store year round. There are bananas in our home almost every day. The Cavendish bananas that we eat have been developed specifically for transportation over long distances. Picked green, their ripening is slowed by refrigeration during transport. Most of the bananas we eat are grown in Costa Rica, Guatemala, or Mexico, though they might have come from Brazil, or from as far away as India or China. In regions where bananas grow, there are many different varieties of bananas available, with a variety of flavors and textures. Bananas are served raw and cooked in those places. Plantains, a starchier variety, are grown as a staple food crop and usually cooked when served.

Bananas were originally found only in the tropical regions of Southeast Asia and Australia. Today they are cultivated throughout the tropics. The process of developing large plantations to grow bananas for export to Europe and the United States played a role in the development of governments. The wealth produced by bananas and the power associated with that wealth provided ample opportunities for corruption. The term “banana republic” refers to a small country that is dependent on limited agriculture with a small wealthy and corrupt elite class who govern the workers. The term has become almost a joke in contemporary America. The 1971 Woody Allen film is a comedy set in an imaginary Latin American country with a corrupt dictator. The term “going bananas” is a description of unpredictable and capricious behavior that probably has its roots in the behaviors of the leaders of corrupt governments. Much of the origins of these terms

are fading from popular culture. Contemporary American youth are more likely to associate banana republic with a clothing store than with the corruption that transformed countries from subsistence agriculture to export agriculture at the cost of a great deal of suffering for the indigenous people.

But whether we are talking about the food we eat or the clothing we wear, the decisions we make do have an impact far from our homes. Things that we see as improvements in our lifestyle sometimes come at the cost of a loss of freedom and a decrease in lifestyle for others. We have come to expect bananas to be readily available at a price that is generally less than \$1 per pound. This means that they need to be grown and shipped in large quantities in order to keep the availability constant and the price low. Small and independent growers simply are not able to participate in large scale production for the popular market in our country.

Organic bananas and some exotic varieties are now sometimes available in American stores, but they come at a much higher cost than the bananas that are shipped in mass quantities. The economies of scale play a big role in production agriculture throughout the world and bananas are just one crop among many where the lifestyles of local farmers are affected by the choices we make.

The truth is that we are connected to people in distant places in more ways than we are usually aware. Our lives are dependent upon systems of transportation and communication that link us with people who live in the most distant places on the globe. Awareness of our connections and of the lives of the people at the other end of the supply chain can enable us to make more responsible decisions. Occasionally we are able to trace our food to its source. The coffee we make in our home comes from a small cooperative in Zona Sur, Costa Rica. We know that it is fairly traded and that the members of the cooperative receive fair compensation for their work. We pay a slightly higher price, and getting it from Costa Rica to our home is less than convenient, but it is worth it to us to know the source of the beans and the stories of the growers.

No matter how much we like to think of ourselves as independent individuals, we live in a world of complex connections and relationships. Sometimes it is good to think of the other people who are a part of the world in which we live and whose lives are connected to ours in so many different ways.

I intend to enjoy my banana and coffee this morning. And I will also enjoy thinking of all the people whose work has contributed to my breakfast.

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## January 29, 2008 – Multi-generation Family



I'm not sure who coined the phrase "sandwich generation," but we baby boomers have taken to it. It is true that there is some overlapping of responsibilities for the care of our children and our parents, but there is nothing unique about it in our generation, and there are more options than ever before for care and support of all ages. In our particular case, we have never actually lived three generations in the same household, unless you count the fact that our daughter's cats have lived in our home continuously since she adopted them.

Multi-generation families are the norm throughout the world and have been the norm for a long time. If anything has changed in our generation, it is a decrease in the amount of time that households are made up of multiple generations. In previous times, shorter life expectancies combined with earlier onset of parenthood and decreased mobility to mean that three generations living in the same house was very common. In our generation, children and parents often don't live in the same state, let alone the same home. It is possible that there is some lengthening of the years of responsibility for another generation caused by the lengthening of adolescence and increased life expectancy, but it is doubtful that the percentage of our lives invested in caring for others is any greater in this particular generation.

There are a few changes in our roles in the family as we grow older. We make become more involved in health care decisions involving our parents and more active in some aspects of their financial management. Our parents are an independent group and not

likely to ask for help when no help is needed. Sometimes it can be awkward for a child to offer assistance, but these changes in roles are inevitable.

A quick scan of the websites about the sandwich generation gives the impression that we baby boomers are seeing our situation as a problem and that we are doing more than a little bit of complaining while at the same time trying to make money marketing “solutions” to each other.

The truth is that living in a multi-generation family is a whole lot of fun. Family is a wonderful blessing and regular contact with people of a different generation broadens our perspective. Regardless of the specifics of living situations, regular contact and involvement in the lives of our parents and our children enriches our lives. Despite the rhetoric of the websites, the best position in the sandwich is the middle. The wisdom of our parents and the vision of our children add immeasurably to our quality of life.

The pressures and stresses of which we are often aware are, in truth, not caused by our children or our parents. They are the result of the decisions we have made. We are busy because we choose to be busy. We feel stretched thin because we choose to burn the candle at both ends. Time and money have been limited commodities for all generations. Learning to live abundantly within limits is a challenge of every generation. If we feel that we don't have enough time, it is likely that we are trying to do too much. If we don't have enough money, it is likely that we are trying to buy too much. Blaming another generation for our stress is unlikely to help reduce stress.

After scanning the websites, it is clear that I won't be spending much time or money or energy seeking online or face-to-face support as a member of the sandwich generation. The support I need is right in my own home, right in my own church, right in my own circle of friends.

What seems a bit unique about our situation is that we live our lives immersed in the church - which is intentionally a multi-generational organization. Activities for people of different generations are the norm. Learning to respond to varying needs of people of varying ages is our way of life in the church. Living in a multi-generation household enhances and supports my work in the church. Working in the church supports my living in a multi-generation household.

Who knows how much time we will have living with this particular configuration of family? Time is a limited commodity, and if our experience with our children is any indication, when the time has passed, it will seem to us that it has been all too short.

So we treasure the life that we have. We laugh a lot, cry occasionally, and tell all of the stories we can remember. We look at pictures together and we go out to community events together. Sometimes we fret over decisions together, and often we wish that we

had more time in the day. But at the end of the day and at its beginning we give thanks to God that we have been blessed to have opportunities to be close to our family.

The best place in the sandwich really is the middle.

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## January 30, 2008 – Religion and Science

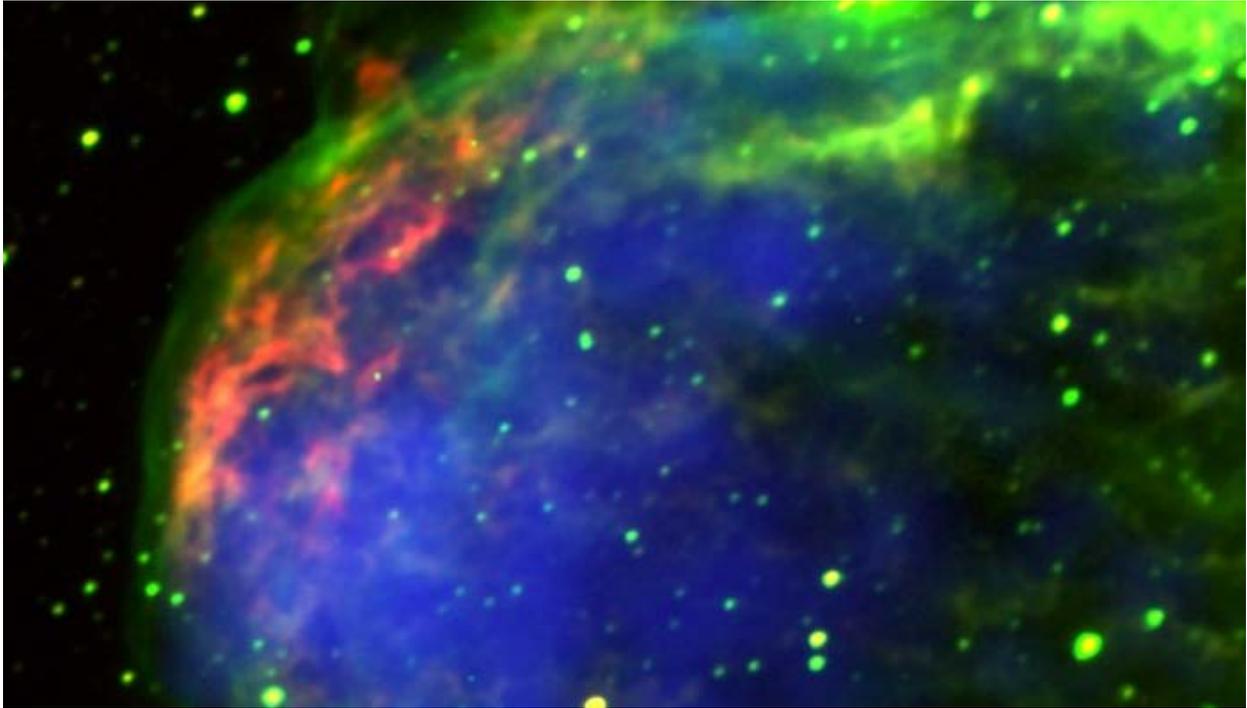


Photo by NASA/CXC/SAG. Used by permission.

Yesterday a clergy group to which I belong got into a discussion about science, technology and religion. Later in the day, John Thomas, general minister and president of the United Church of Christ released a pastoral letter on science and technology. You can view the letter and other resources at <http://www.ucc.org/not-mutually-exclusive/>

It is interesting to note what seems to me to be a false polarity that we have set up between science and religion. There are many voices in scientific circles and many in religious circles who see the two world-views as diametrically opposed. For those who see the opposition, science is based on observation of the physical and natural world and will accept no reality that cannot be directly observed. Religion, for them, involves the belief in and worship of the supernatural - that which lies beyond the physical and natural world.

This model of two realities has been common throughout the history and both religious and scientific thinkers have often embraced the dichotomy. Certain scientific theories seem to threaten religious notions and cause some religious thinkers to attack the assumptions of science or at least particular theories of science. The theory of evolution threatens some religious notions. A narrow attempt to apply human dating to certain biblical passages has been used to discount scientific dating of planet. A simplistic and surface reading of Genesis 1:1-2:4 as if it were the definitive description of the origins of the universe has led some religious people to discount the basic assumptions of

science. That same literal interpretation of a text that is far more complex and multi-faceted than it first appears has led some scientists to discount all religious thinkers as people who fail to take seriously the observable physical evidence that is present in the universe.

Both perspectives in this debate are clinging to a way of thinking about God from a human perspective that defines God in a very limited human-centric way. If God is forever consigned to the supernatural world, then the idea of God either shrinks or grows more distant with each new scientific discovery. The notion that God and religion are the explanation for all things that do not fit into scientific theories sets up a definition of God that is altered by each new observation or discovery.

From this point of view, science continues to refute belief and belief continues to question scientific observation.

If, however, one lays aside the arguments about the existence of God and looks at the world from a perspective that assumes the existence of God and assumes that the reality of God is always greater than the idea of God, science no longer threatens religion. Each new discovery about the vastness of the universe or the complexity of the physical world becomes an opportunity to expand the idea of God. If God is as involved in the part of the universe which is physically observable as well as that which is beyond our present powers of observation and understanding then each new discovery expands our notion of God. From this perspective, both science and religion are imperfect human enterprises. Religion is the human attempt to know and understand God who is beyond our ability to know and understand. Science is the human attempt to know and understand a universe that is beyond our ability to fully conceptualize and understand.

That doesn't mean that we should stop trying to understand, but rather that we admit that the human perspective is limited, that both the physical universe and the reality of God are far greater than our ability to observe and conceptualize.

There will continue to be those who take a limited view of the nature of science and claim to only believe in that which is directly observable and say that they will believe in God only when proof of God is given. They will unwittingly continue to participate in the expansion of the idea of God for some religious thinkers. Each time they refute a mistaken religious claim, they pave the way for a deeper and fuller understanding of God.

There will continue to be those who take a limited view of the nature of God and claim that every scientific theory is flawed. They will unwittingly continue to participate in the expansion of scientific theory. Each time they point out a logical error in a theory, they pave the way for a fuller and more comprehensive theory to follow.

God's universe is far more vast and far more complex than the limits of human observation and understanding. It certainly appears, from my point of view, that disagreement and difference are far more conducive to growth in understanding than unanimity or common belief. So let the debate continue and revel in the incredible discoveries that are made. I will continue to listen for voices of those who see things from a different point of view than my own, knowing that even when my faith is shaken and doubt enters my world, God is not limited to my ability to understand.

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## December 31, 2008 – Wandering Through the Stock Show



The Black Hills Stock Show and Rodeo celebrates its 50th year with the current show. It is a big deal around here. There are ten days of sales, shows, rodeos, concerts, banquets and special events. The civic center is filled to the brim with vendors, and equipment displays are also set up outside in the parking lot. Everything for farm and ranch life is for sale from pots and pans to clothing, from trucks and trailers to veterinary supplies, from feed supplements to saddles and tack. There are booths set up by hospitals and insurance companies, jewelry and t-shirt companies, leatherworkers, blacksmiths, artists and more than one can take in.

My father in law and I like to wander through the displays. He grew up on a farm, I grew up the son of a John Deere dealer. The main topic of conversation as we walk through the displays is price. "I never thought I'd sit in a \$50,000 pickup." "You need one if you're going to pull a \$40,000 trailer." "Here's a tractor that is less than \$100,000 - only \$200 less, but still it's less than \$100,000." "You wouldn't want to put a \$2,500 saddle on a \$40 horse, would you." "Where could you find a \$40 horse today? If you've got \$10,000 you want to spend we might go to the horse sale."

We sound and feel like a couple of old men wandering through the displays, amazed at the state of the business and how it got to be this way, reminiscing about the days when farms and ranches were smaller operations and prices were lower. Neither of us has been very close to agriculture for three decades and those decades were monumental for the business. Ranches and farms were forced to get bigger in order to survive. The

number of families required to work the land and care for the cattle declined dramatically. Bigger and better equipment was demanded to keep up with the increasing workload. Ranches and farms had to become super productive in order to survive. It has always been a tough business. Now it is big business.

Farming and ranching have changed in other ways as well. Paging through the catalogue of the genetics sale, I realized that I didn't know all of the terms. There were vendors selling dart guns and crossbows designed to inject cattle with medicines without herding them into a squeeze chute - maybe without even getting out of the pickup truck. From my limited experiences of ranching, I couldn't imagine the use of some of the equipment we saw.

Sitting down to a cup of coffee, we realized how much the business has changed and how out of touch we have become. But as we sat there, we watched a two-year-old, all dolled up in a western outfit with a hat and boots, clinging to his father's jeans as they waited in line. We watched a couple of young boys tossing a lariat around a garbage can, and looked at some pictures of the mutton busting competition. While there were lots of aspects of the business that we no longer understood, we could easily identify with the kids growing up in the midst of ranch life, learning to care for critters, having a healthy dose of open space and room to roam, enjoying getting together with friends at special occasions, getting more time with their families than kids whose parents commute to distant jobs. There is an appeal to ranch life that is deeper than our distant memories - an essential goodness about most of the folks who care for the land and the animals because they love the land and the animals.

We don't pretend to be something that we are not. We're a couple of old guys who chose different paths for our lives. My father-in-law earned his living as an electrician, I can't imagine not being a minister. We joke about it, but neither of us is going to buy a horse and we wouldn't have any place to keep one if we did. So far we've both found excuses to keep owning a pickup truck. Heck, I even bought a cheap cowboy hat this winter. But we're far closer to drug store cowboys than the real thing. And we know it.

But you don't have to live on a ranch to appreciate the people who do. We've grown fond enough of eating that it is good, on occasion, to rub shoulders with the people who raise our food. So, as long as we're able, we'll keep wandering through the stock show every year. We'll keep talking about how expensive things are and the vendors will know that we aren't serious customers. But we enjoy a visit with the people and the culture of farm and ranch life.

Now wouldn't it be cool if they would actually let us drive the tractors?

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## February 1, 2008 – Becoming a Home



Building a house is a process of solving problems. A small error in measurement when building the floor system can set off a string of events. In the home we are currently building, the access to the crawl space is slightly farther to the north than originally planned. This resulted in the need to move the wall of the closet slightly to make the access inside of the closet. This meant that the ceiling, instead of being exactly the dimensions of the panels of sheetrock, needed to have a small strip cut to fill in the extra space. The end result is a beautiful home where no one notices the error.

The human imagination is capable of thinking more precisely than the realities of life. The plans for the house can be drawn exactly to scale with no variations. The plans assume that each stud in every wall is exactly the same size. Real boards, coming from real trees and run through real sawmills have slight variations. They aren't always perfectly straight. A board that is only 1/16 of an inch off at one end can be 1/2 inch off at the other. As careful as the builders are and as precise as their tools are, a perfect house is not within the realm of possibility. This doesn't mean that sloppy construction is inevitable. Walls need to be plumb. Doors and windows need square openings in order to work properly. Corners need to be precise in order for appearances to be right. But perfection is not possible.

When we are struggling to make things fit, one of the saints of our local Habitat affiliate will occasionally say, "We're not building a watch here." He means that a small margin of error is acceptable.

We are making regular progress on the home we are building in partnership with Black Hills Area Habitat for Humanity. Crews have been installing sheetrock the past two days and will probably finish the sheetrock on Saturday. The house is beginning to take shape. Individual rooms and closets are obvious. There are still lots of details to be finished and it will be some time before the house is completed, but some of the bigger jobs have been completed and the regular progress helps us to know that we can get the job done.

Of course completed construction does not make a house a home. A home is a home only when it is occupied by people. The presence of a family with its stories and experiences is what makes the structure into a home. Tools can only go so far in creating a dwelling place for the human spirit.

The family who lives in the home may never know how much spirit has been built into the structure. They may not ever know about the day when Emily and Evan stopped by with their grandmother and dabbed a bit of mud onto the sheetrock. They may not know about the laughter and joking that the workers exchanged as they developed life-long friendships. They might never sense the dedicated volunteer who invested hours in the house between cancer treatments and who is constantly thinking that this home might be his last. They won't have a conscious memory of the volunteers who provided lunches week after week to keep the workers going. They do not need to know these stories in order for the spirits of the workers to be invested in the home.

What is being built is far more than wood and sheetrock, siding and shingles. It is the physical expression of a community that believes that no children should have to live in substandard housing. It is the sign of the conviction of many people that offering a hand to help someone up is more helpful giving a hand out. It is the passion of faithful people who are committed to the economics of the Bible and who measure their worth by how much they give rather than how much they gain.

It will become a home. It isn't a home yet. There is more work to be done. But it will become a home.

And when it is done we will build another home.

February 2, 2008 – Shit



It is an indelicate subject and the word is offensive, so I decided to put it in the title line so those who might be offended could skip today's blog all together. I'll try not to over-use the word, but it seems to be the only way to talk about the topic. When I was a kid, it was one of the worst curse words we knew. All the kids knew the word and we all know that we weren't supposed to use it, even when we were angry or frustrated. Most of us had heard an adult say it in anger, which seemed to make it more intriguing. My parents didn't cuss, and "shoot" or "darn" were about as rough as it got at our house. Occasionally the word "spit" was used with intense enthusiasm.

The guys down at the barber shop would use the term, and I heard it used with a bit more freedom in settings where there were only men present, such as the coffee room at my dad's shop or at the ranches of some of my friends. Occasionally the term was preceded by the word "bull," as if bulls produced a worse variety than steers or cows or other critters, though that term was not so often issued in anger as in disgust for someone who didn't know what he was talking about.

There was a term of derision in our community, seldom used in polite circles, but almost always said with meaning and conviction. "He doesn't know shit . . ." was more than an expression of disgust about a person who was inexperienced or lacked information. The term was most often applied to someone who had a certain air of superiority. It meant that there was something phony about the person.

There is a real distinction in ranch country, at least there was in the years I was growing up. Real cowboys knew about bad weather, and muddy roads, and spring blizzards during calving season. They had experienced wet feet and cold fingers and trying to help pull a calf in the mud and muck. They had shoveled out barns and scooped out corrals and knew enough to remove their boots at the back door. They knew shit because they had experienced it - first hand. They had touched it, lived with it, smelled it, dealt with it and cleaned up for dinner.

But there were always a few hobby ranchers hanging around. They tended to have new pickup trucks and knew how to keep them clean. They were quick to call the vet when an animal got sick and they tended to need to make trips to Arizona or California that lasted through most of the worst weather. They would slip and slide to the gas station and have the guys there put the chains on their pickup trucks and then drive them back on bare pavement to have them removed. They had the hats and the belt buckles and the boots, but they didn't know shit.

We knew the difference, even when we weren't allowed to use the word. My father used to joke that the slogan of our shop was, "We stand behind everything we sell . . . except the manure spreaders." The implication was that a rancher wouldn't buy machinery from someone who didn't know shit.

There was a sense that if one didn't have some experience dealing with the stuff, one wasn't real. My own direct experience before the summers I worked on my uncle and cousin's ranch, was limited to the chicken coop, but in many ways it was as real and as disgusting as the experiences of the ranch kids.

I was thinking about the topic this week when we went down to look at the Herefords at the stock show. These cattle were dressed up. The bulls looked like they had just gotten out of the beauty shop. They were displayed on beds of fresh wood chips and if any manure was produced, it was scooped up, loaded into a wheelbarrow, and removed from the civic center so quick you'd think the parks department was experiencing a fertilizer crisis.

I couldn't help but think that all of this might be a bit embarrassing for the bulls. To be shampooed and combed and cleaned up and displayed as if their natural environment was the pampered status of someone who had it easy. There is a distinct difference between the bulls in the show ring and the working bulls you'll find on a ranch. It's hard to maintain the tough guy image when someone shampoos your backside and combs your tail. Why a casual observer - one of the city folks at the show - might think that you didn't know shit. After all that scrubbing and washing a bull doesn't even smell like a bull.

While the truth is that these critters don't live most of their lives in the show ring, and the corrals at home aren't very much like the inside of the civic center, they do lead pampered lives. The need for careful breeding and some control over the dates of calving have resulted in increased artificial insemination and other techniques. A good bull may become too valuable to simply turn out with the cows. Modern agriculture consigns some magnificent animals to life in the runs at the breeders and contributing to future generations by being harvested.

I hope that we don't get too removed from the realities of life that we always hire someone else to deal with our shit. There are times when cleaning up one's own mess is therapeutic. Don't get me wrong. I'm all in favor of modern plumbing and sewage treatment systems. I just don't want my life so removed from the basic realities of life and death and everything in between that I become someone who doesn't know shit.

Maybe I already have. There is something a bit phony about my hat and jeans and western shirts. They aren't required for the work I do. I wear them because I like to. Feeding cows is a vacation item for me, reserved for occasional visits to the ranch. I haven't helped pull a calf or vaccinate or brand since I went to graduate school. I haven't ridden a horse in the last 20 years. I'm pretty much off the ranch for good.

So it is important for me, on a regular basis, to participate in plain work. Even though I don't spend much time on the ranch, I try to get my hands dirty with Habitat for Humanity or church work days or volunteering at camp. I can still handle a shovel and set a post. I look for opportunities to stack wood and get a few calluses. Because in the basic chores of life there is an authenticity that can't be explained in ivory towers. There is a wisdom in the sometimes crude phrases of the ranch.

Do you know what they do with all the shit from the stock show? The parks department uses it for fertilizer. We couldn't have the beauty of the rose gardens and parks in our city if we lived in a place where everybody was somebody who didn't know shit.

## February 3, 2008 – A Classical Performance



Each year twenty-two high school students from South Dakota gather to form the J. Laiten Weed Honors Orchestra. The orchestra is an auditioned ensemble and they gather for 48 hours of intensive rehearsal with a guest conductor before giving a concert. Every-other year our church hosts the performance.

I was sitting working in my office last evening before the performance and I could hear the conversations of the students in the hallway outside my office as they prepared to begin their performance. “Wow! did you look at that audience!” “There’s a lot of gray hair out there.” “Definitely an over 50 crowd.” “I never saw so many glasses in one room at the same time. Everyone is wearing glasses.”

I was about to join the audience and I met all of their criteria. I’m over 50, I have gray hair, and I wear glasses. I also wore glasses when I was their age, but it is a different world today. The only pair of glasses in the orchestra were worn by the conductor. Members of the ensemble who needed vision correction were wearing contact lenses. With the advances in corrective surgery they may never wear glasses.

I don’t know when I became old. I don’t think of myself as old. But to those young musicians last night, I had definitely crossed over into the category of “old.” I am older than most of their parents.

Then the concert began. The students played brilliantly. They began with Adagio and Fugue for String Orchestra by Mozart. The music has been performed by orchestras for over two centuries now. They played works by Handel and Tchaikovsky. The one piece by a contemporary composer that was performed was written by John Corigliano, who is 15 years older than I.

But the music they performed wasn't old. It was fresh and exciting and wonderful. Twenty-two 17- and 18-year old musicians brought to life music that has been around for centuries. In the case of the Handel, it is likely that teenage musicians have been performing the Passacaglia for Strings for the last 300 years.

There will be teenage musicians performing classical music 300 years from now.

These students have been living with this music since before the beginning of their intensive rehearsals. They had received the music months ago and were practicing individually before coming together as an ensemble. But since last Thursday, they have been working full-time honing the music. They had over 12 hours of rehearsals on Friday and almost eight hours of rehearsals yesterday prior to the performance. There has been no time since Thursday for video games or hanging out at the mall for these young people. They have had their cell phones turned off more than they have been turned on this week.

This kind of music requires hard work and dedication. The commitment required of the students is high. And we do not live in an age that is marked by deep commitment to much of anything.

The sense of accomplishment was obvious after the performance. The performance was masterful and they knew it. There were no shortcuts to what they achieved. It took dedication and hard work. We in the audience may have been a bunch of over fifty, gray haired, glasses wearing people, but twenty two high school students somehow found us worthy of cramming 24 hours of rehearsals into to and 1/2 days so that they could perform for us.

The audience may have been old, but the music wasn't.

The performance transcended time. It did not belong to our time alone. This music has been around for centuries and will be performed centuries after our time on this earth has passed. And it will take the same level of dedication, practice and just plain hard work to perform this music whenever it is performed.

Following the concert, there was a reception and then it was time for the musicians to pack up their instruments, say good bye to their conductor and fellow musicians from around the state, and head home. By then they looked tired. They were spent. They

slept hard last night and I doubt that any of them are awake yet this morning. When they do wake, they might get a brief taste of what it feels like to be getting older.

Perhaps the students in the hallway outside my office last night got it a little bit wrong. The audience wasn't composed of old people. It is just that like the music, we've become classical.

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February 4, 2008 – Tea



Every once in a while we go through our cupboard and get out the boxes of tea to look for a special kind of tea or to offer a variety to a guest. Everyday tea at our house is simple black tea, but we have acquired a variety of green and herbal teas, and we usually have some oolong and white tea on hand. Often, when we start to get out tea, we are surprised by how much we have accumulated. Tea is a kind and appreciated gift and we occasionally will add to our supply of different varieties for a special occasion.

Although tea has been a part of Chinese culture for over 5,000 years, it was unknown to Europeans until the second half of the sixteenth century. It took another century before it became popular. By that time, it had also been brought to the North American continent and the demand for tea had risen to the point that trading in tea was a major factor in travel, shipping and the politics of colonization. Tea is compact and portable and can be kept for long periods of time. It was a natural for the settlers. Although herbal teas can be made from native plants grown in all parts of the world, it was black tea that the settlers in North America wanted and that tea was imported, primarily from China and India. Britain granted a monopoly on the tea trade to the John Company.

A tax on tea, levied to help defray the costs of the French and Indian war, was resisted by the colonists. They began to seek tea from non-British (primarily Dutch) sources, and sales of British tea plummeted. Tensions grew and when hundreds of pounds of British tea were thrown into Boston Harbor as a part of tax protest, Britain closed the harbor,

setting up the escalation that led to the American revolution. It wasn't all about tea, but tea trade and tea taxes were major contributors to the conditions that led to war.

It hasn't occurred to us to go to war over tea for some time. And usually we like to come up with more philosophical reasons for our wars than simple trade. We like to say that philosophical ideologies about freedom, liberty, and the spread of democracy are the reasons for our wars and we rarely are completely honest with the financial and trade reasons that wars are fought. But trade and international economics are large factors in international conflict.

We are far more conscious of the culture of tea than of its politics. The slightly bitter taste of tea is an acquired taste, but once acquired, the flavor is soothing and relaxing. Tea is most commonly served freshly brewed and the time it takes to boil water and steep the tea is all a part of a ritual of slowing down and taking time. Tea breaks or a cup of tea in the evening is an invitation to slow the pace of activity and take time to relax and savor life.

Tea is shared as much for the change in pace as it is for any other reasons. Of all of the health benefits that tea provides, perhaps the change in pace and the invitation to relax is primary.

So come in and sit down. Relax while we brew a fresh pot of tea. Take time to reflect on the events and activities of the day and share the art of conversation. Breathe in the steam rising from the cup and learn to appreciate a simple pleasure.

Life is good. And one of its simple pleasures is sharing a cup of tea with family and friends.

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## February 5, 2008 – Hands



Over the years, I've given my hands a fair amount of abuse. I have hit them with hammers, cut them with knives and saws, smashed them under heavy objects and burned them a couple of times. They seem to have held up to the abuse quite well, recovering each time and returning to service - often without much of a disruption. My hands haven't had to endure the abuse that some have. My father had three fingers that were shortened by an encounter with a planer. Those fingers continued to serve him for the rest of his life. A couple of years ago, my sister had one of her hands crushed by rolling a car on top of it. It took some delicate surgery and an extended period of recovery, but the recovery is amazing.

I guess that my hands are about average in their abilities. I can use my fingers to enter data into a computer and when typing words they are very quick. They participate in musical endeavors, pressing the keys of the piano, the valves of my trumpet, and the strings of my guitar, but lack of mental focus and lack of practicing have made them somewhat less capable in this arena than I wish they were and a lot less capable than the hands of some. They are fairly good at using tools. A hammer, wrench or screwdriver seems to come easily to my hands and work fairly well. My hands know about how much pressure to apply to a wood plane to produce a pleasing curl of shavings.

I can still get the lid off of a new jar of peanut butter. Which has made me useful around the house. I can turn a doorknob which has made me useful to our cats.

All in all, I don't have any complaints about my hands.

In order to use them, I have had to learn that there are things they cannot do. They can't remove a baking dish from the oven without pot holders or oven mitts. They cannot take the cold of a below zero day without gloves. They cannot loosen the lug nuts on a vehicle without a wrench. And there are hundreds of tasks they cannot do without the help of other people's hands.

Our culture has taught us to be independent and to focus on what we can accomplish with our own hands, but most of the significant challenges of this world are too great to accomplish with only one set of hands. There are many vocations that cannot be accomplished in a single generation. The saying, "many hands make light work" is true and there are many jobs that can't be done with one set of hands.

Perhaps the most important work that my hands do is to reach out to another person. There is much that can be conveyed with a handshake or a gentle touch upon the shoulder. There is energy in the moments when we reach out and take the hand of another. Our hands can be the bridge that connects us with others.

Over the years I have learned that it is often best to approach others with empty hands. The offering of myself is more valuable than the things my hands can carry. It is unlikely that I will have the solution to another's problem, but I can join with another in seeking solutions.

I think I pray best with open hands as well. I don't presume to be able to tell God what to do or to know what should be asked in a particular situation. Simply offering myself to God seems to make more sense. Use my hands and heart and energy, I offer them to you.

I hope my hands can be of some use today. May I approach this day with open hands.

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## February 6, 2008 – Ashes



The simple truth is that humans are finite. We do not go on forever. Fantasies of immortality led to myths about super beings or gods who were immortal. Stories of immortal beings are common among the ancient traditions of a wide variety of cultures. In some mythologies, the immortals are in regular contact with mortal beings and occasionally become mortal by exposing a weakness or by falling in love.

But while we might like to speculate about what it would be like to live without limits, life as we know it, is a limited commodity. We do not have an endless amount of time for this life. It is this truth that makes life so precious. If there were no limits - if life stretched on without end - we would not treasure the time that is ours.

On the other hand, we do not like to think of our limits. Dwelling on the shortness of life can immobilize us and decrease our capacity to take risks. We can carry on for long periods of time without really admitting to ourselves that we are temporal, that the things we acquire are ours for only a little time, and that all position and power we possess are transitory.

Today is the day of a simple reminder of who we are. With a simple smudge of ash on the back of our hand or our forehead and the simple words, “dust we are, to dust we return,” we remind ourselves that even the elements of our our bodies are ours for a limited time and one day these elements will be the carriers of our unique identity.

The mystery of who we are and what happens to our consciousness and our identity when we die has been the subject of generations of contemplation, wonder and religious thought. For more generations than we can count, our people have told the simple story of Adam (which means human - or everyone) being created out of Adamah (the earth). The human is formed of humus. But to be human is to be more than just humus. In the stories of our people God breathes life into Adam. We are more than the elements that make up our bodies. We have life and breath and consciousness and being - for a while.

And then we die. Which is another holy mystery that we have contemplated for as long as we can remember. We observe the deaths of others and sometimes we even think of our own deaths. And we have concluded that the part of our being that is the elements of the earth: the human returns to the earth: the humus. And the part of our being that is the breath of God returns to God. And while we can speculate about what that means, we have to admit that we do not fully understand, we cannot fully know this mystery.

Ash Wednesday is a powerful day for a pastor. Unlike most other worship services I lead, this one is a service of touch. The words that I say are ancient, steeped in tradition, and few. The service is about symbol and not about words. The people line up and I touch each one. A smudge of ash on the forehead or the hand and simple words about our mortality. One by one I touch the people who come to the service. Life touching life - connecting for a brief moment. We acknowledge our commonness. Some of the ash goes to the other, some remains on my fingers. We are made of the same elements, we share the same mortality. We are alive now and we will one day be dead.

Of course this is not the end of our story. Our faith contains the bold declaration that death is not the end. This, too, is a holy mystery and the focus of much worship and praise and celebration. But Easter is six weeks away. We now enter a season of deepening our understanding of who we are and accepting the reality of our limits. And we enter the season with a touch.

Each day I search for a short, pithy statement to summarize my blog and draw it to a conclusion, but today's story has no conclusion. It is a story whose ending is yet to be fully revealed.

The story, my friends, continues . . .

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**February 7, 2008 – Lent**



The name of the season of Lent comes from a word for “lengthen,” that refers to the the lengthening of the days in the spring. Christianity began many of its traditions and developed its calendar in the northern hemisphere. It is a somewhat different experience to go through Lent in a part of the world where the days are getting shorter as the Lenten journey continues. Most religious traditions have some sort of festival that celebrates spring. The Christian tradition of Lent and Easter has roots in the Jewish celebration of Passover, which itself has its roots in earlier celebrations of the birth of the first lambs in the spring.

But we live in a world that is less connected with the passing of seasons than was true for previous generations. The development of modern electrical lighting systems resulted in the ability to engage in all sorts of activities once the sun had gone down and natural light was no longer available. Before electric lights people adjusted their schedules to the seasons, sleeping more in the winter and less in the summer. Even when they were awake during the dark hours, activities were subdued. Telling stories round a campfire has a different quality than shift work under florescent lights.

Researchers tell us that we sleep less than previous generations. There is dispute about the results of this practice. Some claim that it negatively affects our health, others are less sure. David Beaudouin has published a book of interviews with people who are more than 100 years old and one of the common threads in their stories is hard work and long days.

I think our experience of Lent is different in our generation. I don't expect my days to get any longer despite the change in the seasons, and I don't expect my productivity to increase with the expanding hours of daylight. While my garden gives me some sense of connection with the changing seasons, I am less connected to agriculture and the cycles of planting, birth of animals, growth and harvest, than were my forebears.

Still there is an anticipation about this season. I have lived in this country long enough to know that there can be a big blizzard during holy week. The weather on Easter can be very wintry, but even with an early Easter, we know that the storm will pass and that warm weather is returning to our corner of the world. And the one thing that does change with the seasons for me is the amount of time I spend outside. Morning coffee on the deck, trips to the lake and walks in the woods. It is not that we are homebound in the winter, we just live more of our lives outside when the weather is warmer.

My life may be more removed from the cycles of nature than the lives of previous generations, but my understanding of resurrection is still rooted in some of the cycles of nature. Seeds planted and sprouting, new animals born, trees budding, and many other signs of nature teach me about fundamental realities of life. New life emerges. Death is not the end. The earth recovers from dramatic changes.

I know that summer isn't here yet. I know we have many cold days ahead. And I am grateful that this is true. One of the truths taught by the six weeks of Lent is that there are many things in life worth waiting for. Delayed gratification is important. Sometimes waiting and anticipation are essential to a celebration.

So this is a season for waiting - we know that there is change in the air and that change will take some time. And it seems that it is a good thing for it to take time. There are preparations that need to be made before Easter. One possibility is that the lengthening of this Lent is a lengthening of the time we create in our lives for quiet, prayer and contemplation. A little less rushing about, a little more time sitting quietly.

It promises to be a meaningful season.

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## February 8, 2008 – Birthday



Today is Susan's birthday. It is a day shared by several of our friends as well. The meaning of birthdays shifts as we go through our lives. At least the celebrations shift. As we have gone through the different seasons of our lives, we have had different kinds of birthday celebrations.

Still, it is good to mark the passing of another year and to give thanks for the gifts that people are in our lives. We had a subdued celebration last night with my mother and Susan's father. The four of us enjoyed a bit of cake and exchanged a few gifts. But the emphasis of the evening was spending the time together. An evening without meetings or work to be accomplished - just time for each other. It was just the celebration that we needed. We found time to tell a few stories of past birthdays and Keith recalled the day that Susan was born. The stories increase in value to us each time we hear them.

Acknowledging the passage of time reminds us how precious our time is. And how fortunate we are to have each other. Somehow we each found a partner who came with a family. Our family has always been surrounded and embraced by a wider family. And we have lived long enough to know that family configurations change. Looking back through photos shows quite a few different gatherings in celebration of Susan's birthday. We've celebrated with friends, with our own children, with our parents and with various combinations of relatives. Susan has a nephew whose birthday is the day before hers, so for the last 29 years, there have been multiple occasions for celebration at this time of the year.

And several times over the years, we have shifted our celebration. We celebrated last night because I have to drive to Hastings NE today and need to get an early start. One year, I spent Susan's birthday in the airport in Denver trying to get home. It seems that I have traveled on her birthday many times over the years. So the celebrations haven't always been on the exact day.

Still, a birthday is worthy of a celebration. We don't want to let a birthday pass without some kind of recognition. It is a way of expressing how much we value an individual. It can be a way of saying thank you to a person for being a part of our lives. Counting birthdays is a way of measuring time and with time comes a degree of wisdom. In our society, we have trouble assessing who our elders are. Does wisdom come with the first invitation to join AARP, or when you qualify for the Senior Citizen's discount at IHOP? There are several different ways of measuring the age at which one becomes an elder. And there is much in our culture that celebrates and honors youth, perhaps more than celebrates and honors elders.

But elders are critical to our culture and our lives. Elders have the shared memory of our people and they provide a context for our work, our hopes and our dreams.

It's a treasure to be able to celebrate another birthday, whether or not this is the one that confers elder status. May we continue to grow in wisdom and in understanding as the years pass. And may we never forget to pause to celebrate the birthdays of the ones we love.

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## February 9, 2008 – Hint of Spring



I am in Hastings, Nebraska today, teaching in the Nebraska Education for Lay Ministry (ELM) program. I think this is the sixth trip I've made to teach in this program. It's a pretty good drive - about eight hours one way. This year, I made a trip in January and this trip. Both trips have been on dry roads all the way, which is unusual for this time of year in this part of the country, but much appreciated. The forecast is for the weather to hold and I should have good roads for the trip home today. It wasn't too long ago that planning this much travel at this time of year would have been considered foolish. Now it is routine.

The weather yesterday was beautiful, with sunshine and high temperatures in the '40's. They have had a bit more snow here than at home, but it was melting and bare spots were emerging. There is a small reservoir in Hastings and I could hear a large flock of Canadian geese circling the lake when I got out of my car after the drive. I took a short walk to stretch my legs after sitting. The melting snow and the sounds and sights of the geese gave the day a definite feeling of spring.

I know that the geese probably winter in this area and that there is likely quite a few wintry days left before spring settles in for good, but the hint of spring was delicious. The grass was green where it emerged from the snowbanks, the smell was fresh and the sound of running water was refreshing. It was a sign of the promise of things to come.

This evening as I drive home, I should be able to observe that daylight lasts longer than it did a month ago and I'll get a bit farther down the road before it gets dark. If I time it right, I'll be heading north by the time the sun is so low on the horizon that it makes westward travel more difficult.

I feel fortunate to live in a land where the change in seasons is dramatic and there is some connection to the natural cycles of the land. I feel fortunate to live in a place where there is enough open country to afford me trips across open spaces where there aren't too many people. Yesterday, I drove across South Dakota to Murdo and then headed down through Valentine and the sandhill area. The roads were empty. Today I'll start out on the Interstate in Nebraska and then cut up through the panhandle to Southwestern South Dakota, passing through lots of open country. The drive affords me quiet time to think and an opportunity to sort out my priorities in the midst of a busy life.

This life is filled with promises of things to come. The hint of spring is not the same as the end to winter weather, but a promise that keeps us hopeful and focuses our attention on the call of the future. Our time is not the only time. The present weather is not the only weather. Hope is built into the way of this world and even when unpleasant events occur in this life there are glimpses of a better life that lies ahead. We live in hope precisely because we have had glimpses of the future. The promise is not yet fully revealed, but we have seen the signs that the promise lies ahead.

So we will take our hint of spring and enjoy it. We open the windows and breathe the fresh air and smile at our neighbors. And when the next storm comes and we have to fight to get about in the snow and cold, we will remember the hint of spring and the good times that lie ahead.

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## February 10, 2008 – Chasing the Sun



Yesterday was an especially long day for me. I got up at 4 a.m. in the central time zone and finished preparing for the final day of class. My class agreed to meet at 8 a.m. so that we could end at 2:30 p.m. and I could get on the road. Class sessions went well, with mostly lecture presentations in the morning and hands-on activities for the afternoon session. We ended with a simple worship service. I grabbed a cup of coffee and hit the road. Because it was snowing in the hills and off to the East, I decided to head west in Nebraska and come up through Chadron. This would mean that I would have only 50 or so miles of driving on snowy roads at the most. But there was no way to avoid the simple fact that I would be driving the snow at the end of the day.

The roads were dry and there is nearly 200 miles of Interstate driving in Nebraska before heading north. As I headed into the panhandle, the light began to get low, but by then I had turned northwest and so the sun wasn't directly in my face. A quick gas stop at Ogalala and I was still chasing the sun for nearly an hour before it got dark. The prairie sunset was magnificent. I never can capture sunsets with the camera the way they look in real life, but I snapped a couple of frames as I drove along.

I was probably within 50 miles of Alliance when it finally got fully dark. From there on it was a matter of driving carefully, watching for deer, and waiting until the first snowflakes appeared.

It started snowing just south of the turn off to Hot Springs and by Buffalo Gap, I had slowed to about 45 miles per hour due to blowing snow and reduced visibility. Conditions were improving by Hermosa and I arrived at home without any troubles. 1000 miles and 10 hours of teaching in two days. Not bad at all.

There are lots of commentaries that can be made about the inefficiency and energy wastefulness of my chosen mode of travel and there are many different ways of evaluating the total cost of having a pastor from Rapid City teach a class for lay ministers in Hastings, Nebraska. But the truth is that the community of the plains has always depended on people who were willing to travel. We live in a place where people are few and far between and we are predisposed to need each other.

Having a vibrant church that serves the needs of all of the people of the plains whether they live in cities or in rural isolated locations demands that we pay some high costs for the value of being together for fellowship, learning and service. It requires people who are willing to chase the sun on occasion and drive a few miles.

Long days can take the energy out of me. I sleep harder and I have less energy for a while after putting in the super long days. But they are also energy-giving. I learn from the students in my classes and I gain a renewed excitement and enthusiasm for ministry. I have a colleague who says that when he travels he is the “visiting expert” and when he is at home he is the “resident idiot.” There is a sense in which there is more attention given to someone new or someone who has traveled from far away to bring a message. But I am not treated like an idiot at home. People of the plains are good listeners and we have a high degree of respect for each other.

So was it worth the gas consumed, the carbon put into the atmosphere, the tiredness I feel? It certainly is too early to evaluate all of that today. I have a stack of papers to read and I will have another stack in a couple of weeks. And those papers will reveal to me what I have been able to teach and they will also reveal areas where I failed to get the message across. I suspect that we will do it all over again in a couple of years, because we continue to believe in the value of teaching and learning and are willing to invest a lot of energy in that process.

And along the way there are some incredibly beautiful vistas. I’m just glad I was there to see last night’s sunset. And I look forward to tomorrow’s sunrise.

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## February 11, 2008 – Milestone



At Kearney, Nebraska, the Great Platte River Road Archway spans Interstate 80. I have driven under it many times, but I have never stopped to go inside of it. It is a sort of history museum with a lot of modern interactive displays, movies, live actors and other ways to tell the story of the convergence of the Oregon, Mormon and California Trails at Fort Kearny, the first military post that was built to protect the Oregon trail. No one has ever explained to me why the contemporary city Kearney is spelled different than the name of the fort.

The archway is a modern structure built to resemble a covered bridge with towers at the end to remind visitors of the historic fort. The span is red, yellow, brown and orange and has a bit of a sunset effect when one drives underneath it.

One thing is certain. The archway marks Kearney. When you see it on the highway, you know where you are. There are hundreds of thousands of little green mileposts on the Interstate, but there is only one Great Platte River Road Archway.

Today is one of the milestones that is not marked by a monument or a celebration. It is more like one of those little green highway signs with numbers that mark the miles. This is the 365th entry in my daily blog. I started posting a daily blog on Feb. 12 last year and although I said I would take a break for the trip to Costa Rica, I ended up posting my daily journal entries in the form of my Costa Rica diary. So I have maintained the discipline of writing a short essay each day for a year. Had I set out to write a book, I would have nearly 700 pages of text, though when edited for meaningful content, it might not yet be a book. Not everything I have written is worth keeping.

At last count, I think we're up to seven or eight regular readers, but the readers are a diverse group of people. I hear from readers in Utah, New Hampshire, Washington, Montana and Oregon from time to time. Granted, most of them are family members, but there is a sense that we have formed a small community to which I can freely express my ideas.

When I contemplate the journals of previous generations of my family, my blogs seem like an insignificant effort. We have volumes and volumes of journals of Roy Russell, a pioneering forebear who settled in Ft. Benton, Montana in the late nineteenth century. All the same it seems like today's blog is a sort of milestone. I have kept copies of all of the blogs, although they are not all available online. I occasionally remove the earliest blogs in order to create space on the server for additional ones.

The discipline that has been the largest challenge for me lately is the discipline of a picture each day. I haven't taken all of the photographs, but I have taken most of them and even when I don't take the photograph, I have to locate and select one for each entry. Digital photography has made the technical side of this process easy, but not every photograph that I take is worth sharing, so there is a process of sorting and attempting to match the photograph with the topic of the day. At first I tried to take a fresh photograph for each blog, but that discipline fell by the wayside quickly and I often choose a photograph that was taken some time before the blog was written.

The writing is fresh, however. I write daily, usually within an hour of waking, usually fairly early in the morning for those who like to read the blog as part of their morning routine. On a couple of occasions, when significant events have occurred, I have posted a second entry in a day. Once or twice, I have written part of the blog the night before and finished it in the morning. Choosing topics has been easier, because the blogs are wide open. I've commented on religion and the life of a pastor, the flow of the seasons and the weather, current events and my own adventures, travels and ideas that strike me.

As I said earlier, I have never stopped to go through the Great Platte River Road Archway. It is simply a structure that marks a place for me. I drive under it and keep going at Interstate highway speeds. So, I won't be stopping to mark this milestone in my life, either. I intend to keep writing the journals and I'll keep posting them as long as I get an occasional comment that someone is reading them. And I'll keep going.

After all - it will take one more entry to make up next year's blogs - the year is one day longer.

## February 12, 2008 – Many Paths



The church has long wrestled with leadership. Early in its history it recognized that leaders are called by God. The stories of our people are filled with leaders coming from surprising places. Moses had difficulty speaking, not the most obvious choice for God's spokesperson. When Samuel was sent to anoint a new king for Israel, he was told it would be one of the sons of Jesse, so he looked at the sons one by one and found no one suitable for the position. Only after he had rejected the obvious did he discover that there was another son, a youngster who was out tending the sheep. This youngster was David. Jeremiah was very young when he was called to speak God's truth. Jesus chose common fishermen as disciples and not temple officials and members of the educated elite.

Discerning God's call can be difficult. There is an individual sense of being called that can be felt, but there is more to call than just the wishes of the individual. The community needs to be involved in a process of dialogue with the individual. Even a minister with years of experience can confuse personal wants and desires with God's calling.

Once called, leaders need to be equipped for their ministry. Formal education and skill training is required. It takes years to acquire the knowledge and background required. The tradition in many mainline denominations is four years of college and an additional three years of theological seminary before becoming a candidate for ordination. Individual experiences such as internships, clinical pastoral education, and international service are also encouraged.

There are other traditions within the church that require different kinds of preparation. Some denominations do not value academic education and have no specific requirements in terms of formal education. Ordination can occur without any specific level of formal education. The title “ordained minister” has a wide variety of meanings in terms of preparation and education.

Now, as in other periods of the church’s history, it seems that we have a shortage of pastoral leadership. Congregations have difficulties finding pastors to lead them. The costs of education and the practice of borrowing money to finance education means that some educated pastors have to command salaries and support packages that are beyond the means of small congregations to pay.

Lay ministers are church leaders who are called from within local congregations and who come from a wide variety of backgrounds. They can provide significant leadership in the church, but they need training and support to engage in leadership tasks. Many educational programs have arisen within the church to support lay leadership. While these programs do not replicate formal seminary education, they do provide an introduction to the topics of ministry and a starting point for further research and education.

It is unclear what route these lay academies will take in the future. One possibility is that they will continue to develop into more formal educational programs, bringing increasing levels of academic experience closer to the homes of church leaders, requiring less travel and more flexible time commitments. Another possibility is that they will provide an entrance point into additional educational programs that can be pursued both by traditional, residential education and by various forms of distance learning. It is unlikely that they will replace theological seminaries, as they have not matured to provide the level of research and innovation of the academic setting.

As the church considers multiple paths to ministry, there is some discomfort at what appears to be a wide variety in leadership skill and significant problems caused by ministers with inadequate preparation getting into conflicts, ethical issues and causing serious problems within the church. This is not to say that all seminary-educated pastors can avoid conflict, ethical issues or problems. Hopefully we can become a learning institution that can build on the successes and failures of our programs and be strengthened by our experience.

God will provide leaders for the church. But we need to assume responsibility for equipping and supporting their leadership.

## February 13, 2008 – Pecking Order



We used to feed wild birds on a regular basis. We enjoyed watching them and listening to their songs. We have a large variety of birds in our area and we learned to look forward to the visits from different types of birds at different times of the year. Then the turkeys discovered our feeders. They can empty the feeders in a few minutes. And they leave a mess behind. There are ways of mounting feeders on poles so that the turkeys cannot get to them, but we haven't yet made that change in our feeders. So often, I just don't put out any food at all and after a while the turkeys stop coming around.

But the turkeys themselves are entertaining. So, this winter, I have been putting out a little feed for the turkeys one or two days per week. The turkeys come every day, whether or not there is any food. Turkeys are large birds with small brains. Much of their behavior is simple instinct, free of premeditation or conscious thought. But as we watch them, we often see behaviors to which we assign human qualities. "That one's a bully. She isn't going to let any other one near the feeder." "That one's a loner. He only comes to the feeder when the others are not around."

There is a form of social organization and not every turkey gets the same amount of food as another. Bigger birds tend to get first pickings at the feeders and usually get more food. Smaller birds are more likely to get attacked by other birds. Some birds appear to only feed off of the ground while others sit on the railings or benches. There isn't a formal hierarchy, but there does seem to be a pecking order. Scholars who have studied poultry behavior have identified definite ranks, or levels of organization, where

some birds peck at other birds and submit to pecking from different ones. The pecking order determines who gets to eat first and who has to wait. The pecking order plays a role in natural selection, with larger and better fed birds being more likely to reproduce.

The assumption behind a pecking order is that the supply of food is limited and there may not be enough for all. It is a system based in scarcity, or at least the fear of scarcity.

There are decisions in human society that resemble the turkey's pecking order. When resources are limited there seems to be a tendency for hoarding. In tough economic times, the richest people tend to get richer and the poorest tend to get poorer.

But we are not turkeys. We are not limited by brains too small to comprehend the situation of others. We are not forced to base all decisions on short-term gain. We have the capacity to share. Even in times of perceived scarcity, we have access to abundant resources and are able to take into consideration the needs of others. This is not to say that we are free from hierarchies or other orders of distribution of wealth, privilege and power. But we don't have to be victims of the system.

Among the most precious stories of our people are the stories of times when we chose to be human - to risk reaching out - to lay aside wealth and power for love -to share in times of scarcity. Our heroes have chosen to say "no" to the hierarchy and have become able to live abundantly in the face of scarcity. We have revered those who choose poverty instead of power, community instead of personal gain, service instead of self aggrandizement.

We also have known a few turkeys - the human kind - who put themselves first and fail to consider the good of the community.

After several seasons of watching the turkeys in our yard, I am convinced that I don't want to be one. There is much more to life than rising in the pecking order. Even the top turkey, to whom every other one must defer, does not know that joy of giving or the blessings of sharing.

For my life, I would like to have less and give more. I don't expect to rise to the top of the pecking order, but life in community is a life of abundance and joy.

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## February 14, 2008 – Another Shore



Our community lost another member to suicide yesterday. We have learned a few things about prevention of suicide and treatment of mental illness, but not enough to head off tragedy, and not enough to be free of the stigma that is placed on those who suffer from mental illness or the families who have lost a loved one to suicide.

Every suicide has a lot of victims. When a person dies by suicide, there is a circle of family members and friends whose lives are forever changed by the event. Survivors of suicide never get over the suicide, they survive it. They continue to live and learn in spite of the tragedy that has occurred, but they are never the same after the loss.

There is plenty of blame that gets tossed around in such a situation. Family members often blame themselves, wondering, “what if?” People who haven’t experienced mental illness in their own circle of family and friends blame genetics or upbringing or failures in the education system. A sudden and unexpected death brings about all sorts of fears about what caused the death and who else might be vulnerable. Blame and guilt can be debilitating and demoralizing for those who survive the suicide, and they can be a factor in grief that is “hung up,” and not properly processed. Life doesn’t have a “rewind” button. We cannot go back and un-do the past. Suicide is irreversible.

Every suicide is, in part, a failure of community. Life saving medications and therapies are often out of reach because of short supply and high costs. Individuals “fall through the cracks” in a mental health system that doesn’t have enough resources to provide

adequate follow up. An individual becomes isolated and cut off from the resources that are required to address pain. Care givers become exhausted and burned out and experience their own limits. Families feel like they have run out of options and don't know where to turn. There is no sense in pointing fingers. We are all to blame when our community fails to provide the resources that are needed.

Healing begins. For the person who died of suicide, all pain and sorrow and suffering are ended. It is as if that person has traveled to another shore that is incredibly different from the place left behind. On this shore, the suffering continues. The suffering of the survivors is addressed in part through social conventions. A funeral or memorial service can provide visible evidence of the care and support of the community for the grieving family. At some point a minute goes by when thoughts of the one who died are not the only thoughts that come to mind. And then another and another. The lump in the throat begins to soften and food gradually re-gains its appeal. Life goes on.

But we will not forget. The death has revealed to us a failure in our community that we long to repair. Education can help to overcome stigma. Advocacy can bring mental health services to more people. Prevention programs can be brought to schools and churches and other places where people gather. Support groups can be made available to survivors. Hope arises in a renewed dedication to prevent similar tragedies.

Today is the feast day of St. Valentine. It is a day when we focus our attention on love, especially the joys of romantic love. Love is more than a puff of emotion. Paul, in the letter to the Corinthians wrote, "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." Love is the bridge that spans the great divides that occur between people. And it is the power that can transform communities.

So our celebrations will be muted this year, for we know that there are those whose hearts have been broken by the tragedy of suicide. We will be mindful to speak our messages of love to those around us and to renew our commitment to repairing the brokenness of our community. Life and death are often close in our experience. Pain and celebration intermingle. The tears of sorrow and the tears of joy run together. While we mourn that which is lost, we give thanks for the things we have.

May the events of this day deepen our awareness of and commitment to the power of love.

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February 15, 2008 – Home



My day yesterday was filled with thoughts of home. I began the day with a meeting and a tour of Cornerstone Apartments, a new 24-unit transitional housing apartment building that will receive its first families in March. The apartments are only part of a two year program for families that have been homeless as they learn the skills and receive the support necessary for them to have their own home. The construction is complete, and the leaders of the program are working to select families and develop support structures.

In the afternoon, we worked on our Habitat for Humanity home. We are nearly finished with the drywall. The attic insulation was completed yesterday. After a workday on Saturday to finish drywall and to clean up the space, tape and texture will be done by an outside contractor and then the home will be ready for painting, cabinets, finish trim and flooring. We are getting close to having one side of the duplex ready for occupancy.

In the evening, our family had a Valentine's day celebration, with a nice dinner. After dinner, we got out old photograph albums and looked at old family pictures. We are fortunate to have had many amateur photographers in previous generations, so we have some precious photographs of ancestors. The evening was filled with laughter and the joy of being a multi-generation family.

Having spent most of my day in empty apartments and an unfinished duplex home, I was struck, once again, with the simple fact that it takes more than a structure for a

home to exist. The addition of furniture to an apartment or house does not yet make it a home. The dynamic that makes a house a home is human relationship. Our house is a home in part because it triggers so many memories of things we have done together in this place. The stairway to the upper bedrooms is fairly plain and the carpet has a couple of stains, but it is the stairway both of our children descended on the day of their high school graduation, and the place where we paused for countless short conversations as they headed up to bed. The kitchen table is the center of our home, where we have gathered for so many meals and played so many games and shared so many stories.

The sights and sounds of our home are familiar to us because we have lived in this place. The ticking of the old wall clock, the sounds of the cats, the clicking of the heaters as they warm up, the hum of the florescent light in the kitchen - all are comforts to us because they have long been a part of our story.

Yesterday, in celebration in Valentine's Day, we added a new sight and a new aroma to our home. We brought home a small, potted tea rose. It is a plant that will be planted outdoors when the weather warms, but for now lives in a flower pot inside. The blooms add beauty to our lives and remind us of the many joys we have received. And the greatest of these joys is the joy of love.

We have reached the age where we are cautious about gifts. There aren't many things that we need and our home is filled with all kinds of things. Bringing more things into it seems unnecessary for the most part. The gifts we treasure most are gifts of time with each other. An evening at home without meetings or needing to go out is worth more than the things that are sold in stores. So we try to look for symbols when we exchange gifts - signs of the love we share, items that remind us of the experiences we have.

A live plant, instead of cut flowers, holds the promise of spring and summer. It brings to mind the summer garden and holds the potential to produce blossoms for us to enjoy over a long period of time. Like most of the joys of family, it offers pleasure over time. It is simple pleasure. Often it is the simple things that turn a house into a home.

I hope and trust that the houses and apartments that our community has worked so long to build will soon become homes to families of every size and shape. They will soon be the place for collecting memories as well as providing safe shelter for generations of people. Whether their furnishings be fancy or simple, may their occupants provide the most important element of all: love.

## February 16, 2008 – Seeking Alternatives to Violence

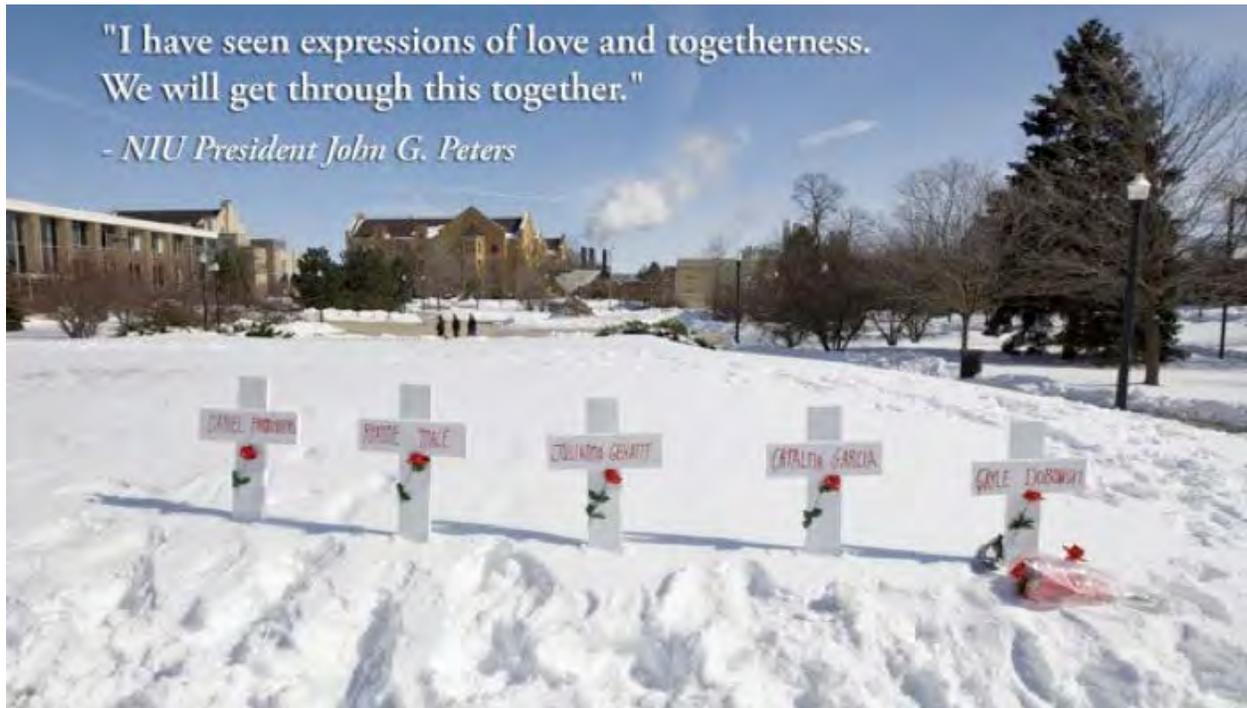


Photo courtesy of Northern Illinois University

It seems as if we are becoming numb to campus violence. There has been a marked decrease in coverage of campus shootings since 33 died at Virginia Tech last April. Thursday's shootings in a lecture hall on the campus of Northern Illinois University resulted in six fatalities, including the gunman. The news didn't make the front page of our local newspaper and there have been far fewer reports in other media than were a part of the Virginia Tech story. Fortunately, there were fewer victims at NIU, but one victim is too many. Every family who loses a student suffers irreplaceable loss and immeasurable grief.

Reports of campus violence are becoming common. Two students were shot by a female student in a class at Louisiana Technical College in Baton Rouge last week and two doctoral students were shot in a home invasion on the campus of Louisiana State University in December. Last September, one of two students died after being shot in a Delaware State University dining hall.

The cost to our society reaches far beyond the individual students. Free and open education itself is coming under attack. The work of a university demands a certain level of trust and safety. The free exchange of ideas cannot take place under the threat of violence. While universities have a responsibility to insure the safety of students and most universities have adopted increased security measures and emergency response

plans, there is no absolute guarantee that future events of campus violence can be prevented.

Locked down campuses with metal detectors at each building might enable an increase in security, but the price of such security is high. A university is a place for the free exchange of ideas and creating barriers will result in the isolation of students and impede the flow of ideas. Increased security screenings not only take time and disrupt schedules, they create an atmosphere of fear that is not conducive to learning. But the failure to provide adequate security can also result in fear that disrupts. Campus leaders have a delicate balance as they seek to provide for the safety of students while pursuing the educational goals of the institution.

At Virginia Tech, the shooter was a student. At NIU, the gunman was a former student. Both men had documented histories of major mental illness. In both cases, there is a sense of failure to provide adequate mental health services to students known to be suffering from major mental illnesses. While health care providers cannot be blamed for the violence, it is clear that an increase in availability of mental health services must be a part of the plan to return safety and security to university campuses.

Easy access to weapons increases the threat of violence. Certainly there are ways to provide common sense regulation of access to weapons without threatening constitutional rights or responsible use of guns for legitimate reasons. The debate about arming students continues, but there is no evidence that the presence of additional weapons could have decreased the violence on Thursday. Allowing students to carry weapons on campus introduces the threat of violence into every debate and alters the nature of university education.

A climate of fear is a threat to all of society as it limits legitimate discussion and disagreement and interrupts the free flow of information that is essential to university education. Over reaction and panic are not appropriate responses to the violence.

Teaching nonviolence on every university campus must be considered essential. There are alternatives to violence and they can be taught. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. taught students to face billy clubs and tear gas without resorting to violence. Ghandi inspired enormous groups of people to counter violence with nonviolence. We have found the funding in our society to provide for the serious study of war and tactics through military academies, and war colleges. The time has come for us to take seriously the need for serious study and education in alternatives to violence.

There is no one single solution, or easy path for our society to take in the face of violence on our university campuses. Education is, by its very nature, a risky business. New ideas create disagreement and tension and can expand the horizons of students. Education must be offered to all students, including those who are the victims of mental

illness. Education increases options in the lives of students and expands their horizons. There are no guarantees in an enterprise with as many variables and risks as education. But the threat of physical violence should not be a risk for students and teachers.

We can do better. Common sense and serious study of alternatives to violence can be pursued.

We must do better. The failure to create safety is the failure to educate.

It is not just another campus shooting. It is a threat to the order of our society and the future of our people.

We will not forget. Nor will we allow our fear to immobilize us, when there are clear and viable options for us to proceed. NIU President, John Peters, said, "We will get through this together." He may have been referring only to the faculty, staff and students of his university. But together includes all of us - for we are all responsible for creating an environment for safe learning. Let the healing begin.

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## February 17, 2008 – Journey with Huck



When I was in the sixth grade, our teacher, Mrs. Thom, read to us for the last 15 minutes of each day. Perhaps she had decided, after a career of teaching, that there was nothing else that would occupy the attention of 11-year-old boys at that time of the afternoon. Or perhaps, this being the last year of her career, retirement loomed big in her thoughts and she was simply tired. I remember thinking, at the beginning of the year, that it was a bit condescending. I could read all of the books that she was reading to us. And I could read them faster than 15 minutes per day. She even read a couple of books that I had already read. But I soon began to change my opinion and to look forward to the end of each school day. When the bell rang, signaling that it was time to go outside, I wanted the reading to continue. She had a marvelously soothing voice, and she read to us stories that captured our imaginations: *The Wind in the Willows* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Old Yeller* and *The Wind in the Willows*. It was a different time. Movies were rare treats for us and television was a family affair. The *Andy Griffith* show told some stories, but my family was more interested in Lawrence Welk or Ed Sullivan, not places of narrative.

Mrs. Thom read us stories that set our imaginations soaring. We could picture, in our minds, the scenes from the books. The stories came alive. And she had a penchant for pronouncing words correctly. I was a reader, and had been for some time, so I routinely boldly mispronounced words in my mind however I chose. When the words are pronounced correctly they come alive and there is poetry and rhythm to a story.

I could imagine myself on the raft with Huckleberry Finn and his friend, the runaway slave Jim, a talkin' and a singing' and a floating' along. We spent our summers playing in the river and I longed to have a raft that would carry me on an adventure like Huck's. I could imagine making friends with Jim and floating day and night in good weather and in storms. I wasn't too sure about Huck's notion, learned in Sunday school that people who let slaves go free go to everlasting fire. I had learned, I think in Sunday school, that slavery is wrong. And my parents had made a point of teaching us, not only through words, but through relationships with guests in our home that people with brown or black skin are equal in every way. So it was easy to accept that Huck might just have gotten a bad lesson from his Sunday school.

So I wasn't surprised when Huck chooses to keep his friendship with Jim. I had been hoping that he would all along. But I was shocked that he said, "Alright, then, I'll go to hell." It was shocking because I couldn't remember ever hearing an adult woman use the word "hell." I had decided that our teachers weren't allowed to talk that way. We learned about heaven in Sunday school and we knew that the wages of sin is death, but I couldn't imagine one of my Sunday school teachers saying "hell." That was the kind of language you heard out in a barn or in the break room at the shop.

And I was shocked that Huck would choose to go to hell if it came to choosing between Jim and eternal punishment. I was raised to be good, and suspected that I could avoid hell if I kept up my record. To choose hell was radical indeed, and it was strangely exciting. It wasn't the kind of thing I wanted to talk to anybody about. The girls were giggling about the use of the words and the boys were wondering if Mrs. Thom using the word made it OK for them to use it. I heard it on the playground several times in the next week. I was convinced that if Mr. Churchill heard anyone using that word, they would soon find out what a bad idea it was. I was even afraid that if the word got out Mrs. Thom might get in trouble and stop reading stories to us, and I knew I'd hate to have that happen. So I was keeping my lips sealed. I didn't say the word. But I didn't need to say the word. It was an idea that I wasn't yet ready to discuss. I wanted to think about it and experience that strange sense of excitement I had experienced when Mrs. Thom said, "alright, then, I'll go to hell."

It is an idea that has stuck with me through the rest of my growing up and four years of college, four years of seminary and nearly thirty years of ministry. If the choice was between loyalty to and protection of another human being and my own personal salvation, I hoped that I would have Huck's courage to make the right choice. Sure, it is a story. Huckleberry Finn is a fictional character. His choice is imaginary. But I have asked myself many times over the years, "Would I be willing to risk my personal salvation for the good of another?" It is a different question than the question of whether or not I would be willing to die for another. I've been hanging around the church long enough to come to the conclusion that death is not the end. Sacrifice for the good of the community, or even the good of another is an admirable choice. But would I risk going to hell?

I've never made much of a theological or personal connection with folk who think that religion is only about gaining one's personal salvation. It has always seemed to me to be simply not enough to have faith sufficient to gain personal salvation. What about all of the other people? Who will you stand with when you've spent your energy earning your own salvation only? My experience of religion has brought me to reject the notion that it is a personal possession or getting something for oneself.

So I think that Huck was right to risk going to hell for his friend Jim. I hope that I have made some connections in this life that are deep enough that I would risk everything for the sake of another. But I think that even Huck stopped short in his thinking. To risk going to hell and back for another – now that's another story entirely.

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## February 18, 2008 – Where We Live



Tornadoes ripped through Alabama and Florida yesterday. Parts of Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan received up to ten inches of snow over the weekend. Airports were closed and President's day travel was disrupted for many. The reports of severe weather damaging and destroying homes and injuring people have become so regular that we have almost become immune to the stories.

Here in the place we live, the wind blew a little yesterday and there were a few snowflakes and some slippery roads. It didn't disrupt our lifestyle much at all, except for the folk who were looking for an excuse to stay inside and it provided that excuse. We like to talk about how our particular corner of the world is a place that is somewhat immune to the severe weather that makes living in other places so difficult. We're far enough away from the coasts to avoid hurricanes and the hills shelter us from the severe thunderstorms and tornadoes that are more common on the plains. Rapid City was the site of a devastating flash flood in 1972 that resulted in the death of 238 people and the loss of over 1200 homes. But as the years pass, we think of that event as an unique combination of factors and assure ourselves that we have made precautions to avoid the levels of damage and destruction that flood caused. Smaller flash floods occur and damage a few homes, but for the most part we maintain a rather smug attitude about the place we live.

The truth is that natural disasters can strike anywhere. We're not immune to fire or wind or heavy rains or blizzards. Weather that is so severe that it overwhelms our resources

is rare and we read the news most days with a sense of wonderment about why other people choose to live in areas where earthquakes or devastating storms are regular. Of course they probably read reports of blizzards in the upper midwest and wonder why anyone would want to live in South Dakota.

The truth is that this planet is an amazing life-sustaining place and most places on the planet have the resources to sustain human life. Even the most hostile environments, such as Antarctica, can be places to live with advanced technologies and regular shipments of supplies. Humans are remarkably adaptive creatures that come up with some remarkable solutions to the problems of obtaining sufficient food and shelter.

Far more devastating are the tragedies that we bring upon ourselves through corrupt government, human cruelty, and the failure to share resources. The largest disasters in human history are not caused by elements that are beyond human control. On the contrary, they are human caused events. There is a steady stream of news of genocide and near-genocide, of displacement and overwhelming refugee camps, of violence that is unchecked and suffering that is unending.

Even though we have this wondrous planet, we still haven't learned how to live with each other in peace. We still haven't learned the ways of sharing and service. We still live with distrust and fear. When we look at the political realities of this world, we have a similar sense as when we study the weather - we're glad to be living where we do. Where we live there is relative calm and peace and although we may complain about taxes or other policies of our government, we are free from oppression and excessive abuse of power. The place we live is a good place.

Today, as another day begins, it is good to step outside and feel the bite of the wind and see the sun peeking out from the horizon. It is a good day to count our blessings and to express our gratitude for the goodness we have experienced. We are indeed fortunate to be able to live in this good place.

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## February 19, 2008 – A Propeller



There is a propeller hanging on the wall of our home. It is real, made of laminated wood and once provided thrust for an airplane. But ours isn't the first home where this particular propeller has hung as a decoration. It was first hung in the home of my great uncle Ted. Its story is simple. When it was still attached to the airplane, it struck some wires. The resulting nicks in the propeller made it off balance and it needed to be replaced. Not ones to throw things away, our family saved the propeller and it became an item to hang on the wall.

At the time it was originally hung in my Uncle Ted's home, it was a symbol of modernity. Airplanes were the wave of the future. They were the most modern and quickest form of transportation and there were many people in aviation who believed that private aircraft would be come like private automobiles - virtually everyone would have one and they would be the way most people traveled from one place to another.

History didn't quite play out that way. Airplanes continue to be the fastest mode of transportation for many of us, but most of us make those trips on airliners. Private aircraft are used for some personal and business transportation, but most individuals cannot afford to keep up with state of the art aircraft. Propellers are no longer symbols of the future, but relics from the past. Jet engines power the airliners and for most of the general public, a propeller is seen as a symbol of an older and less modern airplane.

I frequently have conversations with my father-in-law about how everyday items become antiques and collectables. “If we had only known,” he will say, “We would have saved the right junk.” Everyday household items become collectables only when they become somewhat rare. As newer technologies replace the old ones, a few items gain value because they are no longer common. They remind us of a different time.

So the propeller is often viewed by guests and friends as a symbol of the past. And I guess it functions in a similar way for me, too. It reminds me of my Uncle Ted. It reminds me of my father, who was a pilot and who taught me to fly airplanes. It reminds me of the time when our family owned airplanes and when I was able to fly regularly. I don't think I'm overly nostalgic about those times, but they are good and pleasant memories and I enjoy thinking of those times. Its value is limited to my enjoyment of seeing it hanging on the wall. It is unlikely that future generations will have any interest in this particular piece of memorabilia. Perhaps there is some collector somewhere who might like to keep it, but finding that person will be a challenge when the time comes for us to get rid of it.

Our possessions are ours only temporarily. They are for a particular time in our lives and a particular set of circumstances. There are a few treasured items that are passed down from generation to generation, but for the most part, the things we own belong to particular phases of our lives and our lives move on. At some point we all part from all of our possessions. We enter this world without possessions and we leave our possessions behind when we die.

Our possessions may be temporary, but the amount of effort and energy we put into acquiring is monumental. We say that we work to “earn a living,” but we live with far more possessions than are required for survival. Living requires basic shelter, good nutrition and a bit of health care. Most of the income we earn is invested in possessions that are, in some sense, optional. I don't need to have a propeller. I don't need to have many of the items that are in my home. And someday we will move into a smaller place and leave a lot of these possessions behind. There isn't room for an array of tools in an assisted living apartment.

When we go through the process of sorting and paring down the amount of possessions we keep, symbols often become important to us. Photographs and a few small items can become treasures that are portable and can be taken with us on our life's journey. A few items that trigger our memories and bring to mind our stories are retained, at least for a while. And we say good bye to other possessions and hope that they can find good homes where they are treasured. We know that many possessions simply become garbage and are discarded.

But today isn't a day of discarding for me. Although I pause to ponder what might happen to the propeller, I know it will hang on my wall for some years to come. There is

a painting of an airplane that I enjoy that hangs near the propellor and together they remind me of our past and of the vision and imagination of those who have gone before.

But my reflections make me more aware of the things I acquire. How many of the things I purchase do I really need? What items can I do without? What items would I be better off without? These are questions worthy of more careful consideration. At the same time, I need to be careful about which items I discard or give away. After all, the propeller that hangs in my home was once replaced by a brand-new one. Who knows what became of the replacement? The one that was discarded is the one that became a treasure for me.

It sort of makes me wonder which of the things in my home will carry meaning into future generations. Of course that is not for me to decide. These possessions are mine only temporarily.

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## February 20, 2008 – Wilderness



The Gospels report of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Our traditions connect the season of Lent with the stories of that time. The stories of our people also tell of the forty years that Moses and the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness after leaving slavery in Egypt before entering into the promised land. Forty years, forty days, or a season of every year, wilderness encounters are part of the way that we think of our lives.

Of course contemporary people do not think of wilderness in quite the same way as the ancients. We head to the wilderness to vacation - to get away from it all. We think of the vast scenic beauty of wild places. When we head into the wilderness we have plenty of supplies and plan ahead so that we don't become lost. Survivor is a television show devised for our entertainment. We have forgotten that the wild places were once places of our greatest fear.

Perhaps Lent is a discipline of being honest about our fears and facing them. We may have lost the fear of getting disorientated in a lonely place with no other people. We might have lost the fear of not being able to find enough food or water to survive. We may have lost the fear of being attacked by wild animals and finding ourselves without defense. But we are not people without fear.

We fear the future. We fear the loss of health. We fear getting old. We fear dying. And we don't talk about these fears very often.

Much of the organization of our society is based, in part, in our fears. The lines at the airport have their roots in our fear of terrorist attack. The ever-expanding federal defense budgets have a relationship to our fear that others will attack us, that we will lose our way of life, that the forces of evil in this world have their sights set on us. The speeches of our politicians build upon our fears.

But we don't like to talk about our fears, even when they are manipulated by hype and often based in threats that are more imaginary than real.

Fear gives us a bit of an adrenalin rush and there is a part of us that becomes excited in the face of fear. Like paying money to go to a horror movie or strapping into an amusement park ride, we seek out brief encounters with fear, losing control, but only for a little while.

And fear is only part of our wilderness.

In the wilderness of our lives we search for meaning and purpose. We go through the motions of living, working to have money, spending money on things that fail to satisfy, always wanting more, never getting enough, trying to figure out what is most important. In the midst of this wilderness we search for priorities and for focus for our daily activity and for meaning in the midst of this life.

The stories of our people tell us of the temptations that Jesus rejected in the wilderness: comfort, security, power. In their place he chose trust in God and an openness to listen to God's voice calling him to bring good news to the people. John the Baptist based his ministry in the wilderness where the people had to come to him. Jesus left the wilderness behind and brought his message to the people.

Our wilderness has a different shape. Our temptations may have different names. Our vocation - the call of God - is the same: to bring good news to the people. Healing and hope and purpose and meaning and justice and compassion - these are the things we bring from the wilderness to the communities of our people. Instead of manipulating their fears we bring them an alternative to living in fear.

But the struggle to get through the wilderness is not easy. The journey of Lent has just begun. We have weeks ahead before we experience the dawn of Easter.

The story is not yet finished. The journey continues.

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## February 21, 2008 – Pipes



Our church was designed to accommodate a pipe organ of about 30 to 40 ranks in four divisions. The pipe organ project was started within about 18 months of the completion of the building, and the congregation was financially stretched. But they had been the owners of a pipe organ in the old building and there was a strong desire to have a new organ for the new building. When financial realities met the dream of the organ, they compromised and installed three divisions, leaving one pipe chamber empty, planning to add the fourth division and exchange the console within the five years that the builder had allowed for full value from the “temporary” console. The organ that was installed was magnificent, and only a little short of the dream. But the second phase of organ construction was never completed.

It is now fifty years later and technicians are in our building every day installing the nearly 700 new pipes in the choir division of the organ. This expansion and re-building of the organ involves changing the switches for every pipe in the existing organ, moving ranks of pipes from one division to another and adding new wind chests and pipes. There is a bit of cosmetic work being done as well, cleaning and refinishing pipes and re-doing lighting to show off the organ.

The work requires patience. Each of the thousands of pipes has to be removed, checked, voiced, tuned and re-installed. One by one - by hand. There is no way to mass produce the type of instrument that we are having built. Every day they come and listen to the pipes and tune them and prepare the organ. And Justin and Mark are perfectionists. They have incredibly high standards for their work. If it isn't done right,

they re-do the work until it is right. Sometimes this means that we feel that the work is progressing too slowly, but to compromise on quality is not something they would consider. We hired them because of the same qualities that occasionally frustrate us. But we are making an investment in the future. Properly maintained, the pipes we install today could still be producing sound 500 years from now.

For centuries, pipe organs have represented the height of musical engineering. The nickname “king of instruments” comes from the incredible complexity of the technology and from the incredible difficulty of truly mastering the instrument. When finished, our instrument will require the organist to play on three manuals (keyboards) and pedals as well as make the selections of voicing for the instrument. It is a full-body workout to play the organ.

It is an instrument that is, by its very nature, designed for many people to own, not individuals. Even though there are cases of pipe organs in private ownership, the instrument is meant for the pleasure and enjoyment of groups. Churches, desiring to offer the highest and best of our human efforts to the worship of God, are ideal locations for the installation of organs. Additionally, organs are multiple-generational instruments. Organs last much longer than the span of a human life, so it is an undertaking that deserves installation in a building that will be available and in use generations from now.

We have received the legacy of this organ from our forebears. We intend to leave this legacy to our children. So it is worth taking time to do it right.

I am learning the sounds of the organ individually. As they install and tune the pipes they play them one by one and I listen from my office. Some evenings, at the end of their work day, they simply play the organ and we hear all of its sounds come alive together. When the entire instrument is completed, I feel like I will be familiar with the individual voices and already I am longing to hear them “sing” together.

Why do we do this? This organ project costs enough that we could build two or perhaps three habitat for humanity homes. The money we are investing in our organ could heat hundreds of homes belonging to impoverished people. It could fund the operation of our congregation, with all of its benevolence projects for six months or more.

This money, however, is our long-term investment. It is our gift to generations yet unborn. It is a bit of our legacy.

But it is not something that we can do instead of any of our other vocations. If building this organ were to mean that we would stop building homes or providing heating assistance or feeding hungry people, it would not be worth the effort. Only when it is a part of the total picture of our congregation does it make sense.

Earlier this week, I worshiped in a relatively new, state-of-the art church. They had computer-controlled theatre lighting, a video projection system and an array of electronic instruments. None of the computer-controlled portions of their system are designed to last for 25 years. Most will need to have major components replaced every 5 to 10 years. It is a beautiful facility and it serves their congregation well.

But it is not who we are. We intend to leave behind a building and instruments that last for centuries. We intend the mission and ministry of our congregation to serve this community as faithfully in the next century as it has in the past. We are not in this for ourselves or our time only. We're in it for the long haul. I do not intend to say that one approach is better than the other, merely to point out that there is a radical difference. They cannot succeed by imitating us and we will not succeed by imitating them. The church of Jesus Christ has plenty of room for both kinds of congregations.

The older of the brothers who are doing the work on our organ was born in the same year as I. Sometimes when I ask, "When will it be finished?" he says, "An organ is never truly finished." Sometimes he says, "You can't set a specific date for the kind of work we are doing." Sometimes he says, "We won't know until we get done." And sometimes he sighs and says, "I hope in my lifetime."

One of the greatest gifts of this life is to be engaged in a job that is bigger than oneself. This phase of organ construction will be over in a year or so. The organ is not the biggest project that we will undertake in our lives. But it is a symbol for the larger work that we do. We have a message about a community that accepts all people at all stages of life, we have a story of a faith that is growing that an understanding of God that is still expanding. We have the stories of our past that are worthy of giving to yet another generation of faithful people. We have good news of justice in an unjust world, good news for captives and widows and orphans, homeless and dispossessed people. Our work will not be accomplished in this lifetime.

But we belong to a great parade of faithful people throughout the centuries - we are a people with a past and a future.

For now, we're trying to do our work - one pipe at a time, one person at a time, one prayer shawl at a time, one visit at a time, one sermon at a time. Little by little by little. Our people have been doing this work for generations and we will be doing it for generations to come.

It is good work. And today we will do more.

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## February 22, 2008 – Red Hats



Last night I watched part of a television program about the Red Hat Society with my mother. It was a fun story of a fun organization. But it was interesting how a gathering of a group of women who got together for fun and mutual support has grown into a huge organization. The official website of the Red Hat society refers to the group as a “disorganization.” Because the group is organized for fun and support, there was a resistance to meetings, organizational structures, rules and the like. And the group has kept remarkably close to its original goals. But there is a website, chapters all around the world, different levels of membership, and international conventions. There are even rules - chapters need to become officially recognized and women under 50 are supposed to wear pink and lavender instead of red and purple.

The group is meaningful organization for many women and their commitment to fun makes it nearly impossible not to like the idea.

I suspect that future generations will not embrace such organizations with the same enthusiasm. At least there will be some differences. The prevalence of two vocation families and other factors are combining to decrease the gap in life expectancy of women and men. The large number of widows will not be replicated in the next few generations, at least not in the United States. Perhaps a future “society” will include men as well as women. But I doubt if the millennial generation will respond to their lives by creating a society.

Churches, service clubs, and many other organizations are discovering an entire generation of people who aren't interested in joining. They may participate and they can become engaged in projects and in service to other people, but they seem reluctant to make organizational commitments. Invitations to membership are met with the comment, "We're not joiners." It is a phenomenon that I do not understand. Perhaps the organizations that are issuing the invitation aren't the right organizations for these people. These organizations were formed and for a long time their leadership has been dominated by elders. Their schedules, organizational structures, and plans of work have been adapted to the lifestyles of those who are retired. Perhaps a new generation needs to develop its own organizations.

Another theory is that the over-organization of childhood and youth has resulted in a generation of people to whom adulthood means release from all of the organizations in which they participated as children. Freedom from the intense schedule has become a privilege of adulthood and the last thing these young people want to do with their discretionary time is join an organization.

Yet another theory is that many organizations have structures cater to retired people and that as younger people age they will become more involved in organizations. The Red Hat Society makes no attempt to recruit younger members, but rather celebrates age and maturity as marks of membership. With a very large generation now entering retirement, there will be no shortage of older folks to populate organizations.

It is clear that voluntary associations will need to adapt as the current generation of leaders move on. There is no core of eager younger people waiting to assume the mantle of leadership. Organizations will need to learn to operate with fewer people who serve on committees and participate in organizational structure. For a while, short-term projects will have to replace traditional activities to make room for new traditions to emerge.

The Red Hat Society has only existed as a formal organization for ten years. It is a new organization what is able to meet a need and provide a meaningful association for the current generation. Perhaps allowing some of the existing organizations to die and new ones to emerge is a natural way for society to grow and change. That kind of model fits well with the theology of the Christian Church. As an organization that is founded around the concept of resurrection, there is no need for the church to fear death. We understand that the traditions, stories and faith of generations past will not disappear with reorganizations or reformations or radical changes in organizational structure.

But it is tough for the present generation to experience a sense of decline. The organizations that have become beloved because of the incredible investments of time and energy and financial resources are not something we will give up lightly. So we continue to search for appropriate and meaningful ways to pass on the church structures and organizations to a new generation.

There is a little song that we've been singing in the church for thirty or so years that says, "The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is a people." We sing the song, but we have grown attached to the building and the steeple and the quiet restfulness that we have found in the organization.

We do not know what the future holds. But we do know that we belong to a church with a future and that we will continue to make investments in the future. The shape and the color of that future are yet to be determined and we know that we will not be in control of the directions it will take. In the meantime, it is a great joy to be a part of the church. We are building houses, making music, worshiping God, serving others and learning to live joyously within our means.

May we be willing to share that joy with others.

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February 23, 2008 – New Ted



Yesterday's newspaper reported that Rapid City is going to get new Ted service. The article was about the coming of the discount airline named Ted. It is a part of United Airlines. Still, the article probably caught the attention of others named Ted in our city. I know it caught my attention.

I have given some thought, lately, to whether or not it is time for a new Ted at the church. Not literally, but whether or not it is time for me to move on so that the church can find a new minister. Long-term ministry is not something at which either the church or I have experience, so we're trying to discover out how to do this bit by bit. Susan and I served for seven years in North Dakota and ten in Idaho before coming to this congregation. This summer, we will complete thirteen years as pastors here. And every year I am getting older. As much as I try to deny it, I don't have the energy and stamina that I had at 25 or 35 years of age.

Twelve years was a good number for this church. The congregation experienced growth in many different ways. Giving was strong and budgets were growing. Membership held steady, which was an achievement because there were a lot of funerals in the congregation. We expanded existing programs and started new ones. We undertook major projects such as building new accessible restrooms and expanding the organ with success.

But the last year has seen significant turnaround. Attendance has been lower in all areas: worship, church school, fellowship groups, boards and committees. Income

dropped in 2007 for the first year in a long time. And I am not sure that I understand the reasons why these things are happening.

Of course, there is a tendency for pastors to take things personally. I often over-personalize events in the church. When a family goes to another church and requests a letter of transfer, I feel like I've been kicked in the stomach - I assume that it is my fault. Often it is not my fault at all, and I know that no church can be all things to all people. Still I take it personally.

Yet I know that the church is not just about me and my feelings. There are forces that are bigger than me at play. Membership patterns are shifting. Rapid City has too many congregations for the number of people. The only churches in our city that are growing are doing so by transferring members from other congregations - no church is doing a good job at involving people who have no church background or affiliation. Out city, like much of America, is aging.

And I know better than to pick up and leave when there are hard times. The courage to endure is one of the tests of genuine leadership. When there are problems, the ability to knuckle down and seek solutions is far more valuable than a loss of leadership.

Still I wonder. That is one of the realities of God's call. It rarely comes in a clear and obvious manner. Most of the time, we need to discern God's call, and it is necessary to involve others in that discernment. God's call is far more than what I want. God's call takes into consideration the needs of the whole church and all of God's people.

Most likely, the new Ted that Rapid City needs is not a different pastor, but some changes in this one. We fall into patterns of behavior and tend to do jobs the same way that we have done them before. Shifting priorities and examining the ways things are done can reveal new and better ways to work together. New times call for new approaches.

Lent is a good season for prayer and reflection. And discerning God's call requires careful deliberation and careful listening. I am trying to discipline myself to take more time for reflection and careful consideration. I know that direction and purpose come slowly and that sometimes it is in the midst of doing the work of the church that God speaks most clearly. There certainly is a lot of work that remains. The new Ted probably will not be a sudden transformation. More likely a slow process of change will emerge and with it a growing sense of faithfulness to God's call.

None of us can predict the future. Perhaps the newspaper is right and Rapid City is getting new Ted service. Perhaps the new Ted is produced by growth in the old one. At any rate it is clear that the old one needs to continue growing and to continue serving.

And I know I am not in this alone. When I pray for God to reveal what is best for the future of this congregation, my prayers combine with those of a wide community of faithful people. Together we will discern God's call for this congregation.

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## February 24, 2008 – Beads



There has been a women's retreat at the church this weekend. The women of the church plan, organize and provide for leadership of the event. I'm aware of the event because I work in the building and keep track of the programs of the church, but it doesn't require any special commitment or work from me. Most years, they go to a retreat center or some other site that is away from the church. This year, they held their retreat at the church. It was fun to be in and out of the building as the retreat was going on because they had activities in various rooms and the church was filled with joyful and engaging activities.

One of the projects of the retreat was working with the beads. They had a package of beads for stringing that had come from BeadforLife. In addition, they had a display of colorful jewelry from BeadforLife displayed in the parlor. BeadforLife is a project that provides jobs and opportunity for impoverished women in Uganda. They make jewelry out of colorful recycled paper. Each bead is hand made and unique. Many of the women who make the beads are living with HIV/AIDS. Some are refugees from the war in northern Uganda. They often are caring for AIDS orphans as well as their own children. In addition to providing income for the women who make the beads, BeadforLife supports development programs in health, education, employment and housing in Uganda. There is more information about this program at [www.BeadforLife.com](http://www.BeadforLife.com).

Today our worship will focus on the story of Jesus' meeting with the woman at the Samaritan well. The text doesn't tell us much about her story other than that she was a Samaritan, that she came to the well to draw water, that she had had multiple

husbands, and that she was effective in telling her friends about Jesus. Many came to believe because of her.

The text also tells us two important things about Jesus' relationship with the woman. He went to her country to meet her on her own terms, and he really got to know her. Both are surprising, considering the culture of the time. Jews from Judah didn't travel north much in those days. After the fall of the northern kingdom to the Assyrians and the exile of the people there, those who remained and who in most cases intermarried with the occupiers and adopted parts of their culture were suspected as lacking loyalty to Jewish faith and traditions. Samaritans were seen as "the enemy" in the eyes of many Jews. And in a patriarchal culture, men often didn't take the time to really get to know women. It was an encounter that surprised the woman and Jesus' disciples.

BeadforLife continues the tradition of going to people and really getting to know them. Most Americans know very little of Uganda. We know that there have been many wars on the African continent and that Uganda. Some remember that during the seventies, Uganda was ruled by Idi Amin, a brutal dictator whose rule was characterized by human rights abuses, political repression, ethnic persecution, extra-judicial killings and the expulsion of Indians from Uganda. Estimates of the number of people killed range from 80,000 to 500,000. Since the civil war that dominated much of the history of Uganda in the 1980's, news from the region has focused on Sudan to the north and other neighboring countries. Those living in the United States rarely think of the individual people in Uganda. It is not a place or a people that we know at all. When BeadforLife brings pictures and the stories of individual Ugandan women to our church, they are new stories of a people that we have not known.

These are the people who will be most effective in telling the story of faith, hope and love and carrying it to their friends and neighbors. Effective ministry begins with listening to the stories and really getting to know the people.

Jesus' ministry constantly defied convention, reached beyond traditional relationships and re-defined the nature of family and community. He treated those estranged from Israel as members of his family. He got to know a woman at a Samaritan well so much that she felt he had told her everything she'd ever done.

If we would be faithful, we too must truly listen to the stories of others and come to know folk we might not ever meet as individual people with their own unique stories, thoughts, feelings, and intentions. Like the piles of beads that were displayed in the church, each individual is unique, special, wondrous and beautiful.

The beads are a way of learning the stories of others. And there are many other stories to be told and learned. For our congregation, each trip to Costa Rica, each visit to Eagle Butte or Wanblee, each contact with someone outside of our normal circle - becomes an opportunity to get to know another and to show the story of God's great love. May we

continue to be people who go to places we might not otherwise go, listen carefully to the stories of those we meet, and share living water in the name of Jesus.

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February 25, 2008 – Transfigured



There are rare occasions in my life when I am allowed to be, for a while, in the presence of true genius. Last evening was one of those occasions. Petronel Malan came to our community for a concert presented by the Black Hills Chamber Music Society. Her performance was beyond brilliant. It was inspired.

I do not use that word lightly. As a theologian and a pastor, I am well aware of the dangers of attributing divine qualities to human beings. But she was filled with spirit last night. And she moved the entire audience with her technical brilliance, her composure and her down-to-earth passionate love of the piano and the family of masters in which she stands.

Franz Liszt lived a century before my time. His brilliance as a pianist and composer have been made known to me by reading and by artists who have played his music. Vladimir Horowitz was an artist who I admired at a distance. The recording of his 1986 Moscow concert moved me to tears the first time I heard it. I have played over and over again and continue to be moved by his playing. Both of these men were examples for me of the power of human artistic creativity. Both were people that I admired in part because of a wide distance between them and me. Petronel brought them into the sanctuary of our church last night. It was as if they had passed the mantle of piano mastership to this less than thirty-five year-old young woman and given her permission to go beyond what they had achieved in their lifetimes.

It is fair to say that the audience was transfigured. Our experience was not that of Peter and James and John on the mountain with Jesus, Moses and Elijah, but our language has a distinct lack of words to describe the experience. For a few moments, as we listened and breathed as a unit in time with her playing, feeling the music flood over us with the full dynamic range of the piano and all of the colors of which it is capable, our perception of time and space was altered.

In her introduction to Liszt's Sonata in b minor, Petronel told the story of a woman who looked at her hands after a performance and told her that in a former life she was a mistress of Franz Liszt. I don't believe in reincarnation or former lives and the story was just another anecdote that people tell. But when she played the sonata, the depth of her love and understanding of Liszt transcended time.

She played Haydn, Mozart, Bach and Mussorgsky with formidable competence, clarity and beauty. To have heard those pieces would have made the evening's concert well worth the admission price. But she poured her passion into Liszt and carried us to a place we had never before been. It is said that when Horowitz recorded the Hungarian Rhapsody no. 19, he said to the recording engineer, "I make a few changes, no?" Petronel understood the changes and went a step farther. She played it like we had never before heard it. We felt as if we were hearing it for the first time.

Words fail to describe the experience.

Our generation has seen the depths of human depravity. The horrors of genocide in Cambodia and Rwanda, the evils of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Sudan, the list goes on and on. The evil of which human beings are capable seems to have no end. Nothing that can be done by humans in this life can fully restore justice and set things right. But we do not sink into despair because we have also known the heights of human genius. The good of which we are capable has been revealed to us.

It is trite to say that being in the presence of Petronel Malan's musical genius has restored my faith in humanity. But for a few moments last night, it was enough just to be alive in the same generation as this artist. Today we will resume our work and we will encounter frustration and failure and human frailty. But we will know that greatness exists and perhaps we will set our expectations just a little bit higher knowing the heights to which we can ascend.

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**February 26, 2008 – Sunrise**



The location of our home and the location of the church are both particularly well-situated for my personality. I am a morning person. I like to get up early and get to work while the world is still quiet. I find that I am most productive in the morning and that my energy is more focused than it will be later in the day.

So I have a lot of sunrise pictures. And many of them include the shadow of the large outdoor cross that is at the East end of the church's property. It is a spectacular place from which to view sunrises, and it happens to be where I park when I drive into the church - so I am often greeted with a beautiful view.

A sunrise is a reminder of the promise of a new day with new opportunities, new challenges, and new possibilities. It is also one of the places where the extravagance of nature is revealed. The colors and contrasts in the sky go beyond the demands of function. Beauty exists for the sake of beauty and we have been blessed with eyes and brains that perceive color and light and sense the glorious beauty of this world.

At the same time, we do live in the shadow of the cross. Life does not go on forever. The beauties that we behold are ours for only a little time. We can attempt to ignore the reality of death, but death is a part of the human condition that is as real as the air we breathe or the beauty we behold.

Of course Christians do not erect crosses to remind us of the reality of death alone. The symbol holds much more power and meaning for us. Once a symbol of the torturous

brutality of Roman occupation and a sign of the extent of the power of human rulers, the cross invoked fear for many who knew of its function in Roman society. And in the early years of the Christian church, it was not among the favorite symbols of the faithful. Only gradually, over time, did the cross take on new meaning for Christians. It came to symbolize the depth of Jesus' sacrifice and the power of the resurrection. It came to us as a reminder that death is not the end of the worth, meaning, and beauty of human life. Just when we think it is over, it really isn't over at all.

At the low sun angle of sunrise, the shadow of the cross is long and stretches across the yard. At this time of year, the shadow doesn't fall on the building, but goes out into the yard to the north of the building. The shadow is much larger than the cross that casts it. Our fear of death may be a bit like the shadow of the cross. Our fear may be much bigger than the reality itself. The cross is a symbol for us that we do not need to fear death - that we will not be alone in death.

I have hundreds of pictures of the cross at sunrise, and I keep adding to my collection. But I have memories that go beyond the photographs. There have been as many mornings when I didn't reach for my camera. Some days I have approached the church and my work with a bit of weariness. Other days I have been in too much of a rush to pause for long. Some days my attention is focused on other projects and other realities.

The gift of the sunrise is given whether or not I am paying attention. The beauty is present even when there are no witnesses. So it is with the death and resurrection of Jesus - they are not dependent upon my attention to be powerful realities in this world and in my life. Still these things are worthy of my attention. Lent is a season that is full of reminders of that which lies beyond.

May I take time to pause and ponder these things amidst the rush of life.

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## February 27, 2008 – Partners in Mission



The flights were on time yesterday and Chuck and Sybil returned from Costa Rica a little ahead of schedule. Travel has not always gone smoothly, and it was a bit of a relief to know that this trip travel had not been a problem. It was too late by the time they had arrived, and they had traveled too far, for us to go into all of the details of the trip, but the initial reports of our sister church and its ministries sound encouraging. The feeding program is providing a meal for 70 kids five days a week. The church is well-maintained and filled with activities.

Costa Rica has its usual frustrating bureaucracy. The start up of school was accompanied by a new regulation about books that needed to be bought and new uniforms for gym class that included a demand that all of the children have new shoes - the financial crunch was more than many families could bear. Schools are still not up to providing more than two or three hours of instruction per child and the scattered start times mean that many parents have to go back and forth to the schools for each child every day. The streets in Los Guido are practically impossible to navigate with a sewer project leaving behind giant ruts and the promise of rivers of mud when the rains come. The busses are unpredictable and increasingly unsafe. There are more people living and sleeping on the streets than ever before.

It is the theology of incarnation lived out every day. We believe that in Jesus Christ God comes into this world, not to suddenly change everything nor to take us out of this world, but to share all of human life, including the suffering and pain. In whatever life brings, we are not alone. The church, the body of Christ, is in our human communities

to serve and to share the journey. At the same time that we seek and work for justice, we are under no illusion that we are able to fix the problems of this world.

Ours is a ministry of presence. We stand by the people of Los Guido as sisters and brothers in faith. We share the joys and sorrows of life in the church no matter what the future may hold.

Of course the presence is vicarious for the most part. We can't be in Costa Rica very much of the time. Ten days every two years isn't much time to hear the stories, to listen to Pastor Dorotea, to get to know the people. Chuck and Sybil are our missionaries who go for an additional six weeks every year to help with Vacation Bible School and to immerse themselves more deeply in the life of the congregation. But we know that our physical presence is only part of the story. We believe that love transcends the distances that separate us and we know that our journey is not the same as the journey of our brothers and sisters in Costa Rica.

But we have been called to a special relationship. And we live out that relationship in the ways we can discover. We share the journey of ministry through pictures and stories and regular visits. We share the journey through regular gifts to the mission and ministry of the congregation in Costa Rica. Together we believe that feeding the children of Los Guido is a worthy task for our energies. Together we believe that special programs such as Vacation Bible School add to the quality of life for those who participate. Together we believe in programs to support, educate, and provide meaningful work for the women of the neighborhood.

We won't run out of shared work in this lifetime. So we are in this relationship for the long haul.

So you won't see a web site with statistics on how many people our ministry in Costa Rica has "saved." You won't find flashy pictures of the new churches that we are starting. Our presence in Costa Rica is not that kind of presence. We're two congregations - one in Costa Rica, one in South Dakota. We have discovered rich meaning in traveling this life journey together. We have our ups and downs. We have our challenges and problems. We have seen each other at our best and at our worst. And we are grateful that somehow we have found each other to balance our journeys and to add depth and meaning to our ministry.

Our faith is stronger because we walk with others of faith.

And it was exciting to have Chuck and Sybil return home last night. I can't wait to hear more stories about their experiences and about the people we have grown to love in a place that is far away from our home. We'll soon be planning for a visit in the summer of 2009, when we take a group and introduce a few more of our members to the work of our sister church.

And when we pray for the people of Costa Rica there are specific names and faces that come to our minds. It is good to know that they pray for us as well.

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purchased a shredder for the almost daily credit card offers and anything else that might be misused. But a certain amount of what comes in the post office ends up in the landfill. After sorting out the obvious waste, we need to sort the bills and business mail from the other correspondence. In our house we need to sort the mail by recipient, as we receive mail not only for ourselves, but for our parents and our children as well. Bringing the mail into our home can result in three or four files of paper headed to different destinations. Some days it feels like we have to fight for table and counter space against an ever growing mountain of paper.

We've tried to get on all of the lists for reduction of unsolicited mail, but it doesn't seem to have reduced the volume very much. We continue to change business accounts and statements for electronic delivery, but our parents prefer written statements and bills and since we deal with several different accounts to manage our parents' finances, we need to keep separate files for each of them.

There are days when I don't feel like getting the mail at all. It seems to just represent more work.

And then a small personal note arrives, perhaps a thank you card or an invitation, or just a greeting from a friend. And I'm grateful that we still receive mail. Some communications seem more valuable when they are on paper and written by hand.

So about once a week I make a stop at the recycle bins to drop off recycling. Shredded paper goes to another location. Magazines that have been read go to the library. Sometimes there is mail that came to the house and should have come to the office and sometimes it is the other way around. No one seems to want the catalogues that arrive daily. And while I'm at it, I often have a letter or two that is outgoing to drop by a mailbox. Our efforts to control the paper clutter are valiant, but it seems to be a never-ending battle.

I don't look forward to the arrival of the mail the way I used to - even though I "may have already won" and "the valuable coupon is good for three days only" and "this catalogue contains the largest selection ever."

I think we'd better plant some more trees this spring.

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## February 29, 2008 – Preparing Food



One thing that we share with our sister church in Costa Rica is a belief that hungry people should get good, nutritious food to eat. Our sister church is located in a neighborhood where there are many hungry people and they focus on feeding the children. Approximately seventy children come to the church five days a week for regular meals. The feeding program has become one of the most important outreach programs of the church. Here in Rapid City, we share a partnership with many other congregations through the Cornerstone Rescue Mission. The meals program is just one aspect of Cornerstone, which provides shelter and transitional housing, educational programs, veterans programs, a woman's shelter, counseling, addiction treatment, financial management and many other programs.

When it is our turn to serve at the mission, a team of volunteers goes to work at our church. They usually prepare the meal the day before, and cook it on the day that we serve. We have good refrigerators and ovens at the church, and have developed a system of bringing a hot meal to the mission and serving there without tying up their kitchen for too much time.

I love the days that our crew is preparing the cornerstone meal. Because on those days our kitchen takes on the feel of the kitchen in Los Guido. It is filled with busy and happy people who have well-defined tasks and there is always room for another volunteer. There is plenty of laughter and the telling of stories. Working together brings people closer and working together to serve others is the best kind of work that exists. Our

kitchen echoes with the memories of thousands of other meals and generations of people who have worked together for generations.

The mood is similar to that of the crew at the Habitat for Humanity house. There is a basic equality to the plan of work. We do not need a hierarchy or too much committee meeting. We simply tackle the job at hand and keep going until it is finished. And the task is manageable. We continue to strive for justice and for adequate shelter and food for everyone. These are illusive goals and they lie beyond the strength and leadership of any small group of people.

But in the meantime, we can fix dinner for tonight. We can build one house. And when we get done, we can cook another meal and build another house. Sometimes, when it is not clear how to change the world, it is good to do something. Hungry people need good food, prepared with care and love. We understand this.

I have been thinking about today for a while now. It seems that I ought to be writing something special to mark leap day - the extra day added into our calendar once every four years. It is somewhat unique. And later today, I'll drop by for the party of a man who was born on leap day and finally gets to have his twentieth birthday - an occasion on which he'll celebrate being 80 years old.

It occurs to me, however, that there is more meaning in the everyday tasks than some special events. We need special events to mark the seasons of our lives and we enjoy the special celebrations. But there are hungry people who need food every day. There are people who work with joy to serve them every day. There is a need for simple, decent housing every day. There are effective partnerships emerging to eliminate poverty housing that are working every day.

Perhaps it is the laughter and joy of the kitchen - a mood that transcends language and culture - a free choice to serve others - perhaps it is this that is most remarkable and worthy of my comments today. A special day is also every day - or perhaps every day holds the possibility of being special.

I'm not much of an evangelist. I enjoy telling about the joy of faith that we discover, but I am hesitant to tell another how to live or what to believe. I've seen the power of God at work outside of the institutional church too many times to believe that we have some kind of special corner on God's presence.

But we do have a kitchen where everyone is welcome to join in the work and a path of service that is available to those who wish to participate. It is a good idea to share our food. And we will continue to do so. It is an even better idea to share our work. May we continue to learn how to share the work as well.

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## March 1, 2008 – Dreaming



Photo courtesy of Chesapeake Light Craft Boats.

Last week, Mike, my source for local spruce, asked me when I was planning to build my next boat. I gave him the sensible answer. “I have to paint my house this summer, and we need to spend our spare time fixing up the interior as well. No boat this year.” Of course I can’t get my mind off of boats ever since that conversation. I have my sights on building a rowing boat, a small wherry that could be outfitted with a rowing frame with a sliding seat, or used with shorter oars as a simple boat for picnics and day excursions. Bill Grunwald, a west coast boatbuilder, is reported to have said, “the thing most likely to kill the idea, the dream of having or building a boat is levelheadedness.” I am not at risk for excessive levelheadedness.

A levelheaded person would not consider another boat when he already has four canoes and three kayaks, all but one hand-built treasures. Why would anyone want more? It just isn’t sensible. Where do you store them, how do you haul them? No one can use more than one boat at a time. Boatbuilders are rarely blamed of being sensible.

It is a quality that drives some people up the wall. A very sensible church member recently asked me, “When are you going to stop thinking of new mission projects and new fund drives?” I had no idea what to answer. I don’t ever intend to stop thinking of new mission projects and as long as people have a need to give and there are needs in the life of the church, I guess I’ll be asking people to consider donating. Before we finish one project, I’m dreaming of starting another. Another church member recently

commented, "I can't keep up with everything that is going on." I thought it was a compliment. Only hours later did I realize that it was a complaint.

There is a good case to be made for sensibleness and levelheadedness. One needs to be aware of the practical realities of life. You can't beat sociology. For the next few years, a typical church is not going to be getting any younger. As our communities age, so will our churches, and those of us who started with rather mature churches to begin with are not likely to see overbrimming Sunday school rooms or overfilled youth events. This is not to say that we have lost interest in Sunday school or in youth events, but it is unlikely that we will see the numbers that old timers can remember from forty or fifty years ago.

And sensibility and levelheadedness are good qualities for financial managers. There is a need for practical people to manage money. Spending more than one has is never a good idea. And not keeping track of money is irresponsible. But God has always provided for our real needs. And God continues to provide for the things we need.

While I understand the role of the responsible and levelheaded folks in our congregation and I treasure their contributions, I suspect that I will continue to drive them up the wall.

God's love is simply too extravagant for a practical response.

The reality of incarnation is too mind boggling for a levelheaded response.

Here is what I should do:

- Clean my office and finish up all undone paperwork.
- Split and deliver the wood that has been already donated for the Woodchuck society.
- Set up a schedule and visit church members who are shut-in and ailing.
- Deliver prayer shawls to the people who need and deserve them.
- Write my sermons earlier in the week.
- Devise a strategy for receiving new members on a regular basis.
- Solve the problem of low church attendance.
- Get competitive with other local churches.
- Supervise staff members so they feel support and a sense of being on a successful team.
- Raise money for a practical advertising campaign for the church.
- Do some serious planning over the summer and be ready for the beginning of fall programming.
- Make a strategy to get new members.
- Frown and worry about the decline of the mainline church in America today.
- Dress up and represent the church at public gatherings.
- Be like the churches that are growing.

Here is what I probably will do:

- Buy and read more books.
- Organize people to become partners with the families moving into the new Cornerstone apartments.
- Respond to the latest crisis and spend hours and hours with people who likely will never become church members.
- Sign up for more days on call for Local Outreach to Survivors of Suicide.
- Spend more time at Black Hills Workshop.
- Ask the board to continue making our small quiet services a regular offering to our church and community.
- Encourage church members to go on adventures and travel when the opportunity presents itself.
- Seek ways to cooperate with other churches and rejoice in their successes.
- Expect church staff to take responsibility for their own areas of work and tell others how creative they are.
- Play with the computer and the church's web site and learn how to include more video.
- Take a summer school class and stay up late at night and get up early in the mornings to study, read and write papers.
- Laugh and sing and delight that I get to be a local church pastor instead of having to be a church bureaucrat.
- Encourage seekers to find the church that is the right match for the place they are on their spiritual journey.
- Wear jeans and write rambling blogs every day.
- Discover who we really are and imitate no one else.

As good and as dedicated as are some of our congregation's most sensible members, we are not in danger of an excess of levelheadedness anytime soon. Of course the sensible members of previous generations have created reserves and a trust and a style of management that gives me the luxury of experimentation and exploration of new ways to carry out the gospel of Jesus Christ. We don't have a mortgage to pay and we live within our means even when our means are less than the year before.

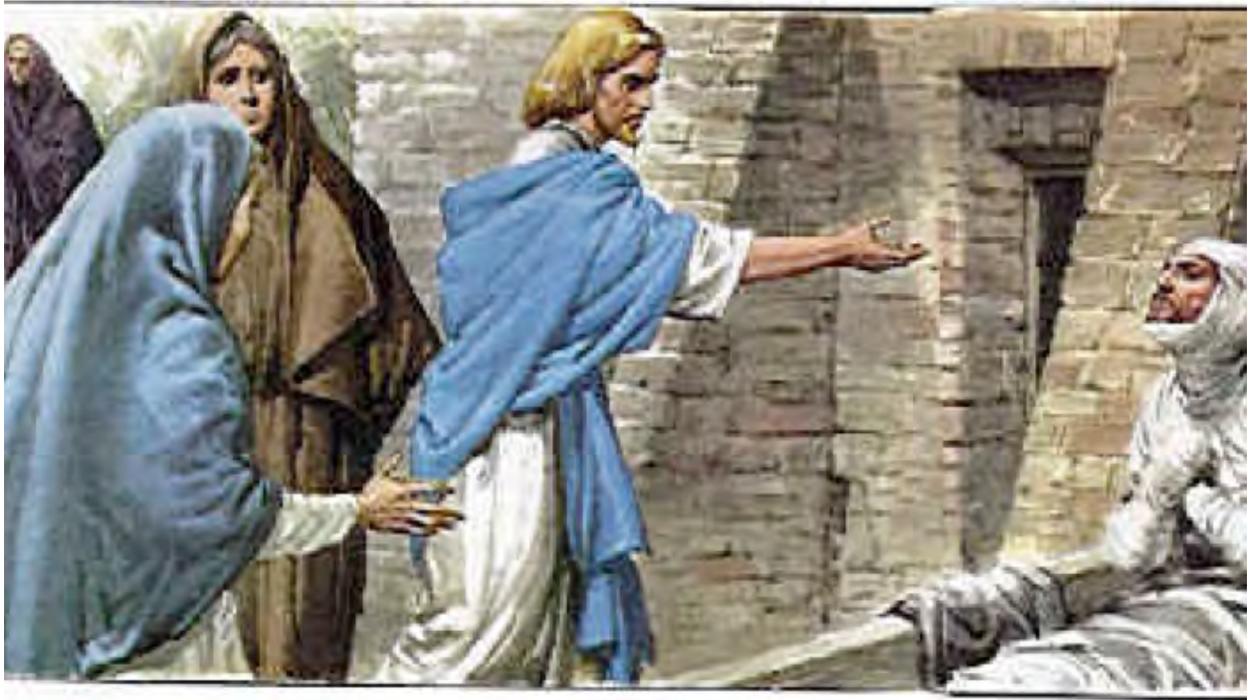
I am not unaware that there are rumors around the church that we ought to be looking at a change in leadership. And I am not insensitive to criticism. I just am not able to be someone that I am not. And I trust the Holy Spirit to guide us as we all - the sensible ones and the dreamers - seek what is truly best for our church. After all we're all in this together and I'm pulling for the whole church, not just the people whose personalities are similar to mine.

Maybe I'll run by Mike's place and pick up a few planks of spruce. I can always store them under the deck so I'll be ready when I start the next boat project.

And I will take time to pray to God for the sensitivity and wisdom to listen carefully to the critics and trust their love for their church. And I will continue to dream about new ministries and new missions for our congregation.

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## March 2, 2008 – What is with Lazarus



Ok, I know that this is not the dominant theory. And I know that most Christian theologians would find a flaw in my thinking, but it seems to me that there are some real problems with the raising of Lazarus from the dead. I understand the grief that Mary and Martha felt. I know that Jesus shared their grief. It is one of the points in the gospels when Jesus is reported to feel deep emotion. Grief is gut-wrenching. Wanting the death not to have happened is part of the emotion. Human beings have long sought to be able to reverse death - to make it go away - to make someone undead.

So I guess we should rejoice that Jesus did it. Hooray!

But what about Lazarus?

Did anyone ask him how he felt about the whole thing?

Most of us have lived long enough to know that there are things that are worse than death. We've seen the bitter old man who once was useful and creative and contributed to society and now has become angry and bitter and unable to affect meaningful change. And from time to time we have wondered why that person has to go on so long - it life itself a punishment from some wrong? We know the story of King David, whose sin at the murder of Uriah was so grievous that God denied his wish that he would die and instead forced him to live with his guilt and to see his own son die. We have seen the grieving partner or parent who genuinely wishes that she or he had died instead of the loved one. Sometimes the role of the survivor is far worse than that of the victim.

Here is Lazarus: all pain and sorrow and suffering are over. Death itself is past. He has entered into that realm where all of God's faithful people gather in peace. And then, all of a sudden - whoops! False alarm. You don't get to die after all. You've got to go back to your aches and pains and your struggle to earn a living and the troubles with your family. And, oh, by the way - you have to die again after it is all over.

Is it just to assuage Jesus' grief? Sorry Lazarus - you don't get to die first. You have to wait until Jesus dies and see that grief and sorrow and pain and sadness and loss. Having you die is just too much for Jesus to take right now.

The power of Jesus - the glory of God - both are revealed, but at what cost? Are we to change our beliefs and see death as the enemy? Are we to feel that those who died and were not raised from the dead to return to this life are somehow less loved than Lazarus? Does Jesus really have to perform signs and change the order of life and death in order for us to believe that he is the Son of God and that death is not the end? Is the raising of Lazarus a kind of false resurrection - somehow less than Jesus' resurrection - somehow less than the promise we have been given?

Lazarus becomes like someone who has experienced clinical death and been resuscitated. Death is partially experienced, and it is delayed, but it is not averted. Being revived does not make one immortal.

It is possible that the huge gulf that we perceive between life and death is only huge from our perspective - that the enormous transition of death itself wasn't that enormous to Lazarus once he had died. Another hug, another family dinner, another joyous greeting of friends - these were as natural and as pleasant as they had ever been. And pain and suffering and grief and sorrow were not quite the monstrous burdens they once had seemed.

It is possible that we make too big a deal out of death and that we do so because we simply do not get it. Jesus' attitude seems to indicate this. When he hears Lazarus is critically ill, he lingers and delays his visit. Chastised for arriving too late, he shares the anguish of the grieving sister and then greets his old friend as before.

What is with Lazarus?

I don't know. It seems quite obvious that there is more to learn about life and death than what I presently know. Maybe Lazarus got it the first time he died. Maybe it took a second experience for him. The miracle that Jesus performed - far from making everything clear to those of us who live in this generation - reminds us of how much we really do not yet understand. Curiously I await the promise of tomorrow - whatever the future may hold.

## March 3, 2008 – The Size of Things



I bought a few giant strawberries at the grocery store. I know that they must have been trucked in from a long way off and that we should be paying attention to how far our food has been transported when we make decisions about what to eat. They were expensive, but they were so big and beautiful. And they tasted as good as they looked. Wild strawberries are relatively small, and grow in a lot of different places, and are one of the first fruits of spring, but it is far too early for them in our area. But we humans have learned how to develop all kinds of hybrid plants, including strawberries. Modern hybrid strawberries are bigger in size, more uniform in appearance, more resistant to diseases, and the plants produce more berries per year.

Modern plant science means that farmers can produce consistently large, juicy fruit and deliver it year round. Consumers love the big berries. Taking a look around the grocery store, I notice that most fruits are being produced in varieties that are larger than was the case a few decades ago.

So what is it with carrots? Instead of getting bigger, carrots are being sold in varieties that are smaller and smaller. While any carrot can be harvested before it is mature to produce a smaller and more tender “baby” carrot, plant scientists have been developing fast-maturing cultivars that are designed to be harvested at small sizes. Even with the possibility of more crops per year, the yield of these smaller carrots is decreased. But they are so popular that it pays to grow them.

Fruits are getting larger, vegetables are getting smaller. It is sort of like my dream world when I was a kid. Now if one serving of strawberries equals seven strawberries and one serving of carrots equals one carrot - hmm - that means I get a lot of sweet and not too much crunchy. Even though it is a different kind of sweetness, it is sweetness that sells in carrots and strawberries, so we get bigger berries and smaller carrots. And we get bigger.

Over eating is a serious health threat in contemporary society. It's not just a product of bigger strawberries. The portions of many foods are larger than necessary and we have developed a lifestyle with too much eating and too little exercise. This was not a problem for earlier hunter/gatherer societies. Food was simply too hard to obtain. It took so much work to get food that there was little, if any, danger of over eating. But in our society, high calorie foods are available at very modest costs and over eating is a serious problem.

Many authors have written about making changes in diet and how we get our food. Barbara Kingsolver's "Animal, Vegetable, Miracle" documents her family's adventure in producing more of the food they eat and making wiser food decisions. The options that were available to her family are not available to all families - they had the ability to choose the region of the nation where they would live and income sources that allowed them to spend more time obtaining food. But the book is valuable nonetheless because it shows that much is possible if we raise our awareness and make more careful decisions about what we eat.

There is much potential for joy and pleasure in eating. We are fortunate to have access to so much food. But in a world where resources are not evenly distributed, it does us well, from time to time, to remember those who have fewer choices about what to eat. Feeding hungry children is a daily job at our sister church in Los Guido, Costa Rica. The cooks in the feeding program have fewer choices when it comes to feeding the children. Limited funds mean that they have to be careful. The result is a lot less variety than the diets to which we have become accustomed.

What we eat does have an effect on what is available for others to eat. The incredible variety that is available in our modern supermarkets is not required for us to have healthy lives, and it may not be sustainable in the long term.

I resolve not to take my food for granted and to pause and think about it from time to time. And since I have the luxury of much freedom of choice in the foods I eat, I resolve to be more careful in my choices and more mindful of how my choices affect others.

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## March 4, 2008 – Attacks



I recently received another e-mail that is being forwarded around the Internet. It is one of dozens that I have seen that attack a political candidate for one reason or another. This particular one claims that Barak Obama is a muslim and that Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago is not a Christian church. It was forwarded to me by a thoughtful member of my congregation with a question about whether or not it was true. It didn't take much research to find out that the originator of the message is a principal in an anti-muslim organization in Florida. He claims his judgment of Trinity UCC is based on a brief conversation with a secretary at the church in which he pretended to be a muslim seeking membership in the church. The message was full of lies, innuendoes and half-truths. It was an attack not only on the candidate, but on his church.

I have no desire to issue any political endorsements. I am confident that there are good and faithful members of my congregation and of other congregations who will vote in different ways on election day. Our church does not require its members to agree on politics.

But I am growing weary of the politics of personal destruction where attacks of any nature, whether true or not, are used to do whatever damage can be done to an opponent. We have seen it in previous campaigns.

What is different about this particular campaign, I guess, is that it is my church that is being attacked. I don't know if there are e-mails out there claiming that Mike Huckabee is not a Christian because he is a Baptist, or Hillary Clinton is not a Christian because

she is a Methodist, or John McCain is not a Christian because he is an Episcopalian. But it is frustrating and disappointing to see our church attacked in such an uneducated and hateful way.

The facts are quite simple. Barak Obama has been a member of Trinity United Church of Christ for more than twenty years. His faith and his membership in that particular congregation are not some kind of campaign props, added for the sake of public image. Trinity UCC is a vibrant congregation of our church, one that I have visited on numerous occasions. I have known Jeremiah Wright, the senior pastor at Trinity, for more than thirty years. The United Church of Christ is a mainline Christian denomination with its roots firmly planted in the Christian tradition. The history of our church and of its leadership in the formation and growth of our nation is well documented and can be learned by anyone who is truly interested. Those who do not know the story of the United Church of Christ and its predecessor denominations do not know some very important parts of the history of the United States. It was our church that founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony, that formed the Mayflower Compact, that provided fourteen signers of the Declaration of Independence, that hid and sheltered the Liberty Bell during the revolutionary war, that provided incredible leadership in the movement to end slavery and that has been present throughout all of the history of our nation.

I am sure that ours is not the first generation where hatred and lies were used to attack political candidates. The Internet is a slightly different media than tabloid newspapers, but this generation does not have a corner on hatred or lies.

But we do have a responsibility to respond to the lies with the truth, and to respond to the hatred with love.

So I urge all of my friends to think twice before forwarding any e-mail. Consider its source. Refuse to pass on lies and hatred. Stay involved in the process. Send to your neighbors and friends all of the reasons to vote for the candidate that you back. But don't resort to fear, lies and hatred to attack the candidates you do not support.

Sadly, we live in a time where there is intense and sometimes unhealthy competition between Christian congregations. Attacks on the church often come from other organizations that claim to be Christian. Some try to build up their own congregations by attacking others. We are passionate about our faith, so let us show the positive sides of that passion and energy. Let us demonstrate the love of Christ in the way that we treat one another.

And I will continue to tell the story of my church and of its many and varied congregations. I will join with Christians of other denominations to worship and to work for peace and justice. And I will answer lies with the truth, attacks with non-violent resistance, and hatred with love. And I will trust the members of my congregation to

vote their consciences even when they do not agree - especially when they do not agree.

And I recommend without hesitation our sister congregation in Chicago. If you ever have the opportunity to worship at Trinity, it is an experience not to be missed. You will be warmly welcomed and you will feel the power of the Holy Spirit moving in the mission and ministry of this vibrant congregation.

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## March 5, 2008 – Big Changes



Human languages have undergone some dramatic and revolutionary changes. One of those changes was the development of forms of complex writing. The relationship between written language and spoken language is a complex one and at times the two forms seem to develop along different paths. Writing began with drawing. Pictographs and ideographs provided a way to record some ideas. The drawing of language developed into systems of symbols that could be discerned by a wider number of people. In the East, systems of symbols grew in breadth as ideas grew in complexity. New symbols replaced pictographs and ideographs and allowed more complex ideas could be recorded and preserved beyond the span of a generation. The Chinese language grew to a system of nearly 70,000 characters to represent phonetic sounds as well as specific items and ideas. Western languages took a different course than Eastern ones, with the development of alphabets. A relatively small number of symbols could be combined in different patterns to allow for the expression of complex ideas. In both cultures, oral language developed alongside written language and increasingly complex ideas were being expressed.

Writing was an incredibly revolutionary change in how humans thought about religion and God. Writing allowed for the recording of ideas so that they could be accessed beyond the span of a human life. Really big and complex ideas, such as the nature of God, could then benefit from the contributions of multiple generations of thinkers. No longer was God confined to the understanding of individuals only. In our tradition, we discovered the God of our ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. One of the greatest stories of our people, the Exodus from Egypt came from the time of the

development of the Hebrew alphabet. Human freedom became something different than a random set of actions that were beyond control. Freedom began to be viewed as the way that people ought to live - God was on the side of human freedom. Living and working for freedom was a cause worthy of a lifetime and more. And now we had a written language to preserve and to develop the concepts through the generations.

It has been argued that the second great revolution in human language was the development of the printing press. The ability to consistently reproduce language and to do so with accuracy meant that written language could be standardized and that ideas could transcend not only time but also space. Printed language allowed for mass access to the words and ideas of our people. The Bible became available in common languages to great numbers of people instead of being the providence of a select few elders and priests. The protestant reformation came from the same time as the development of the printing press. Human democracies, with their roots in the time of the development of writing, became ideas that could be attempted on much grander scales with the development of printing.

I have colleagues who propose that the development of electronic media is the next great revolution in the development of human language. I confess that I remain skeptical on that point. Yes, there have been some dramatic and observable changes with the Internet and digital communication. The thoughts and ideas of a hack like me no longer need to go through layers of editing and refining before becoming available to people in distant places. The Internet has allowed for a huge increase in the amount of raw data that is available. And it is difficult to deny that the Internet is transforming the printing industry. News is now circulating in electronic form at a much faster pace than before. Printed newspapers are rarely if ever the first source of information. Magazines are disappearing and with them the ability for authors to earn a living writing short fiction. Much more is "published," much less is edited and refined. Students are citing new sources of information that often are much less accurate than research done in a conventional library.

But is the transformation on the scale of earlier revolutions in human language? Will there be major advances in religious concepts and in human culture that come out of the current media - or is the change simply one in form? The answers, of course, cannot be known in a single generation. We sense that something momentous is occurring. Our confidence in the established institutions of our people is shaken. At times we feel that we are gaining new insights into the nature of life and death and the working of God in our world. At other times it is difficult to know what to believe and how to understand our culture.

There have been people who have theorized that just as democracies rose with the development of the printing press, they are now on the decline with the advent of the Internet. While electronic media hold the potential of more mass participation in

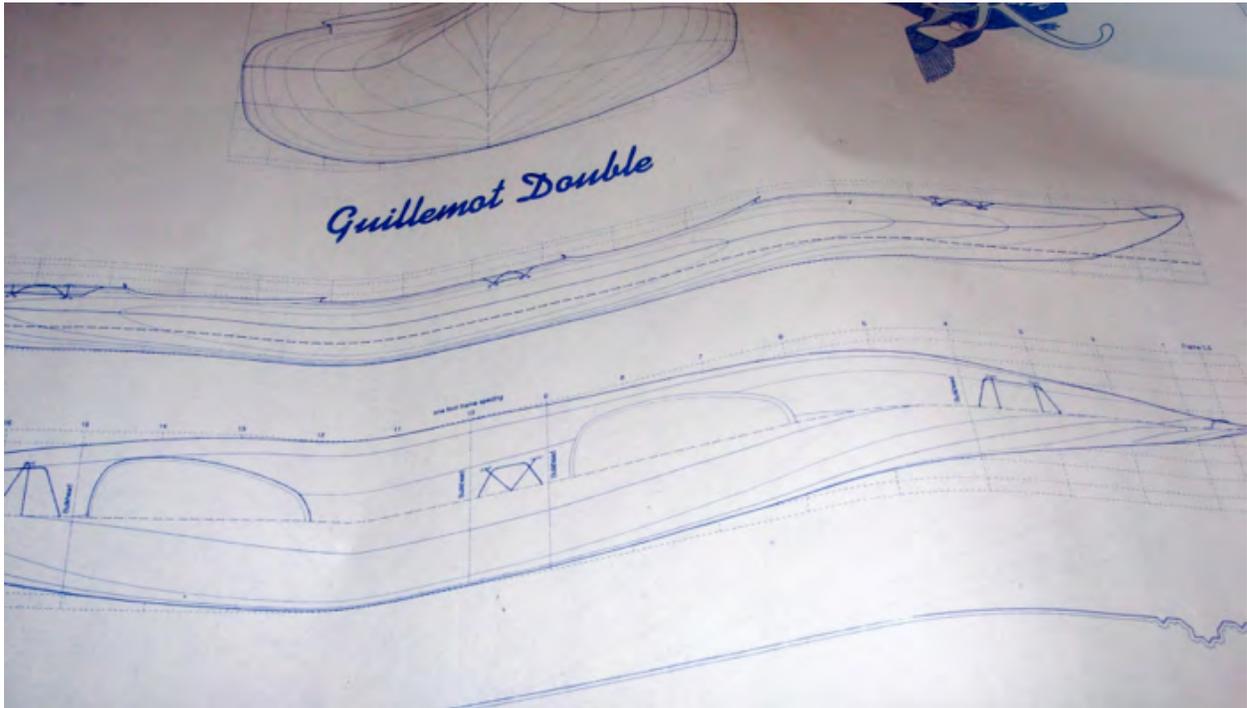
governing decisions, they also hold the potential for mass corruption and manipulation of larger numbers of people than ever before.

It is clear that our language - and our really big ideas - are not static. They are constantly changing. And our perspective on time is limited so that we see only a small slice of the change that is occurring. While I am skeptical about the role of computers and the Internet in the changes that are occurring, I do not deny that future generations will speak and think and believe differently than we do. I wonder if any of our words, ideas and beliefs will be deemed worthy of keeping or if they will simply disappear into the mass of data that exists but is never accessed. I am confident that as was true of previous generations, a few great words and a few great ideas and a few great beliefs will emerge from the mass of data and be treasured long after those who carried them in our generation are forgotten. Such is the nature of human existence.

We must leave it to future generations to discern the size of our impact on the flow of history.

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## March 6, 2008 – Plans



I have always enjoyed looking at blueprints and other construction plans. When we build a home in partnership with Habitat for Humanity, I enjoy going over the plans with the construction supervisor and other builders as we translate an idea from paper into a home. Home construction plans will often have a small error that one does not detect in studying the plans. Perhaps it is the size or location of the access to the crawl space or the routing of the vent for the bathroom fan, but most homes involve making some small changes from the plans.

I currently own plans for two boats that I have never built. They may be plans for boats that I never will build. One set is for a roomy tandem kayak. I think that Susan and I would enjoy paddling this boat on lakes and open water. The construction techniques are well within the reach of someone of my abilities and the cost would be modest, and like other strip built kayaks, the costs could be spread out over the construction period. The result would be beautiful. One of the reasons I have never started to build the boat is that it is 20' long and in a 24' garage, there would be specific challenges making it work, including moving some of the shelving we have installed.

I also have a full set of drawings for a small sailboat. This would be a much larger project than anything I have ever before attempted. It would probably take me five or more years to complete and when I got done, I would have expenses to outfit the boat, which would need its own trailer and perhaps a small auxiliary motor for calm conditions and for maneuvering the boat close to shore. Add to those challenges the cost in dollars, the fact that we do not live near any lakes that are known for sailing and the

simple fact that I really don't know much about sailing and this set of plans represents a dream that I will probably never translate into reality.

Still I like to look at the plans from time to time and imagine what the construction might involve. At this phase of my life, it seems important to me to have some plans for projects that lie in my future. The future itself, however, defies human attempts at planning. There are things that we can do. We can save money for unforeseen challenges and for retirement. We can invest time and energy in relationships with family and friends and build a community of love and support. We can be attentive to the disciplines of faith and develop the ability to trust in the midst of uncertainty. But there is no set of plans for our future that carry even the level of details contained in a set of boat plans. Life takes unexpected turns and deviations. Things that we did not foresee can become the focus of our lives.

Illness - our own or that of a loved one - can change any set of plans overnight. Changes in the economy or political conditions can be quite unpredictable. Even the experts do not know the full impact of the current downturn in housing or the depth of the credit crisis. Pundits try to predict, but who the next president will be is still up in the air.

When I was a teenager, I made up a set of goals for my life. There were accomplishments for each five years up to the age of fifty. I achieved the goals for twenty and for twenty five. I accomplished about half of the goals for age thirty. I did not accomplish the goals for thirty five and on. Now that I have surpassed the age of fifty, I guess that I continue to have unaccomplished goals that lie ahead. One of the realities is that at 17 years of age, I was not able to understand how much energy, time, enthusiasm and passion being a father would involve. I didn't take into account the effects of aging or the time and energy it takes to maintain a home. I thought I could do more than was possible. The book that I planned to have published before the age of thirty is not yet written. I didn't take into the account the number of words I would write that would never be published. Not every attempt at rearranging the 26 letters of the alphabet is worthy of being read by others, let alone being published for the world to see.

And I didn't anticipate the changes in culture, the impact of computer technology, the number of times we would move from one place to another or the commitments and connections we would make that would make us want to stay in the same place for a long time.

Plans are wonderful. I love to study them. But they are not reality. They can be extremely useful, but everyone who has ever built anything knows that the plans are only a guideline and there are times when problems have to be solved in the reality of wood or whatever construction material one is using.

The approach of another birthday that is a multiple of five has gotten me to thinking about plans. I don't have a set of goals for each five years, even the somewhat comical goals of a seventeen-year-old. Maybe I need to make up a new set of plans. I doubt, however, that the life and experience I have gained would make me any more practical. I'd still like to publish a book, visit all seven continents, become fluent in another language, and teach in a university. But I know that there are things I would not give up to achieve these goals. And there are things in my future whose impact I cannot imagine, such as holding a grandchild, retiring from every-Sunday preaching or facing a major illness.

Plans are good. Goals are important. But reality is even better. To have this happy and satisfied life that I have been given, to delight in a joyful marriage, to be surrounded with family and friends and to get up each morning to meaningful work - these are gifts beyond measure and treasures greater than any imagining.

I was thinking as I looked at the sailboat plans, "I could buy or borrow a welder and make a boat trailer," and "how hard can it be to learn to sail, anyway?" For now, I rolled up the plans and put them back into the tube. As much as I enjoy the plans, reality is even better.

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March 7, 2008 – Sparkle



There is a sparkle on the snow this morning. We didn't get too much snow, but there was a brief moment of melting in the middle of the day, so there was a glaze of ice underneath the snow on the driveway and things were a bit slippery. The sanding trucks were out all evening, so the roads weren't a problem, but the snow was sticking to the driveway and we'll need the help of the sun to get the ice off it.

We need the moisture and every bit of snow helps the hills. And this year we have a bit more snow in the high country, so there may be a bit more runoff for the reservoirs this spring. Still, we are short of moisture and we need it however we can get it.

The forces of nature are truly amazing. Water can be carried for thousands of miles in the form of clouds. It can be deposited as rain, hail, sleet or snow and the clouds that carry the moisture can vary in color from fluffy white to gray to dark blues and greens. Water, essential to all life comes to us in a variety of forms throughout the seasons. And it is delivered for free. It falls out of the sky.

The planet does not only have the utility of water delivery to sustain life, however. Water is delivered to us with artistry, beauty, and sparkle. Words are simply inadequate to describe the simple beauty of the snow on the bushes and trees and open spaces of our lawn last night. And the pictures I took can only hint at a beauty that was far beyond the scope of the camera and my abilities as a photographer. A million million sparkles in every bit of light that was cast. The fields and hills were filed with beauty.

It is amazing that we have eyes and brains to perceive and appreciate this beauty. It is amazing that this beauty would exist even if we weren't looking. Beauty is built into the universe independently of our observation. There were fields and fields of snow that were too dark to see last night. They contained the same sparkle. A bit of light and they would glisten with the brilliance exceeding the greatest chandelier ever designed.

Our world is continually reaching beyond mere function to grace all life with beauty. We can grow too weary with our lists of tasks to accomplish and too worried about slippery roads and too preoccupied with our wants and needs to take time to appreciate the beauty that is freely offered whether or not we pause to enjoy.

After a delightful evening of friends and family for dinner, the stories and pictures from Costa Rica came out and we felt like we were re-connecting with dear friends. The pictures served as a prompt for the stories and the stories remind us of what our little Christian community is all about - the people. The children and parents, the workers in the kitchen and the ministers of the church, the bus drivers and guards and workers in the hostel where we stay - they all have stories and experiences and incredible potential. They are forging their way in an often dangerous world and daily transcend the frustrations of a thousand things that would hold them back and give them despair and hopelessness.

Faith, hope and love, however are irrepressible. Like the sparkle on the snow, they are free gifts given in all occasions. Sometimes we have to look closely to find them. Sometimes they are not as apparent as we might wish.

I woke this morning with a deep sense of gratitude and the old familiar hymn on my mind: "For the beauty of the earth, for the glory of the skies, for the love which from our birth, over and around us lies. Lord of all to thee we raise, this our hymn of grateful praise." I don't have the poetic eloquence of Folliot Pierpoint, who penned the verses of the original hymn, but I wanted to add, "For the sparkle on the snow, shining bright in evening glow, for friends who are close and far away, joining us each time we pray, Lord of all to thee we raise, this our hymn of grateful praise."

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## March 8, 2008 – Giving and Receiving



I know that giving is at the heart of my call to the ministry. Mentors and pastors told me that I had a lot to offer - that I had gifts worth sharing. I have often been drawn to need in the world and thought that my role would be that of one who gives. Some of the truly great people that I have met have been those with a huge capacity to give without measuring the cost.

But there is another lesson of faith that I have had to learn along the way. Becoming fixated on giving means becoming a second-rate disciple. Among my teachers of this lesson have been my sisters and brothers in Costa Rica. We went to Costa Rica to give. We organized mission trips so that we could share our financial resources, our ability to work, our experiences. We have been richly blessed and we are aware that we live lives with more wealth and property than our Costa Rican friends. It is easier for us to raise money. We have the freedom to be able to leave our homes behind and still have homes when we return.

And, when we put our minds to it, we can be good at giving.

But becoming equal members of God's family cannot be based on giving alone. When all we do is give, we become depleted. Like the dry bones in Ezekiel's vision, we become spiritually anorexic. We give and give and give until we are completely drained and feel as if there is nothing left to give. Instead of an inspiration to our faith family, we become nothing more than dry bones.

And maybe we have to become reduced to dry bones a few times in order to realize that the first task of every disciple is not giving, but receiving. Early in John's gospel we are reminded, "The Word came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him." (John 1:11). Receiving is at the heart of our faith.

That is what our partners in Costa Rica teach us so well. The first task of Christianity is to welcome, to receive. The process of welcoming is a process of mutual receiving. The hosts receive guests, the guests receive welcome. Together we receive grace, receive forgiveness. Christ comes to us as a stranger, as a child, as a companion on this life's journey. When we reject the kindness of others, we fail to receive Christ.

Jesus came into the world and revealed the nature of God in a new way - in a community of receiving, living and giving. If all you want to do is give, you cannot be a part of this community. Giving and receiving are equal partners in Christian community. Only when one is open and able to receive can one participate in the giving.

There is no hierarchy in Christian community - no preferred position. The giver is not better than the one who receives, the servant is equal to the master. Giving and receiving are equal blessings.

Dry bones are in need of receiving. God directs Ezekiel to talk to the dry bones. Ezekiel doesn't even have to fully believe. "Do you think these bones can live?" God asks. "Only you know," Ezekiel responds. "Then prophesy to the bones," God directs. It takes more than one sermon for the bones to become spirit-filled.

In his farewell to the Ephesians as reported in Acts, Paul quotes Jesus, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." How often we quote this passage without considering its context. Paul says this as a part of his expression of gratitude for the support that he has received from the Ephesians. He is thanking them for having supplied for his needs and the needs of his companions. He has been the receiver. He knew the blessings of receiving. Only then could he acknowledge the blessings of giving.

We often say, when thinking of Costa Rica, "We have received far more than we have given." It is true. The community of the Los Guido congregation is a place where one can arrive empty handed and hungry. Here you will be welcomed and fed. No anorexia here. Dry bones get rice and chicken and beans and God's word.

It is a miracle that comes only when we acknowledge the source of all giving. We go to the well that will never run dry - the well of living water - the source of unending giving. And when we receive from that well, there is giving in abundance.

May God grant me the grace to receive today.

## March 9, 2008 – Saving Time



Today is the morning that we “spring ahead” for Daylight Savings Time. Basically, Daylight Savings time is an agreement of a group of people, usually a state or nation, for everyone to move their clocks forward one hour each spring in order to have longer evenings during the summer. One article I read said that the idea was first proposed by Benjamin Franklin. I’m not sure that he was the first to make the proposal, but he did advance the idea. It was a controversial idea at the time, and it continues to be controversial. Our country recently changed the dates for moving our clocks, and other regions and countries keep changing their approaches to Daylight Savings Time.

The name is a bit of a misnomer. Nothing gets saved. There are no extra hours in the day, nor does the sun rise and set in accordance to what our clocks display. The amount of sunlight each day changes with the tilt and rotation of our planet as it revolves around the sun. With the amount of artificial light to which we have become accustomed, the length of our days is really simply a matter of how many hours we sleep.

The concept of time is a human construct and a human convenience. It doesn’t exist outside of humans. From a philosophical and theological perspective, this is a critical point. Time is our way of breaking up reality into small units that we can understand and comprehend. Our minds are simply incapable of taking in all of reality at once, so we have devised systems of breaking reality into smaller pieces so that we can experience and observe the universe.

As human languages grew and changed, so did the perception of time. Primitive languages did not have much of a sense of time at all. The development of the concept of tense in language rose with the development of alphabets. First there were languages with two tenses: things that are over and things that are not over. Then three tense languages developed with past, present and future. Additional tenses developed with the need to express more complex ideas. A conditional tense about what should have happened, could have happened, might have happened allowed us to express different ideas about time.

I recently listened to an interview with the best-selling author Richard Dawkins, who has become somewhat of an evangelist for an atheist viewpoint. I have not read his book, *The God Delusion*, but it has gotten a lot of media coverage and Dawkins is making the lecture circuit promoting the book and arguing against the notion of God. The argument that he presented in the interview is quite simple. He defines truth as that which can be proven. And since it cannot be proven that God exists, he has made a statistical projection about whether or not there is some entity beyond nature and has concluded that the possibility of there being any supernatural being is statistically so low that he chooses not to believe in that possibility. Therefore he concludes that it is improbable that it is true that God exists.

The argument is, mostly, harmless. I am sure that he makes a more sophisticated argument in his book and I'll probably someday read the book, but it isn't high on my priority list at the moment. But on the surface, there are several significant problems with his argument. One is that he can't prove the existence of anything, really. If you buy his argument that religion is the irrational belief in God that is based in a primitive inability to conceive of other possibilities of the origin of the universe, it seems to me that it is as rational to conclude that the modern scientific method is based on the irrational belief in time based in a primitive inability to perceive reality all at once. Just as I claim that God is a reality that exists beyond the human idea of God, Dawkins and all scientists base their conclusions on the belief that time is a reality that exists beyond the human notion of time.

It is the nature of humans to pursue the truth, but each time we claim to possess the truth, we find that we are usually wrong. The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth is, quite simply, beyond our ability to conceive. There is always more truth that can be discovered, always more truth that can be revealed.

Actually, I have no particular interest in debating Dawkins. I think his ideas might be enlightening, but his conclusions are silly. Ours is not the first generation of human philosophers who have attempted to construct a system of beliefs from the observation of nature. Materialists have earned themselves a label in the history of philosophy. And throughout the history of philosophy, materialists like Dawkins, have been unable to construct moral law that is logically based in their materialism. Modern scientific method doesn't have a way to get from what "is" to any conclusion about what "ought" to be. In

the end, Dawkins cannot make a persuasive argument that anyone else “ought” to share his beliefs. He can only observe that many people do not share his beliefs. A materialist can claim to be a moral person and can engage in moral behavior, but the materialist can not give a logically satisfying answer to the question of why anyone should behave in moral behavior beyond self-preservation. There is no compelling argument for sacrifice from a materialist viewpoint. The argument about the existence of God aside, a materialist doesn’t have an answer to a nihilist - how does Dawkins answer Nietzsche’s claim: “Your belief is fine for you, but it is not binding to me. . . I choose to follow the Will to Power.”? At best materialism is amoral. It simply does not have a rational argument for any system of ethics.

Actually, if Dawkins had spend as much time studying the history of philosophy as he has studying biology, he would understand that his philosophical argument is not particularly new and that there is a history of debate over his ideas and a pattern to the logical flaws in his argument. One might even argue that his ideas are so lacking in originality that perhaps they came from some source outside of himself.

Theology presents a different perspective and from the standpoint of logic, a persuasive argument that cannot be made from the scientific viewpoint. If moral law is revealed through relationship with God - with a reality that is beyond that which can be observed, one can make a claim that there is a moral imperative in the universe - there is a sense of what should and what ought to be that is beyond that which is currently observed.

What does all this have to do with Daylight Savings Time? Not much, simply that twice a year we remind ourselves that our measurement of time is arbitrary. Time is not an absolute. It is a social convention. Perhaps there is an extreme nihilist out there who chooses not to observe time and clocks at all. “I am not constrained by your system of measuring time.” It would be nearly impossible for that person to engage in community. Community is based on some agreement about common times to sleep and eat and engage in other activity.

But for those of you who are wondering, although I think that time is an irrational belief based on our inability to perceive reality all at once, I have chosen to embrace multiple irrational beliefs. Therefore, worship will begin at 9:30 a.m. Mountain DAYLIGHT Time this morning. I think you know what I mean.

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## March 10, 2008 – Laughing



In general, my wife is slow to laugh at my jokes. It isn't that she doesn't have a sense of humor, she has a wonderful sense of humor. It is just that my jokes tend towards puns much of the time and her sense of humor is generally a bit more sophisticated. And after nearly thirty-five years of marriage, there aren't many jokes that she hasn't already heard.

But she was laughing yesterday morning.

From her point of view there was something inherently funny about a husband who would get up on the first day of daylight savings time and spend the first hour of the day writing a rambling reflection that was sort of on the history of philosophy, sort of on the nature of time and sort of deep for so early in the morning.

Mind you, she is a sophisticated thinker. But not always first thing in the morning. She found it funny that she had ended up married to the kind of person who would be excited about an imaginary debate with Richard Dawkins about *The God Delusion* before having had the first cup of coffee of the day.

It is true that we continue to surprise one another and to delight in those surprises. One of the joys of our life is that we don't think the same. Our minds work differently. We made it through our undergraduate education and an additional four years of graduate school with one typewriter. There was no conflict, because we didn't want to use it at the same time. I liked to get up and do my work in the morning, she liked to do her work

in the evening. That pattern of stretching our days in different directions worked well when we had infant children, too.

We both find genuine joy and no small amount of laughter in the exchange of ideas. When we have time together our conversations range from the practical to the theoretical, from politics to religion to philosophy to science to art and literature. There are many books that we both read, but a lot more that only one of us reads and we discuss. Many times we reach similar conclusions - joint decisions often come easily. Our minds, however, take different paths to reach those conclusions. Susan is more mathematical. She remembers dates and specific details better than I, she can work a formula more quickly. I tend to remember the order of events or items, but often not the specific date. Although I enjoy the abstract thinking of philosophy, I am less engaged by abstract mathematical calculations. Susan is quick to empathize and very compassionate. I have learned to trust her understanding of the feelings and motivations of others. I tend to keep a few more barriers up and am slower to make emotional connections with others. I tend to forget names and sometimes specific family relationships. I know I can count on her to remind me which children are in which family and how people are related.

She recently made me laugh when we were introduced to a new family. The children's names were Owen and Gwen. Susan immediately saw the pattern and the connection. I was trying to remember two distinct and separate names. Once she pointed out that three-quarters of the name were shared, she gave me the clue to remember.

As we age our patterns of thinking shift. I have read a couple of books about the aging brain and how the moving of information from working memory to long-term memory can be a challenge and the retrieval of information from long-term memory can be a frustration. For many people mental exercises such as working puzzles, solving mathematical problems, remembering history or organizing thoughts into systematic patterns are helpful in maintaining mental agility. I tend not to be very systematic in my thinking or in other patterns of life. I enjoy a day with few routines and lots of surprises. No one has accused me of being over-organized.

Some people get up each morning and do their physical exercises. They go to the gym or go running, ride an exercise bicycle or do their sit-ups. I get up and write a rambling 400-word essay. It wouldn't take a genius to recognize the difference, even if you never read one my essays. I have less endurance for hiking or climbing mountains, but I have stamina in a philosophical discussion. I've been told that there are people who include in their morning routine the reading of my rambling essays. The Internet is interesting in that the essays are published instantly and those who read them often read them within a few hours of the time they are written.

My job and my life are all about communication of complex ideas. A sermon is more than a lecture - it is engaging a group of people in making connections between the

circumstances of our contemporary community and the great stories of our people. It is leading people in thinking theologically about their lives and recognizing the presence of the divine in the ordinary. Once a week, I am called upon to lead a congregation in thinking about really big thoughts and ideas that take multiple generations to develop. It seems valuable, then to start my day with an attempt to wrestle with an idea and communicate it.

These blogs may not contain many great ideas, but they are part of the process of learning to wrestle with great ideas and communicate them with others. Even if no one read my thoughts, organizing and writing them would be a fruitful exercise. I suspect that the sermons I preach are more relevant and more interesting because I keep working with ideas.

And once in a while they provide a bit of laughter and a moment of joy. Who knows what idea will spark my imagination and amuse my wife tomorrow. As long as she keeps laughing from time to time, I'll probably keep writing.

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## March 11, 2008 – Not Quite Routine



Photo from AP/Getty images.

I can remember when we watched the launch of every U.S. space flight on TV. No matter how early in the morning, we'd be up, watching and listening to the commentary from newscasters and NASA officials. The first U.S. astronauts to go into space, Alan Shepherd, Gus Grissom, John Glenn and Walter Schirra were heroes to us. I had their pictures, and my Walter Schirra picture is autographed. Along with Deke Slayton, Gordon Cooper and Scott Carpenter, these seven astronauts were household names and models for us as children.

I'm not sure exactly when I stopped watching every space lift off on TV. Perhaps the last was the Challenger tragedy in 1986, when seven astronauts, including the first teacher in space, Christa McAuliffe, were lost 73 seconds into the flight. The Challenger was the second space shuttle to be put into service and it was leaving on its tenth flight when the explosion occurred.

The Challenger's replacement vehicle, Endeavor, left Florida for the International Space station last night. I wasn't watching TV and had you asked me yesterday, I might not have remembered which day it was scheduled to fly. It is not that I have become disinterested in space flight. It is that there is less sense of pushing new frontiers as the shuttle is used to go back and forth to the same destination supplying the space station and shuttling crews back and forth. It is less of a vehicle for cutting edge exploration and more of a way to get the science experiments to the station.

Endeavor was the last shuttle to be built. There were originally four shuttles authorized, but Endeavor was built the year after the Challenger accident to replace Challenger. The educational mission of Challenger was continued in part through a national program in elementary schools to involve children in selecting the name for Endeavor. When the Columbia broke up on re-entry in 2003 at the end of its 28th mission, it was not replaced.

Endeavor is carrying a crew of seven and a payload that includes a Japanese module and a Canadian robot for the space station. Space flight used to be intensely national and deeply competitive between the United States and the Soviet Union. It has become a field of International cooperation in the twenty-first century.

I am not sure that space travel has the ability to capture our imaginations the way it did in the 1960's. There was a sense of national unity and shared purpose that is no longer a part of any scientific and technical venture of which I am aware. Certainly there are many brilliant minds engaged in the exploration of space, and there are new discoveries and useful information is being learned. But the public is distracted - our thoughts are headed in a thousand different directions. And, as Endeavor took off last night, there were other things that commanded our attention.

There are many intelligent voices that claim that the future of space exploration is not based on sending people into space. Advanced robots and automatic communications equipment have allowed for exploration far beyond the capacity to send humans. There is so much that can be learned from space probes that are not encumbered with life support systems for humans.

But there is something intensely engaging about space flight that carries humans. The curiosity that leads us to take a look with our own eyes and the desire to have direct human involvement in making decisions combine to keep us imagining travel that exceeds the distances covered by any previous generation.

Space flight is not quite routine. I didn't watch the lift off, but I haven't ignored Endeavor's flight entirely. And I will be grateful when the crew has returned safely to earth. Their lives will not be free from risk when they return, but the risks they face will be different in nature than those of space flight.

NASA has announced that the entire fleet of space shuttles will be retired in 2010, just two years from now. Since the first space shuttle flight was less than a month after the birth of our son, we have a sense of the span of history that shuttle flights have taken. Endeavor's launch last night is just a month shy of the 27th anniversary of shuttle missions. In the scheme of human history, the story of space shuttle flights is a very short chapter. But the discoveries and technological advances of that span of time have been momentous. The groundwork has been laid for a whole new generation of discovery and challenge.

So “Godspeed!” to the crew of Endeavor. I’ll be paying attention to your flight for the next two weeks. And, from time to time, I’ll be imagining what it would be like to be with you.

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## March 12, 2008 – Sailing



For more than a decade, there have been a couple of model sailboats on the shelves in my office. They have served to stir my imagination in moments of calm, started conversations with visitors, provided a bit of decoration, and made the office a little bit less intimidating to children. Yesterday, in an attempt to address the growing clutter in my office and in response to the changing of a room in our home into a library, the sailboats came home. It was, for them, the longest journey since they were packed in movers boxes. These sailboats have never seen the water.

They probably would sail reasonably well. They were designed as toys to be taken to the pond, with heavy keels and sails that can be adjusted with tiny plastic cleats on the lines that control the sheets. On a small pond with a gentle breeze they should make a straight line from shore to shore as a happy child runs around to meet them. They were built for such play, not for the shelves in some office that is about as far away from the ocean as one can get.

I am not a sailor. I served at a summer camp that had sailing instruction and took a few lessons and learned to handle a Hobie Cat well enough to return to the same dock from which I departed. Nearly twenty years ago, I rescued an old sunfish hull out of the scrap yard at a local boat shop, repaired and repainted it, found a used mast and sails and rigged it for sailing. I sailed it a few times before a move provided the occasion to sell it. I built a sailing rig for one of my canoes and have raised the sail a couple of times in relatively calm conditions. I am not a sailor, but I know enough of the joy of wind-powered travel to appreciate how sailors become attached to their sport.

Prior to the twentieth century, most long-distance travel and most of the world's freight transportation were undertaken by wind power. The development of quick cutters and load-carrying tall ships, specialized ships for the whale trade and a host of other sailboats represented the height of human technology for centuries. Much of what is known about the geography of our planet as well as navigation by dead reckoning and celestial guidance were learned by sailors expanding their knowledge and stretching the range of their craft. The culture of port towns, with their boatbuilders and sailmakers, ships chandlers and the like developed because of the simple knowledge that the winds could be used to transport goods and people reliably over long distances.

Functioning model boats have been a part of this culture for as long as we have recorded history of boats. Models and half models were constructed to test designs and to guide builders. Scale models of actual vessels were made to take up extra time of idle sailors and as acts of appreciation for the craft themselves.

And models have been created simply for play. Generations of aspiring sailors began their education in the ways of wind and water with a model boat and a small pond. Setting the sails more efficiently than your playmate could result in winning an impromptu race and in learning about the proper way to set sails. Adjusting the shape or ballast in a model provided sensible lessons in ship design and construction. And it was just plain fun to take a small boat to the water and allow one's imagination to journey even farther than the distance across the pond.

Inspiring imagination has been the principle job of the model boats in my office. When I am at a loss for words or trying to find a fresh approach to express a complex idea, a short diversion to think of sailing has reminded me of the basic elements of wind and water and learning to go where one wants in a world where the winds blow where they will.

For now the sailboats have a new home in our developing basement library. They sit on their stands waiting for the day when a child will eye them and ask for them to be taken down to handle. And perhaps, one day, the child will come when I have enough leisure to grab the boats and head for some small pond with the child.

In the meantime, they will be a pain to dust and I will wonder why I have kept them all these years and, from time to time, I'll go sailing in my imagination as I ponder an idea or a problem.

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## March 13, 2008 – Peace



The author E. B. White reported that when Henry David Thoreau lay dying of tuberculosis in the spring of 1862, his aunt Louisa asked him if he had made peace with God. Thoreau's answer was, simply, "I was not aware we had quarreled." His friends were amazed at his tranquil acceptance of death.

Not everyone approaches death in the same way. A colleague recently reported attending the death bed of a priest who was a man of deep faith and who carried a strong anticipation of life beyond death and resurrection. At one point, when the prayers and hymns had paused, the comment was made, "This really sucks!" It was probably a general comment about the particular process of cancer, the pain and medication and eventual failure of treatments. But it could as well have been a commentary about the process of leave-taking, of saying goodbye to loved ones. It is rarely easy no matter how it comes.

Lent is a season of thinking about death and wrestling with our attitudes about death. It is not a popular topic for polite conversation. It is a topic we often avoid. It is, however, something that we cannot forever avoid. The great equalizer is out there for every one of us. The day will come when it will be the main event in our lives.

A few can ease into the transition with grace, peace and acceptance. Others struggle with its meaning and resist as long as they have strength. There are stories of death bed religious conversions and sudden changes in attitude and personality. I guess if I were given the choice, I would like to have death come as live has - one step at a time,

surrounded by family and friends, deeply aware of the presence of God, and knowing that I am not alone.

The reports that we have indicate that it was not so for Jesus. Betrayed by a disciple, deserted by his friends, mocked and scorned and beaten, he cries from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The gospels report agonized prayers, a sense of doubt about what was the right thing to do, and a slow, lingering death, filled with the worst kind of suffering.

Death sucks!

And part of the process of dying is losing control. As much as we might imagine our own death, what we might say, how we might behave, when the time comes we will not be the ones in control. The reality will be different than our imagining. And the mode of our death, like its timing, will not be of our choosing.

So we accept the discipline of a season of Lent, when we take seriously the reality of death and acknowledge that God's entry into human life is so complete that it is also an entry into the realities of death. Even though we know this, death remains a mystery to us. We engage in this season each year, but we do not emerge with a full understanding of its meaning. There is more to discover - more to be revealed.

Palm Sunday is just days away. Holy week with all of its traditions and activities is almost upon us. I find myself resisting it in a way - I'm not ready. Perhaps I will greet death similarly when the time comes. It will come anyway. When my time comes, however, I won't be able to mimic Thoreau's famous quote. It wouldn't be true. I've had some quarrels with God from time to time. I've asked for things to turn out differently than they have. I've questioned and argued and challenged and pushed. Many loving relationships are that way. Genuine and full engagement can mean intense emotions and deep questions. Some peacemaking may be required.

But the gift of peace - the peace that passes human understanding - is promised by the one who is always faithful in every promise. Peace will come. In anticipation of that day, I try to bring a bit of peace to this world each day. It is, of course, imperfect. But it is peace nonetheless.

For me, it is good that I do not control the passing of the seasons or choose the timing of Lent and Easter. I would probably not get around to them for some time to come. Peace comes not from controlling the seasons and events but from the attitude we bring to them and from the understanding that we are not the source of the gift.

May this day be a day of peace for you.

## March 14, 2008 – Puzzle



My mother bought a puzzle at the church rummage sale. We have several puzzles in our house, but we hadn't gotten any out this visit and puzzles at the rummage sale are a bargain. There were phases of life, when I was a child and teenager when there was always a jigsaw puzzle going in our home. When one was completed, it was admired for a day or so, then put into its box and another begun. Puzzles were a good way to occupy tiny amounts of time when waiting for the next activity in a busy life.

Puzzles were also a good way to connect people. The puzzle table was an open invitation to anyone to join in putting the pieces together. Younger children might lose patience quickly, but could help turn over the pieces and make a general sorting by color and from time to time find a piece that fit into the puzzle. Others might work at the puzzle for five or fifteen minutes and put in several pieces or complete an entire section of the puzzle. The puzzle table was a place of comfortable conversation. The task didn't demand conversation. Several people could work without any need to talk about the task. This allowed whatever conversation that did occur to flow naturally and to drift to subjects that mattered to those working the puzzle. Even when there were times of tension between family members, they could spend a little while working the puzzle and have a sense of common purpose and connection.

Jigsaw puzzles have been, however, relegated to a different role in my current life. We rarely take time to get out a puzzle and when we do, it is usually at the suggestion of someone else. Working on a jigsaw puzzle entails finding a table that can be used for

the puzzle, arranging sufficient light, and teaching the cats to keep their distance from the project. So there haven't been many puzzles worked in our home over the years.

The rummage sale puzzle was a gift to our family. We set up a table and began to put the pieces together. Yesterday was every bit as busy as our usual pace. There were no blocks of time to devote to the puzzle. But there were a couple of moments. Two or three times during the day we'd walk by the table and find one or two pieces and then move on to the next task. Who knows how long it will take us to complete the puzzle - we've set no deadline and the joy of the puzzle is in the process more than in the finished product.

Life is much like a jigsaw puzzle with many pieces that we put together: school, marriage, children, work, church, family, home, hobbies, travel, and more. We make plans, but our lives develop in ways unforeseen. Surprise seems to lurk around the corner and there are challenges that we might not have chosen had we known the fullness of the consequences.

Developmental psychologists say that one of the tasks of the transition from actively working to retirement is that of integration - taking the experiences and memories of a lifetime and organizing them into a meaningful pattern. Writing a memoir or autobiography is one way of giving that reflection structure, but many people don't engage in formal writing. Rather they tell the stories of their experiences and process their lives internally.

Perhaps there is no need to mine our experiences for meanings. We are what we are. And we have become who we are because of experiences that have occurred and people we have met along this life's journey. But the desire for meaning is very strong and most of us find ourselves reflecting, from time to time on the past and how it has shaped the person we have become.

A jigsaw puzzle, of course, is an imperfect metaphor for our lives and our memories. Our brains don't rearrange the memories so that they fit into neat patterns by manipulating colored shapes. But there is a sense in which we do develop orders of recall and patterns of experiences. And there is a sense in which thinking of the meaning of life is a bit like working a jigsaw puzzle. To the extent that the metaphor reveals a grain of truth, we are able to work in short bits of time and at our own pace when sifting through our experiences for meaning. And the help of family and friends in an atmosphere casual, comfortable conversation can help us see patterns and meanings that we might otherwise miss.

Unlike the puzzle, our lives don't have preset number of pieces. New experiences occur on a regular basis and each new experience provides additional connections, but also additional complexity to the pattern of life. And each individual life is connected to a larger "puzzle" of community and humanity.

Today is a good day to place a few pieces into the puzzle mom brought home from the sale. And it is a good day to add a few new experiences to the puzzle of our lives. Perhaps the colors will be bright and the shapes clearly fit into the wider picture. Perhaps we will be surprised and an entirely new picture will begin to emerge. Either way, we are a part of a picture that is even grander than our ability to imagine and we see only a small portion of the big picture.

From where I sit, the big picture appears to be beautiful indeed.

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## March 15, 2008 – Customers



Yesterday was one of the two rummage sales that are held at our church every year. The volunteers who worked to sort, set out, price and prepare items for sale said that there were a few less things to sell than usual. There was no shortage of customers. The line started to form about 45 minutes before the doors opened and when the time arrived, there were so many people that it was hard hard to walk across the fellowship hall.

I guess that there is something irresistible about a bargain. And there are always bargains at the rummage sale. People donate valuable items. Perhaps they are cleaning out their house or preparing for a move or a change in family circumstances means that they need to downsize. Whatever the reasons, it is clear that most of us have more things than we need and the rummage sale is one way to cut back. The volunteers have learned, over the years to set prices so that the women's fellowship makes a significant amount of money at each sale, yet the prices on items are a fraction of what a new item would cost at the store. A drip coffee maker sells for \$35 new. A perfectly serviceable one can be obtained for \$4 at the rummage sale. 50 cents buys a shirt, a quarter buys a toy.

The customers come in all ages and from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds. Some work hard to make a few dollars go as far as possible, others don't seem to pause before purchasing a \$100 item.

And there is plenty of variety. sports gear, lawn and garden items, jewelry, clothing, household items, furniture, tools, automotive and electronics - people donate all kinds of items.

This year, there was an attempt to count the number of volunteer hours it takes to put on the rummage sale. I haven't seen the totals, but I know that it is a significant number. There are many people who work full time for a week. Others volunteer a few hours when they can. Thursday, the day before the doors open, when they are putting prices on items, requires a lot of volunteers. Saturday, the day that everything is cleaned up and the church is put back into shape for Sunday activities, represents another huge job. If we had to pay a fair wage to the workers, the rummage sale would not be profitable, but people are generous with their time and they are greatly supportive of a cause in which they believe.

There is no question that the church benefits more from gifts of time than from cash donations. We need money to fulfill our mission and ministry, to be sure, but when people donate time and work side by side they develop relationships that are very valuable for the church. The friendships of our members and their ability to work together are essential to our community.

And there are plenty of customers. We live in a consumer society where shopping for a bargain is more than the means to survive or to obtain necessary items. Shopping is a form of entertainment for many, a social and cultural phenomenon, and a way of life. People get up early in the morning and wait in line to purchase items that others were ready to give away.

As I watched the crowd of people sorting through the items for sale yesterday, I couldn't help thinking, "Do you people really need this stuff?" And the answer is partly, "no." Buying is more than a way to get things. It is a participation in a culture - a system of relationships that give meaning to life. Part of our identity is wrapped up in the possessions we have. To the extent that this is true, the rummage sale represents small gifts of identity when families donate merchandise to the sale - they are giving a little bit of themselves away with the items they donate.

Today is the "bag sale." Everything you can stuff into a bag for \$1. There will be plenty of customers.

And there will be plenty of customers in the summer and again next spring. There will be plenty of customers as long as the volunteers can muster the energy for another sale. We've already received promises of more merchandise.

But please, don't bring your rummage to the church tomorrow!

## March 16, 2008 – Paint



The Habitat for Humanity home that we had hoped would be ready to bring a family home for Christmas is still unfinished. It won't be ready to be occupied by Easter. But it will be painted. The primer coat and first coat is on every interior surface. The bathroom and one bedroom have received their second coat of paint. A crew of four to six can easily have the entire interior finished this week. Final electrical work is scheduled for Friday. Then we install the cabinets, flooring, interior doors and trim, and do the finish plumbing and the home is ready for the family to move in. We should make it sometime around the end of April or early May. The other end of the house is not far behind. Dave finished with the sheetrock today, so it is ready for taping and texturing as soon as we get some of the items from the first half installed and make space for the drywall guy to work.

Painting is not my favorite part of construction. But it gives visible results. When we get to the end of a day, we can see what we have done. And painting gives us the opportunity to inspect our work. We can see every flaw in the sheetrock, taping and texturing. Much of our previous work is now covered up for good. The studs in the walls, with our pencil notes about how we are framing and measurements for door frames, etc. are no longer visible. The flooring system is mostly covered up. The exterior siding is in place and the porches are built. It looks like a home. You can tell where every closet and room will be. (I know, I've painted every closet in the home, now.)

Yesterday morning I arrived about an hour ahead of the other workers. Only Ward and I were there. Ward is not able to paint any more, but he shows up every day to line up

our work, to help mix the paint, to provide rags and make sure we have coffee. So Ward sat on a little ladder while I painted a room. What a treasure to talk to him. He has a lifetime of experience and we share so many values about marriage, family, work and life. I asked him questions about the 1950's and about some of the homes he had built. I asked him about going to Navy boot camp at Camp Farragut, which is now one of my favorite state parks in Idaho. It is a beautiful location on a deep, clear lake, that must have seemed terribly isolated in 1944. He is patient with my questions and answers them completely. He is similar in age to my father, who died 27 years ago, and he has a similar interest in a wide variety of different subjects.

I am glad to be working on a house. I am glad that there will be a home for a family. Sometimes it feels good to work on something that will last longer than I will. But mostly, I am grateful for the relationships that build around working together. There is a naturalness to conversation as we work - we accept each other in part because we are sharing the same job. We know that this house is not something that an individual could not build alone - it takes all of us to do the work. And we learn what absolute treasures the people with whom we share the job are.

Ward and I joined the church on the same Sunday. They were moving back from Oklahoma and we had just come to serve the church as pastors. I thought he was a gruff old curmudgeon at the time. He is, but he is also a warm and loving man, a devoted husband and a loving father. He and Dona will celebrate their 60th anniversary this June. He wants to renew their vows. "It's been a really good partnership - worth continuing." And I am honored to count Ward as a friend. We probably would never have met were it not for the church and we would never have gotten to know each other the way we have were it not for our shared belief in Habitat for Humanity and the value of working in partnership with people in need.

And Ward is a worker. He and I like the morning and enjoy arriving before the rest of the crew. We usually have a cup of coffee and sometimes a donut before the others arrive. Sometimes, like today, we get a little work done. Always we have a talk. And maybe I'm becoming a bit of a gruff old curmudgeon as well. At least, I think a little bit of Ward is rubbing off on me. I could do worse.

I am a lucky man to have such wonderful friends. I am lucky to have friends of all different ages.

So as we celebrate Palm Sunday and sing our hosannas this morning, I'll have a bit of "eggshell" paint under my fingernails, and a bit of Ward under my skin. Life is indeed very good. We are entering into God's territory - Jerusalem - the city of heavenly peace. Hosanna!

**March 17, 2008 – Twenty-seven**



Our son, Isaac, celebrated his twenty-seventh birthday on Saturday. Twenty-seven seems to be a momentous number. Twenty seven is a perfect cube, being  $3 \times 3 \times 3$ , the second smallest cube of a prime number. And there are exactly 27 straight lines on a cube surface. In base 10, it is the first composite number not evenly divisible by any of its digits. Twenty-seven is the number of books in the New Testament. 27 is the atomic number of cobalt.

Twenty-seven was my age the year my father died. It was my age at the birth of our son - so you can see, I'm twice as old now as I was then.

I read somewhere recently that twenty-seven is the average age at first marriage for men in the United States and the average age at first marriage for men and women combined worldwide. But marriage statistics are constantly changing and moving upward in our country. Both Isaac and I chose to marry at an earlier age - a good decision in both cases I think.

Of course there is no magic in numbers. They are just one way of marking the passage of time. In three months I will have another birthday and my age will no longer be two times twenty-seven. Another five years and I will be twice as old as our daughter. Still, twenty-seven is a fine number. At twenty-seven one is old enough to have gained some of life's experience and young enough to have the flexibility to keep a wide range of options open. Intellectual and academic abilities are near their height and the ability to learn quickly makes one a valuable asset to an employer.

There are a lot of numbers in our lives. Isaac's birthday, March 15, is known as the ides of March in the Roman calendar (the 15th of March, May, July and October - in other months the ides are the 13th - I do not know why). The ides of March are widely known as the date for the assassination of Julius Caesar, probably because of the great line in Shakespeare's play, "beware the ides of March." The day has been associated with impending doom. In our case, it is a day of great joy and celebration - the day of a wondrous gift. The meanings attached to numbers are often like that - changing. One can read too much into a number and place too much meaning in something that has little real power in our lives.

My mother enjoys the page-a-day calendars that have a new word for each day. The word for Saturday March 15, 2008 was rambunctious - a term probably more appropriately applied to the father than the son in our case. The word itself is a demonstration of how symbols change in meaning over time. "Rambunctious" first appeared in print in 1830 - a new spelling for an older English term, rumbustious. Eventually the British adopted the American spelling while retaining their own and the words became synonyms. Rumbustious, with its association with the consumption of rum, has disappeared from American usage. Rambunctious is a better term for those of us whose taste for life far exceeds our taste for rum.

So we note the passage of time and we count the years as a way of reflecting on the changes in our lives and remembering the significant experiences and times. The fact that I am thinking of our son's birthday a couple of days later is a sign that it is a significant day in my story and twenty-seven is a significant year in my life.

The good thing about being two times twenty-seven is that I realize how many other significant numbers are a part of this life. And with mathematicians able to provide names for numbers that stretch to infinity, there are plenty of significant numbers that lie ahead as well.

"Ah, but who's counting?" we sometimes ask. The answer is "We are!" We count the days and years and seasons to mark the passage of time and to recall the significant and wonderful experiences of this life. We use calendars and other devices to think about the days of our future and plan for upcoming events and celebrations. We use numbers to aid in communication of times to meet and addresses. The US postal service devised a system of zip codes to aid in the delivery of mail and now the zip codes have come to be an accepted definition of an area. The 1990's TV show 90210 taught most of the nation a specific zip code and another way to say "Beverly Hills."

I will continue to think about numbers and attach a few meanings to them. And as I do, I am grateful that there are many more numbers whose meanings are yet to be revealed.

Speaking of numbers - today is St. Patrick's day - a dilemma for observant catholics who have a feast day and a fast day land on the same day, something that happens with the early arrival of Lent and Easter. Feast and fast are two widely different ways to interpret the meaning of a day. I suspect that God understands both expressions and takes more than a bit of delight in our silliness about numbers. Time is a human construction, devised because we are not able to take in all of reality at once.

So enjoy the numbers of your life today and don't put too much meaning in them. There are more new numbers for tomorrow and for every day of our lives.

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## March 18, 2008 – Spring Snow



There is a different quality and character to the snow we get this time of year. It snowed on Sunday. For a few hours it was snowing an inch an hour. When I headed in to work in the morning it hadn't snowed a bit. The roads were dry. By 1 p.m. when I headed home, there were five inches or more of wet snow and the driveway was a slippery mess that required four wheel drive.

Then it stopped snowing and started melting. Once I got the snow off of the driveway and the plows cleared the streets, everything was passable. It was white on Monday morning, but there isn't much snow left this morning. All day yesterday we could hear water flowing and dripping as we walked about outside.

The snow came quickly and it left quickly. There was runoff to help replenish reservoirs. It isn't all of the moisture that we need, but it helps.

Days of dramatic change are sources of unending wonder and hope for me. The way things are right now is not the way they always will be. If you don't like the weather - wait. It will change. If you are swept into the depths of melancholy, hope lies just around the corner.

If you want to, you can find a lot that is wrong with this world. Politics are stained with corruption and wrong-doing, rivers and lakes are tainted with toxic poisons, the ozone layer is being depleted and carbon levels are rising, the economy is in or nearing recession, our food has been altered and adulterated, children are under-parented and

raised with video babysitters, violence and obscenity are considered to be entertainment, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have no end in sight and offer no increase in security, small businesses are smothered by bureaucratic edicts, the quest for additional wealth has left people bankrupt of time, social institutions like marriage and church and family are declining. Wherever you look, wrongdoing, debauchery, decadence, and decline are evident. There is no shortage of things of which to complain.

But things are not always the way they seem. Dramatic changes are possible - in fact dramatic changes are likely.

Like spring snow, we cannot always control the timing or the pace of change, but if one is aware at all, change cannot be denied.

In the midst of corruption and wrong-doing there are honest people of strong character who are moved to provide leadership for our people. In the midst of the pressures of pollution and over-population we discover that this planet is stronger than we imagined and that there are people of good conscience working to change our over-consumption and provide alternatives to our present way of life. Corrections in the economy, while painful at the present, can produce changes in our values and a renewed focus on what is most important. Modern media delivers good with the bad. There are some incredibly good parents who are doing wonderfully with their children. The dark days of war have produced incredible tales of the power of the human spirit. Heroism, sacrifice and service emerge in the midst of the destruction. Witness for peace and contributions to change the injustices that give rise to war help to lower the threat of terror. Faith burns bright in spite of the pressures of society. The faithfulness of the church shines despite decreases in numbers.

When you look for the bad it is not hard to find.

When you look for the good it is immediately evident.

This world is changing. And the change can be dramatic like spring snow that is here one day, gone the next, and leaves behind a blessing of moisture for the land. How we look at this world makes all the difference in the world.

Big changes are in motion. Things are not what they have always been and they are not as they appear on first glance. And we have a real choice. Will we be part of the problem, or part of the solution?

In the middle of June, 1776, John Adams wrote to Abigail, "There has been Want, approaching to Famine, as well as Pestilence . . . But these Reverses of Fortune dont discourage me . . . It is an animating Cause, and brave Spirits are not subdued with Difficulties." The dramatic revolution that gave rise to this nation did not occur without

challenge and problem and incredible sacrifice. It would have been easy for our founders to become discouraged and disheartened.

It is easy in every generation to become discouraged and disheartened. But the cause of peace and justice remains an animating cause and “brave spirits are not subdued with difficulties.”

The times in which we live are momentous and great change is in the air. May we be “brave spirits that are not subdued with difficulties.”

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## March 19, 2008 – Holy Week



I'm really looking forward to Easter this year. Usually I am not tempted to "fast forward" and am able to simply experience the events of holy week at their own pace. The special services each have their own character and meaning. The week has its own pace. But somehow this year I seem to be tired of death and loss and grief and sorrow and sadness. I'm ready to talk about life and joy and resurrection.

Holy Week is a bit of a marathon for a pastor. There are special services and extra liturgies to prepare. In order to accommodate the busy schedules of our people, services tend to be in the evenings and the days tend to stretch out. I seem to go from event to event and from activity to activity without too much extra time for reading and quiet contemplation.

But it isn't the pace that makes me long for Easter. It isn't the work that is wearing on me. I don't mind the work. I enjoy reading liturgy and leading worship. There are many opportunities for me to forget about myself and lose myself in the liturgy. This isn't about me after all, and Holy Week often allows the focus to shift away from the pastor and the other worship leaders.

I think part of what makes Holy Week seem heavy this year is that we have experienced significant losses. In the past year, I have been called to officiate at the funerals of church members who have become my friends and some of whom had been my advisors and mentors. Our Conference is in the midst of a major transition in leadership and the changes have not been easy. The church has moved from a season of calm

comfort about our finances to a time of more careful stewardship and management. Scarcity wouldn't describe our mode of living, but we have had to be more careful than we were in the previous decade. There seem to be fewer dollars, fewer worshipers, fewer volunteers, fewer children, fewer . . . we have had losses. We feel grief. We are ready for Easter.

But there are theological dangers in rushing Easter. The first is most obvious. Unless we experience the fullness of loss and genuinely grieve at the size of the sacrifice, we cannot participate in the deepest joy of resurrection. Our baptism invites us to share in a "death like Christ's" that we might share in "a resurrection like Christ's." The death comes first. Without Maundy Thursday and Good Friday there is no Easter.

The second theological danger is a bit more subtle. One of the risks of moving too quickly in this season of the year is the risk of not having fully lived. Churches often focus on life after death so much that we forget the importance of life before death. Jurgen Moltmann, author of *A Theology of Hope*, reminds us of the joy and promise of living fully in this life. While never denying the promise of resurrection, he call us to live abundantly in this life as well. Some of the things we perceive as burdens - pain, grief, adversity - are part of the reality of this life that need to be embraced and fully experienced. Life after death is a meaningless concept if one cannot appreciate life before death.

My Lenten discipline this year is to take one day at a time - one event at a time - one service of worship at a time. And yet, Easter is irrepressible. When I have a few moments, I find myself working on my "Holy Humor" sermon for the second Sunday of Easter. I have a preaching plan for every Sunday of Easter through Pentecost and am excitedly working on those sermons. I have to remind myself that these come in due time - not now - when the time is right.

Today is Wednesday. It is the fifth anniversary of the beginning of the war in Iraq. It is a day for solemn reflection about the losses so many have suffered. Our losses pale in comparison with those of a family whose loved one has died or a victim who will live the rest of this life with traumatic brain injury or amputation or paralysis or other effects of violence. It is a day for serious prayer for peace and for ways to allow justice and freedom emerge in a world where these things cannot be imposed from the outside. It is a day of confession, repentance, and renewed dedication to life-long care and support for those who have served and suffered. Every participant in war has their life forever changed. Long after the bumper stickers, magnets, and even the cars to which they are attached have been discarded and forgotten our support for those who have served will be required. Today we will say our prayers and light our candles and sit in vigil with the victims for a moment. It is not a day for politics for me. I claim no genius at public policy. I will not invest my energy in trying to change the opinions of others. Not that these are not worthy pursuits, but my calling is different - to pray with those who have suffered loss and to recommit myself to nonviolent choices in a violent world.

So we wait. This can be a long week. It is probably supposed to be a long week. Our burden is light by comparison. Our sense of the direction of our lives and of this week is more clear than that of so many others. For the joy that lies ahead we will endure the days that are to come, knowing that we are not alone.

Indeed it is a holy time. May I be open to God's presence in this time.

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March 20, 2008 – Maundy Thursday



“I have earnestly desired to share this meal with you.” Human culture has many different ceremonies that surround the simple process of eating. From the rituals of who sits in which chair at the family dinner table to elaborate rules of etiquette and decorum at formal dinners, we have developed patterns and rituals that surround food. It is natural that we have done so. We need to eat. Food provides the energy that our bodies require. And we have made more of eating than just providing the sustenance we need. We have invested our meals with meanings far beyond survival.

Jesus’ last supper with his disciples was steeped in traditions that went back far into the history of our people. The specific rituals and patterns of eating were developed in response to the Exodus from Egypt. In remembering the transition from slavery to freedom, and in honoring the simple commandments to never forget and to always teach each generation the basic lessons of slavery and freedom, our people had adapted earlier spring festivals into the passover meal. Each morsel of food, each topic of conversation, each act of the entire meal was prescribed by tradition. The bitter herbs, the lamb cooked in a specific way, the haroseth, and even the number of cups of wine were a part of telling the story of the the story that defined our people. It was a meal, to be sure, but it was more. It was a review of who we are and why we are so passionate about freedom and religion.

In the course of that meal, Jesus added more layers of meaning. In the fourth part of the traditional meal, Yachatz, the leader takes the middle piece of unleavened bread out from the stack of three whole pieces. He breaks the bread in two, returning the smaller

piece to the stack and putting aside the large piece to be eaten later turn Tzafun, the eleventh part of the ceremony, which immediately follows the main meal. But when Jesus led the passover meal on that last night, he added a new meaning as he broke the bread. "This is my body, which is broken for you. Do this as often as you eat of it in remembrance of me." All of his disciples would have already known the tradition that after eating the full meal, pieces of the bread are distributed to each guest. They would have been familiar with the tradition that prescribed that everyone must have a piece and that all of the pieces must be consumed before the meal is complete.

Jesus words were fascinating because the entire focus of the traditional meal they were sharing was the past - remembering the past was critical to our identity as a people. We can only know who we are if we remember where we have been. Our faith in God is based on our lived experience that God brought us out of slavery into the life we now have. But Jesus shifts tenses and speaks of the future. "From now on - this night and each future night - remember me when you eat this bread."

The meal resumed with this new meaning fresh in the minds of those gathered at the table. Everyone present that evening would have known of the obligation to drink four cups of wine during the meal. The four cups represent the four expressions of deliverance promised by God in Exodus 6:6-7: "I will bring out," "I will deliver," "I will redeem," and "I will take." At the sharing of the third cup, Jesus added new words to the ceremony. "This is my blood, poured out for you and for many." Again he added words of future remembrance.

Now, thousands of years later, the traditions have become separated. Many have come to participate in Christianity without having grown up steeped in the traditions of Jesus' childhood and adolescence. Many have never known the traditions that precede the Christian ceremony of Eucharist or communion. And layers upon layers of new meanings have been added to the ceremony in the thousands of years of Christian celebration.

But the past is always a part of the meal, whether we remember it or not. Our awareness and complete understanding are not required. The sacrament transcends human understanding. It is enough to simply accept Christ's presence in the bread and in the cup.

Theologians love to debate the specifics. Transubstantiation or consubstantiation? Real or symbol? As if symbol might somehow not be real. Generations of explaining have given rise to complex ideas and understandings. But they have not removed the mystery.

In a simple meal we make connections that go far beyond the room.

Most of the time our understanding is so limited that we receive life in small portions - little bits of time - minutes and seconds - because the whole of time is far too much for us to take in. But when we eat and drink at the table, we participate in something that is ancient beyond our remembering and future beyond our imagining. We connect with all of those who we might have thought are gone.

It is a holy mystery.

So today we wait for sundown - as Jesus and his disciples waited for sundown so long ago. Our sanctuary will be bathed in purple. Our preparations will be complete. We don't remember all of the ancient words, we don't speak the traditional language. We will not eat to satisfy our hunger or drink to satisfy our thirst.

One small bite.

One small sip.

And it is enough.

I am as eager for this meal as I have been for any other.

It is fascinating that we have come to call this "the last supper." Indeed it is only the beginning.

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**March 21, 2008 – Friday**



And so our journey has brought us to Friday. The man of sorrows comes to the day of sorrows. Every year we go through the journey of Lent, knowing that this day is where it will lead us. While we know this is not the end of the journey, it is a necessary step along the way.

Attendance at the special services of the church this week has been light. It is not unusual. We live in a consumer culture and people are looking to get something in exchange for their gift of time. Holy Week isn't about that kind of an exchange. For the most part we pour ourselves into the worship of this week because we belong, because we follow Jesus, because we seek to understand. If there is any kind of exchange in the week, it involves long-term investment, not short-term payoff. The answer to the question, "What's in it for me?" is difficult. The answer is, in part, "the opportunity to participate in something bigger than yourself."

Attendance is light because we live in a culture that focuses on the individual. We speak and think in terms of individuals - my faith, my salvation, my church, my experience. And individuals create their own schedules choosing from many options about how to invest their time. There was a time when many people attended most of the public services of the church. Now the church is viewed as one option among many. It may not be the highest priority at the moment.

Attendance is light because, for the most part, we don't like to talk about death. I don't watch much TV, but a friend recently sent me a wonderful video clip from a recent

Oprah show that was introduced as a discussion of death. There was a man who had extensive cancer and who had been given a diagnosis of only months to live. But he did not talk about death. He did not talk about loss. He talked about life. He spoke of the legacy he wanted to leave for his students and for his children. It was a good conversation, but it was not a conversation about death or sorrow or sadness or loss or grief. We don't like to talk about death. It hurts. It causes us pain. We don't like pain. We avoid the subject of death.

Visit a funeral chapel some day. You will be warmly greeted. There is probably even someone who will talk to you about pre-arrangements if you want. There are displays of the materials used in the caskets, options for memorials, choices of fabrics for pillows and linings, rows of attractive urns. But there is little talk of death itself. The tools of embalming are not on display. There no frank discussion of odor control. Modern funeral chapels are bright, cheery places with lots of light streaming in through windows. You are invited to talk about your final arrangements and about a celebration of your life. But words like "dead," "depressed," and "decaying" are avoided.

Look at the newspaper for any day during Lent. Any article with a reference to religion will speak of Easter. Newspapers love to have pictures of Easter Lilies and decorated sanctuaries. Easter egg hunts and rabbits are also popular at this time of year.

The sad part is that one cannot be fully alive if one ignores the reality of death. Avoiding death means avoiding a part of life itself. The Christian promise of resurrection is real, but resurrection isn't cheap. It doesn't come easily. It is a gift freely offered. But it cannot be discovered by avoiding pain and sorrow and suffering and death.

The church is, by its very nature and by the faith we celebrate, a counter-cultural organization. It is a mistake to use the world's way of measuring success or failure. Counting the number of bodies at a worship service is a poor way to evaluate its worth or meaning. We don't worship to gain market share.

For those who do participate, it is a rich and meaningful walk.

There is a bit of sorrow inside of me for those who have missed the special services that have been offered. But then a bit of sorrow is appropriate today. It is Good Friday after all. Our entire Lenten journey has led us to this place.

We know it is not the end.

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## March 22, 2008 – A Day of Preparation



The church will be quiet today. Members of the altar guild will come to arrange the Easter lilies. There are a few banners that need to be ironed and hung. Musicians will practice. But it is a quiet day. The week has been filled with activities and there have been a lot of things going on. There were services on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. Each needed its own type of preparation. Now we take a day off to rest and to prepare.

It brings to mind the pause in the activities in Jesus' story. The culture was used to the sabbath. There were certain activities and events that just had to wait, even when they were most pressing. By the time Jesus' body was removed from the cross and laid in the tomb, sundown had come. And in the calendar of the time, the sabbath began with sundown. Preparing the body for burial had to wait. The spices had to sit. The activity had to pause. Sabbath was not a day for activity.

Over the years, Saturday has become a sort of sabbath for our family. When we had children at home, it was our family day - the one day each week when there was no school and when parents who worked at a church could take off from work. This didn't mean that we had no activities, however. Saturdays are often hectic, filled with shopping, errands, and events - but they are days that we spend together and often the activities don't start quite as early as other days. The pace seems natural. It seems good to have a day with a few more pauses and a bit less activity.

We often convince ourselves that a life of faith is about the activities we do. There are mission projects, meals to prepare, homes to build, connections to be made. There are meetings to hold and services to plan. There are fellowship groups and fund-raising activities and projects to complete. We measure our aliveness by listing the things that we do. I keep several “to do” lists going at all times. There is much activity in a life of faith.

But faith is not about doing only. Faith is also about being. It is not just what we do, but also who we are.

For the women whose job it was to prepare the spices, wash the body and wrap it in spices, the activities had to pause for a day. The day was no less filled with grief, no less filled with love, no less filled with the awareness of Jesus and the awfulness of his death. But it was not a day for doing.

It is often in the midst of doing that grief begins its work of healing. When someone we love dies, there are calls to be made, plans to be set in motion, arrangements to complete. There is a flurry of activity through which we begin to allow grief to work in our lives. But it is not the activity which heals. Healing occurs in the silent moments, in the middle of the night when sleep won't come and the clock ticks loudly and moves slowly. Healing occurs in the quiet times when the cards are read and the blanket is wrapped around the shoulders. Healing occurs when we take time to experience the presence of God that does not abandon us.

So today we wait.

Today we don't make things happen. We allow time to pass. Instead of doing faith, we are simply being faithful.

The quiet won't last for long. Easter is coming. The stories of our people begin with the words, “early in the morning . . .” And I will be at the church early in the morning tomorrow. We'll have the doors open and we will be ready to greet members and friends and guests. There will be trumpets and trombones and music and activities for all ages. Children will be excited from special treats and special clothes and special dinners that are being laid. The early arrival of Easter won't dim our enthusiasm.

Today we prepare. And our faith is no less evident, no less real, than it will be in the midst of tomorrow's flurry of activities.

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**March 23, 2008 – Easter**



Today is the day we begin to say “Alleluia!” once more. We have removed that particular word from our liturgies for six weeks as we journeyed through Lent. Today the Alleluias return.

Easter is our bold and confident declaration that death and destruction are not the final word on the human condition in this world.

To the participants in cross border tensions between Ecuador and Columbia, we say: “Death is not the way to peace.”

To the Tuareg rebels in Mali, we declare: “Death is not the way to victory.”

To the armed men who opened fire in the Bagdad market, we respond: “Death will not achieve your goals.”

To the attacker who stabbed eight people in a Japanese shopping center, we assert, “Death does not end your pain or provide your solution.”

To the transitional leaders in Pakistan, we warn: “Death is not the path for self-governance for your country.”

To Sudan’s army in Darfur, we cry, “Death will not win out!”

To the Chinese authorities trying to squash the unrest in Tibet, we proclaim, "Death will not accomplish your aims."

To those in hospital and hospice facing an untold number of illnesses, we whisper, "Death is not the end."

Today we boldly declare that death is not the final word on the condition of the human spirit in our world.

Despite the headlines, despite the victims so numerous, despite the power that seems to be held by those with evil designs, despite the weapons so misused, despite the funerals and mourners, we choose that God's gift of life has the final victory.

It is, say some, an irrational belief. For those who look for death and destruction and grief and sorrow and loss, there is no shortage of death in this world. But for those of us who celebrate Easter today, there is no shortage of life in this world, either. Paul's simple assertion, "Love never dies," is our motto and our deep belief. The truth is that the worst evil, the greatest powers of destruction, the most diabolical power brokers - none of these have been able to destroy faith, hope and love. None have erased life from this world.

None will.

God's gift of life has the ultimate victory.

We do not deny death. We do not deny that we will all one day die from this life. We have seen our share of sorrow and loss and grief. We have waited at the bedside and sat with the family. We do not deny the genocides and the massive violence of the 20th century and the threats of the 21st. We have witnessed the horror of human execution on a cross. But death has not won in our world.

Today we celebrate the victory of life.

Alleluia!

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## March 24, 2009 – A Season



For us, Easter is a season. Much of the observance in the wider society focuses on a single day, but we get forty-nine days of Easter. This year, with Easter being early, Pentecost lands on Mother's Day, which we also celebrate as the festival of the Christian home. So for the rest of March, all of April, and the first two weeks of May, our celebrations continue. In our corner of the world, we will get to watch spring unfold throughout the season. Our lawns will green up, the gardens will be prepared, the world will look quite different at the end of Easter. The triumph of life over death is just too much to observe in a single day.

Our culture is geared to events, but not as oriented to seasons. As a marketing tool in stores, Easter is almost exhausted. Any remaining Easter merchandise will be put in sales bins, discounted to get it out of the store quickly. Displays will focus attention on upcoming events such as graduations and Mother's day. Marketers like to anticipate what is coming rather than enjoy what is happening right now.

But when we focus too much of our attention on the future, we miss some of the richness of today. Life is always a bit of a balancing act. We have a sense of our place in time. We are aware of the past and we anticipate the future while living in the present. Part of the experience of Easter is a glimpse of the reality that our perspective on time is not the only way to understand it. Time is not quite the way it seems. For us the past is always present in some ways. We are influenced by those who have gone before. The great prophets and leaders of our faith shape the lives we live. And for us the not yet already is. The future that is promised is partially realized in the moment. It can be very

confusing to talk about time as we think of God who always was and always will be. Our divisions of time are a way for us to take in a reality which is far bigger and far more wonderful than our capacity to experience it.

Easter cannot be experienced in a moment. Resurrection is not an event, observed and then past. It fundamentally changes the order of the world - offers a new perspective on everything.

In the old order, death is the end. All life comes to sorrow. Easter proclaims that death and destruction and grief and sorrow are not the final words and not the final experiences.

Religious structures and institutions tend to move toward the static. Once a bit of the truth is glimpsed, it is claimed as if it is the final truth for all time. Once a practice is established, it is promoted as the only way to experience life. Institutions demand time and energy for maintenance. We form committees and task forces and hold meetings - and too much of our energy in all of these activities is keeping the status quo - hanging on to the way we have always done things. We become tradition-bound.

Easter challenges that way of thinking. It boldly announces: "time to do something new." Easter invites us to live boldly and challenges us to take risks. The old order is shaken by God's announcement, "See, I am doing a new thing."

For many the holiday is passed and it is time to return to life as usual. But we have awakened to a fresh realization that every day is a precious gift of new life that must not be squandered. Every day is an opportunity to look at life from a new point of view - to be fully alive to new possibilities and fresh hope.

Like the disciples walking the familiar road to Emmaus - we may have walked on this ground before, but everything is new and different now.

Expect to be surprised. It's a whole new season.

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March 25, 2008 – Baby



Our daughter works in a day care center. From time to time when she has a day off, she babysits for others as well. So once in a while we get the treat of having her come over to visit with some of the children for whom she is caring. Our household is currently my mother, my wife and me. Susan's father lives nearby, so we are often a couple of eighty-somethings and a couple of fifty-somethings. We've been known to have dinner at the retirement center more than once a week. So having a baby around is a real treat for us. A baby, a blanket, and a couple of toys can keep our household entertained for hours.

We watched as she pushed herself up onto her hands and knees. She isn't quite ready to crawl, but it won't be long. She can get up onto her hands and knees and sometimes she will scoot herself backwards a little bit, but she doesn't yet have the ability to go where she wants to go. Watching our daughter care for her and her brother, we were reminded of how much work infants and toddlers are. They need help with feeding, dressing, basic safety, and just getting around. Their need for care is constant.

A baby doesn't yet have any degree of independence - in our individualistic society babies need others to survive. This is true of all of us, be we often delude ourselves into thinking we could make it on our own. Babies are incredibly resilient. Not all are born in modern hospitals with an array of technology and highly trained professionals. Not all babies learn to crawl in heated homes with carpeted floors. The majority of the world's babies are born into poverty and difficult circumstances. Their arrival isn't necessarily

the best timing for their families. The struggle for survival means that they can't long be the center of attention.

For generation after generation - for thousands of years - our people waited for a Messiah. The history of our people revealed the presence of God in this world. Abraham and Sarah had discovered that God is in every place and not just in a single place - when people move God is in that place. Jacob and his large family learned that God does not abandon us when we fail and when we make bad choices. Moses and the people of Israel learned that God becomes actively involved in human history for the sake of freedom. Through kings and their misdeeds, in the voices of prophets and their call to justice, our people got glimpses of God's presence. But we were waiting. The ancients told of the promise of a savior who would come to all of the people - who would enable the whole world to know God's presence and power.

As we told and re-told the stories of the savior, our vision grew. We are rarely limited by a lack of imagination. There were those who envisioned a return of a central monarchy - a great king who would unite all of the people and who would restore Jerusalem as the center of religious life so that all the world would come to that city to worship and to know God. There were those who envisioned a mighty army - a direct intervention in politics and power that would instantly restore the balance of justice, punishing those who exploited others and elevating those who were unjustly oppressed.

Even though some of the prophets spoke of "a child is born," it was a surprise that God came to us as a baby. Tiny and small and vulnerable and unable to care for himself. A baby, who could not yet talk or walk or provide for himself.

A baby is at the heart of our faith. God loves us so much that God comes to us in human form - fully incarnated. God is a baby. Scoop him up, wrap him in a blanket and hold him in your arms. For those who were expecting fiery chariots, world-altering earthquakes, empty donkey carts, toppled governments, and a radical re-ordering of life as we know it, one more baby born into poverty in a small village at the edge of civilization was a bit anticlimactic. There were more than a few who didn't recognize the event at all when it happened.

But one baby changed everything.

Which makes me wonder how accurate our visions of the second coming might be. We've heard the promise and we repeat the words: Christ will come again. And there are novels that explore what that coming might be like. We entertain ourselves with visions of airliners without pilots, people who magically disappear, cosmic battles and fanciful beasts. There are bumper stickers warning of the potential traffic hazards of driverless cars if the rapture should suddenly occur. Preachers pontificate about the terrors of punishment for those who don't embrace their particular brand of faith. And these visions may carry a degree of accuracy.

But I know that I'm not very good at predictions.

And I remember how much God's presence comes as a surprise.

And I suspect that rather than describe the details of an imagined judgment day, we might do better to pay attention to a baby.

There is no lack of God's presence in these little ones.

*A Brief Note to regular readers of my blog: I'm going to be traveling for the next couple of days and I am uncertain about Internet access. I'll keep writing the blogs, but don't know if I will get them posted before breakfast. Keep looking, they'll show up eventually.*

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**March 26, 2008 – Home Place**



Today we will make a brief visit to the ranch where my mother's parents and grandparents homesteaded. My cousin's grandchildren, who live at the home place, are the sixth generation of our family who have lived on the place. After my mother's family arrived in Fort Benton, Montana, at least part of the family has stayed there in the same place, working the same land. The river ranch functions as a sort of home place, even for those of us who have never lived on the place and whose lives have involved a bit of wandering.

My father's family really doesn't have any place that is like the river ranch. For generations, at least since immigrating from Germany, that part of our family has never settled for more than two generations in any single place. Where is our home? The house my father remodeled and added on to for his children to grow up? The house in Red Lodge where my grandfather retired? The ranch in North Dakota where my great grandfather homesteaded, my grandfather was born, that was sold in my father's teenage years? The places in Pennsylvania where my people temporarily lighted after leaving Germany?

There is a stronger sense of place on my mother's side of the family, even though my mother didn't stay in the town where she was raised.

Growing up in Montana, I never gave much thought to place as a child. I saw myself as a Montanan and believed that I would always live there. I loved the mountains and rivers of my youth and could think of no place that was better to live. I attended college

eighty miles from the small town where I was born. I left Montana to go to theological seminary because there is no theological seminary in Montana. I believed that I would return to Montana as soon as I graduated and serve churches there for the rest of my life.

But I have never moved back. Not that I haven't tried. Over the years, I have submitted my profile to several different congregations in Montana, and have never received a call. There have been times in my life when this was very disappointing. I wanted to move back and I believed that a call existed. But a call to a particular ministry is more than what I want and it takes more than my sensibilities to determine whether or not the call exists. Each time I have tried to make a move to Montana, the congregations have found different leadership and I have been called to some other place. It now seems unlikely that my professional career will call me to serve in Montana.

This has its advantages for one who loves Montana. Montana can be my "Lake Woebegone" - that mythical place in the imagination that is always just a little bit better than reality. Since I don't live there and I don't deal with the people and politics and weather and realities of Montana on a day-to-day basis I can imagine life there to be a bit less frustrating and a bit easier than life somewhere else.

The trick, for me, is to learn to be at home in my own shoes. For everyday wear, I wear the same brand and same style of boot that my father wore - the same brand that my grandfather wore. They are sturdy and dependable and last a long time. And they fit. They are comfortable. Perhaps having a good pair of shoes is enough for this life.

There is, of course, a great freedom in following God's call that leads to places we might not have ever chosen on our own. Abraham and Sarah left the land of their forebears and had wonderful adventures. Moses led God's people for 40 years in the wilderness without ever entering the promised land. There were people who wanted to throw Jesus over a cliff when he tried preaching in his home town. .

And every dwelling in this life is temporary. Our real home is not in this life. Our real home is in the relationships that we are given. To be at home, one must learn to live with others, with God, with oneself.

So today these old feet will walk on the dirt of Montana and this guy will talk about rain and crops and cattle with the folk who live on the home place. And by tomorrow I'll be back in South Dakota - which I have found to be a very good place - a place of God.

Wherever the place, I plan to be at home in my own shoes. Which is pretty good, all things considered.

## March 27, 2008 – Wind



The area around Judith Gap, Montana, is one of the most consistently windy places that I know. My memories of the area from my childhood always involve wind, whether summer or winter. But memories are not always accurate. According to the reading that I have done on this trip, my home town is far more windy than Judith Gap. In fact, a site just south of Judith Gap was selected for a large wind farm project because the winds are consistent, but not high. 20 miles per hour is considered to be an optimal speed for generating electricity using large wind turbines.

The land, most of it belonging to the Springwater Hutterite Colony, has been leased for the wind farm. Smaller wind projects have succeeded in Montana. The Martinsdale Hutterite Colony, about 20 miles southwest of Springwater, has a dozen turbines that produce more than the colony's electricity needs. With the development of larger and more efficient turbines, it seemed to be only a matter of time before a large scale project was attempted. The site, with 90 wind turbines and the possibility of adding 30 more, has the capacity to produce about 135 megawatts of electricity - a lot one is thinking in terms of the energy demands of a home, but not much if compared to the 2,200 megawatt coal-fired generator near Colestrip, MT.

The site was determined to be nearly perfect: consistent winds blowing 15 to 18 mph nearly every day, a major power line running through the area, a substation nearby. But, according to locals, the wind doesn't blow quite hard enough. The turbines don't spin quite fast enough, and the project is producing less electricity than projected.

The technology is impressive. 90 tall poles topped with large three-blade turbines. The blades of the turbines can be adjusted, even fully feathered if wind speeds get too high. Each turbine is attached to a gearbox that transfers the rather slow rotation of the blades into the correct speed for the generators. The generators produce 660 volt electricity that can be added directly to the energy grid. The wires connecting the turbines to the grid are all buried.

The highway goes right through the wind farm, so one drives close to the turbines and gets a sense of the scale of the venture. 90 turbines is enough to get your attention as you drive along. The open ranch land at the base of the mountains has certainly changed. It is impossible to ignore the turbines as one drives by.

Our desire for energy seems to be nearly insatiable. Our homes are filled with devices that use electricity and that would be useless without a connection to a power source. My sister, who lives simply and intentionally beyond the reach of power lines deep in the mountains, has a solar system to provide electricity for the items she considers necessary: lights, a ceiling fan, television and her cell-phone charger. They use wood for heat and propane to run their refrigerator. And they live the simplest, most non-consumptive lifestyle of anyone in my immediate circle of friends. I'm not sure of the exact number of electrical appliances in my home, but it is high. When we get a brief interruption in electricity, we really notice it.

As deep as our desire for energy, and as advanced as our technology to generate electricity, we have to admit that we do not control this world. The Bible reminds us that "the wind blows where it will." All of the technologies we have devised have environmental costs. The wind may be free, but by the time we've used a bit of it to make electricity, the electricity isn't free.

I don't know the future of wind farming in Montana. It's a new venture with high hopes and big promises in a land that has a history of boom and bust cycles and people who are willing to endure hardships to live in that place. Corralling the wind for a little electricity is a far different venture than corralling a few steers to ship them to market. But jobs are jobs and they are hard to come by in this part of the world. They've poured a lot of concrete and erected some impressive towers. If it works it might just be worth all of the effort. If not, it won't be the first monument to failed dreams dotting the Montana landscape.

For now, it is impressive to see, and interesting to think about.

But I can't help thinking that my role in all of this might just be to figure out how to use less rather than how to produce more.

## March 28, 2008 – Water



Photo courtesy of Church World Service.

We are at that stage of spring when we don't seem to know from day to day what the weather might bring. After a winter of mostly open roads and smooth traveling, I came home on slippery roads yesterday and the road report isn't good for my trip to Chamberlain for the Conference Board of Directors today. We have been getting little snow showers that help to replenish our moisture. And we are still below average on snowfall, so we need every bit of precipitation that we can get.

Still, there is a bit of spring fever that sets in at this time of the year and a wish that the precipitation might come as rain instead of snow. We don't get to choose, and we can remember spring blizzards falling well into May, so the season of snow isn't over yet.

According to the U S Department of Agriculture, we continue to be experiencing moderate to severe drought in the hills. This overall dry pattern has been continuing for some time and has got us to worrying about the level of water in the reservoirs and the reserve of the forest to withstand insect infestations and large wildfires.

According to the experts, we've got it lucky, when compared to some other regions of the world. Ranch land in Colorado is being sold for the water rights only. All throughout the West, especially in Idaho, Nevada, Colorado, Arizona and New Mexico, water rights disputes are clogging the federal court system with no end in sight. Severe drought is a major factor in the human suffering and misery across northern Africa. Water rights are a major factor in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

We all need water, and water is playing an increasing role in human suffering and conflict between peoples. It seems a bit silly that I should be complaining because a little snow has fallen on the hills.

The picture on today's blog came from Church World Service, which continues its commitment to help communities gain and manage water resources. In the West Bank, with the drawing and re-drawing of lines between Israeli and Palestinian peoples, many people have lost access to traditional sources of water. The construction of cisterns provides work for local people as well as access to safe water supplies for communities.

World Water day, March 22, went unobserved in our household. We had our attention focused on Easter, and didn't know that since 1992, communities around the world have observed a day of celebration of the gift of water and education about the critical need of clean water to maintain health and sustain life.

So I resolve not to complain about a little inconvenience caused by some snow and ice. We are indeed fortunate to receive precipitation and we suffer very little inconvenience due to water or the lack of water when compared with others in many places around the world.

The snowplows are out and the day will warm and the roads will become passable. I'll get to my meetings and life will go on. And I'll have a bottle of water for drinking as I travel.

Beyond that I'm saying a prayer of thanksgiving for the bit of snow we have received. Every drop of water is precious and a gift from God.

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## March 29, 2008 – The River



The Missouri River plays a big part in the story of this part of the world. The headwaters are at Three Forks, Montana, where the Madison, Gallatin, and Jefferson Rivers flow together. The river runs in a northerly direction for a while, making a big curve towards the East and eventually to the Southeast. The Great Falls of the Missouri gave their name to the city that is near them. Downstream from Great Falls, the river rolls by the homesteads of my family before reaching Fort Benton, the destination for the Riverboats that plied the waters for a short time. The white cliffs are a spectacular stretch of the river, wonderful to explore by canoe. In Eastern Montana, North and South Dakota, the Missouri has now become the largest reservoir system in the United States with Fort Peck dam in Montana and Garrison dam in North Dakota. In South Dakota there are more dams: Oahe, Big Bend, Fort Randal, and Gavins Point on the Nebraska border.

My travels this week have taken me to many points on the River, without spending much time driving along it. I crossed the river at Great Falls twice and visited family at the home place along the river earlier this week. Today I am in Chamberlain and this afternoon, I'll attend a meeting at Pierre before heading home.

Chamberlain and Oacoma, on the other side of the river, have become meeting places for South Dakotans. It isn't really the center of the state, but it is close enough to host many state-wide meetings and it is a common place for boards and committees of the South Dakota Conference of the United Church of Christ to meet. It is central enough for most folk to make a meeting and travel both ways in the same day. Even a longer

meeting, requiring an overnight stay, is convenient with many motels and campgrounds in the area.

The river has long been a meeting point. Crossing it on a modern highway bridge is not the adventure that it once was, but still it is significant enough to be noticed.

The Board of Directors of the South Dakota Conference usually meets twice a year. This weekend's meeting is the third meeting this year. It has been an unusual year, with changes in leadership and difficult choices. And we face more significant actions this morning. Not all of our work has been fun. But the work we are about cannot be done alone. It requires us to work together.

There are some visible examples of independent churches, operating without many connections to other congregations. Some are quite large and appear to be quite successful. At least they have large numbers of people in attendance, build impressive buildings, and impact their immediate community in significant ways. But the connections between congregations are a significant part of the ministry of our church. We are engaged in ministries that are too large for individual congregations - we are connected to the faith and lives of Christians all over the world.

We are not alone.

And our relationships with one another require time and effort and hard work. Sometimes our relationships require meetings and travel and more meetings.

I'm not a big fan of meetings. But the work some times requires that we meet. We have no illusions about the work that we do in our meetings. We are not building the kingdom of God. We are working within human community that is fallible and finite and frustrating. We make plenty of mistakes and missteps. We are continually in need of forgiveness and renewal. When we do our best, we are open to God's presence and action in our world. When we do our best, we respond to God's call. Our imperfection dogs our work. Our humanness is constantly apparent. We remain, however, connected to each other by history and present circumstance. As we wait for the future to be revealed we are aware that we are the church in this setting as well as in the local setting. This isn't just about connecting churches - it is about being the church in South Dakota. Like other denominations and covenants of congregations in trying to live out our faith in the realities of this world.

So we have met alongside the river, which is constantly changing, ever flowing, never the same. It is a good reminder that what we are doing is also a work in progress - a movement.

May God guard us from feeling that we are too important in the big picture, lest our pride and arrogance interfere with the work we are about. May God guard us from

feeling that we are insignificant, lest we fail to engage fully in the call of this time and place. We re the church in this setting. Surely God is present in our deliberations.

Tomorrow I will be at home, at worship with the congregation that has nurtured us for more than a decade. My our connections with others be evident as we worship.

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**March 30, 2008 – Takini**



For some time, we have been working on a small program for cross-cultural education with partners in the Dakota Association of the United Church of Christ. The basic idea is that a carefully planned camping experience for native and non-native youth might be the starting point for building bridges between the two cultures. A small grant from the Genesis Fund of the United Church of Christ will help to provide equal access to a week of camping, learning, games, song and sharing at the Tipi Bed and Breakfast at Bridger, South Dakota, on the southwestern boundary of the Cheyenne River Reservation. The location is significant in the story of native/newcomer relations in our state. In the winter of 1890 after the massacre of Wounded Knee, the handful of survivors walked over three hundred miles to return to the Bridger area. In Lakota, the area is known as Takini, which means “survivors.”

Living in the place that we do demands that we acknowledge the pain and suffering that are a part of our history. The history is so painful that we have avoided it and have not always been faithful in teaching it to our children. But in telling the truth lie the seeds of moving beyond the past and working toward a new future.

Yesterday we had a planning session with participants from across the Dakota Association to select dates and talk about what experiences. There was a sense, among those of us who were in the room, that perhaps the children and youth of our communities have the ability to build bridges that we have failed to build. As we talked about games and experiences that might open channels of conversation for the youth,

we realized that we were opening channels of conversation for ourselves. By working together, we were forging friendships.

Our steps are tentative. There is a legacy of broken trust that must be acknowledged. But there is the ability to restore trust by working together. The seeds of the project were sown by many others in a variety of ways, but one of the projects that laid the groundwork for our work is called "The Woodchuck Society." The Woodchuck Society is a group of volunteers who cut, split and deliver firewood to Eagle Butte on the Cheyenne River Reservation and Wanblee on the Pine Ridge Reservation. Over the years friendships have formed around the task of stacking firewood. We have learned to joke and laugh together. We have encountered each other as people with hopes and dreams, thoughts and intentions, histories and a future.

It has begun to occur to us that we are all in this together.

It has begun to occur to us that Jesus' gospel of love, reconciliation, justice, and service is about us.

Many generations ago, our people were nearly wiped out with in the Babylonian occupation and exile. There were but a few survivors - a remnant people - who were addressed by the prophet Isaiah. They were the Takini of their time. Isaiah's poetic vision was of the simple justice of being able to plant crops and enjoy the harvest, of having enough food to eat and a simple place to live, of being allowed to speak the language and practice the religion of the elders. And Isaiah promised that when the people returned to their homes, "a little child will lead them."

This vision has inspired and sustained our people in many difficult circumstances throughout the centuries. Despite the stories of hearty settlers and powerful military leaders, many of us are descended from families who were forced to leave the old country by famine and political upheaval. We arrived in this country as refugees, not as the architects of manifest destiny. This is not to say that the presence of Europeans on this continent did not result in untold suffering for natives. But we know that our stories are more complex than good guys and bad guys. We know that whenever we tell the stories only from our own point of view, we fail to tell the whole story. We know that we do not know or fully understand each other's stories.

There are many stories that remain to be told.

Perhaps the reconciliation and restoration of all the people of South Dakota lies in our ability to renew the ancient vision of Isaiah. Peace and justice are related. Perhaps the seeds of the future lie in our ability to humbly accept the leadership of the children and youth of our communities.

Yesterday was a day of hopeful vision and fruitful conversation. We have made plans for the conversation to continue. May Isaiah's vision continue to inspire and direct us.

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## March 31, 2008 – Jeremiah Wright



Photo courtesy of Trinity United Church of Christ.

I didn't think that there was much I could add to the continuing conversations about Jeremiah Wright. Jeremiah is a powerful and sometimes fiery preacher who was, until his recent retirement, pastor of the largest and fastest-growing congregation in the United Church of Christ. Many church leaders have stood by him as he has been attacked after short sound-bites were extracted from two sermons and another from a speech that he gave. He's perfectly capable of defending himself and far more skilled at press conferences and political events than I.

Yesterday a letter, expressing gratitude for Dr. Wright's work and solidarity with him was printed in our local newspaper. It was written by our associate conference minister, Marc Stewart. After our worship service a member of my congregation spoke to me about that letter. The member was angry. He felt that Mark should have never written that letter and that no one should defend or express support of Jeremiah Wright. In the

opinion of this church member, what Dr. Wright said was so offensive that no one should be allowed to say such words in a church.

The member was angry and didn't ask for my opinion. So I just listened. I suggested that the member speak to Marc directly about his concern. He probably does not know that there is at least one other member of the congregation who feels that I have failed in my duty by not addressing Dr. Wright's sermons in my own preaching and who feels that I should be defending him in worship. Both of these members, with completely opposite points of view are valued members of our congregation. Both sing in the choir. Both belong in the church.

But I cannot completely satisfy both. To do what one wants me to do would certainly anger the other - perhaps enough to create a situation where we would lose valuable members of the congregation.

I am not much of a fan of television and I don't listen to the radio shows that played the sound clips over and over. So I do not know exactly how quotes from sermons delivered in September of 2001 and July of 2003 were portrayed in the media. But I have read the sound bites. I have also read the longer sermon extracts published in the Chicago Tribune on March 29.

Dr. Wright said things that I would not have said. He said them in a way that I would not have said them. I'm not an African-American preacher. My congregation is vastly different from Trinity UCC. And I believe, at my core, that a sermon is not primarily about a pastor - it is about the congregation and God's word for a particular group of people. Pastors who allow their ego to get in the way rarely serve God or the congregation well.

But it is also true that I have been deeply influenced by African-American preachers. And Jeremiah Wright is one of them. My call to the ministry and my life as a preacher was deeply influenced by Dr. Wright's predecessor at Trinity UCC, Reuben Sheares. Reuben served Trinity for a short time when it was a congregation of less than 100 members. He went on to become the executive minister of the Office for Church Life and Leadership of our church. His storytelling style and his blending of his passion for scripture and his passion for the people as he spoke with out notes moved me deeply. I have studied his sermons and my style of preaching was deeply influenced by Reuben.

I was at the National Youth Event in 1992, an event at which Reuben was scheduled to preach, when I learned of his sudden death of a heart attack. The youth who had traveled from Oregon and Idaho to attend the event with me could not understand my grief. They had no way of knowing how much I had incorporated this great preacher into myself and what a big part of me died with Reuben.

Jeremiah Wright's preaching style is quite different from that of Reuben Sheares. Jeremiah really knows how to work a crowd, to get a large group of people to move into shared emotional space. He can be loud and shouting and soft and crying in the same sentence. His vocal variety, command of pitch and pacing are simply amazing. Like Reuben, he has studied the Bible so intensely that it is inside of him and he quotes it accurately and consistently throughout his sermons.

They both stand in the great African American oral preaching tradition. It is a tradition of orators and actors who know that rhythm and repetition form the foundation of great public speaking and who have memorized great passages of scripture and great sermons that were handed down from generation to generation. James Weldon Johnson sought to record that great oral tradition in his 1927 classic "God's Trombones."

And part of that tradition is a tradition of calling the government to responsibility. All governments are human and all make mistakes. Like Jeremiah the prophet calling the kings of Israel to listen to God, African-American preachers have called American presidents and legislators to listen to God. Their form of patriotism is not blind obedience, but rather loving criticism and a belief that we could do better. Were it not for this kind of preaching, slavery would not have been ended. This country that is our home and that we love once had an official policy of legal slavery in perpetuity. It changed under the leadership of President Lincoln. Were it not for this kind of preaching segregation would still be our reality. This country used to have an official policy of complete segregation in the military. That changed under President Truman. The government can and must change. Only God is always right.

And part of that tradition is taking criticism. The great preachers have always been attacked by those who squirmed and felt uncomfortable with challenging words. Johnson's preacher's prayer, "Listen Lord" says in part:

"And now, O Lord -  
When I've done drunk my last cup of sorrow -  
When I've been called everything but a child of God -  
When I'm done traveling up the rough side of the mountain -  
O - Mary's baby -  
When I start down the steep and slippery steps of death -  
When this old world begins to rock beneath my feet -  
Lower me to my dusty grave in peace  
To wait for that great gettin' up morning."

(From James Weldon Johnson Complete Poems, Penguin, 2000, p. 14.)

I know that these words would not be soothing to the angry member of my congregation. Perhaps it demonstrates a lack of courage that I write them here in a place he may never read. But the truth is that not only do I strongly believe that

Jeremiah Wright is a treasure of the church and that we must resist the call to drum him out of our midst, I also strongly believe that my angry church member is a treasure of the church and that we must resist anything that would push him out of the church. We are a church for all of God's children. The fiery, sometimes mis-stepping preacher and the person who was deeply offended by his words both belong in the church. We're all in this together. And sometimes we get angry. And sometimes we call each other "everything but a child of God." But we are all children of God.

And it is far easier to point our indignant fingers at another and decry their sin. But we are all sinners. And when we focus our attention at the sins of others, we often forget to listen for the gentle, forgiving voice of God calling all sinners to come home, come home, come home.

The great preachers of days gone by reminded us that we enter into God's kingdom only after having come through great tribulations. Maybe a little controversy in the church is one of these tribulations. Maybe it is just another opportunity to be faithful to God and to one another. I have some nervousness about the conversations that lie ahead. But I am not at the center of this storm. Our congregation is not at the center of this storm. Whatever we face is small in comparison to what others are called to endure.

"Oh, I tremble, yes, I tremble,  
It causes me to tremble, tremble,  
When I think how Jesus died;  
Died on the steeps of Calvary,  
How Jesus died for sinners,  
Sinners like you and me."

(From James Weldon Johnson Complete Poems, Penguin, 2000, p. 34.)

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## April 1, 2008 – Ping Pong



The news surrounding the upcoming Olympic games in Beijing, China brings to mind 1971, when the US table tennis team was invited to Beijing to play. They were the first Americans to be officially invited to Beijing since the Communist Party came to power in 1949. The successful tour of the US ping pong team opened the door for further negotiations that eventually led to the visit to China of US President Richard Nixon a year later.

There is a connection between sports and politics. And there is a lot of politics in sports. Sometimes just playing a game can open the door for more substantive conversations.

There are, of course, many differences in how we play. Games have connections to particular regions of the world. It is probably significant that the 1971 invitation was issued in ping pong, a sport in which the Chinese excel. The Chinese team won every match in that 1971 tour. It would have been different with basketball or American rules football. But the world does not remember the scores of the matches. The world remembers that through the game China began to open up to diplomacy, trade and a new relationship with the rest of the world.

The world of professional sports has a different tone than that of the games children play. There are large amounts of money to be won or lost and people can take competition too seriously - way too seriously. But there is a value to games as well.

In our church we have a ping pong table, a pool table and a foosball table as well as outdoor areas for basketball and volleyball. Sometimes it makes me a bit sad that these areas are a bit under-utilized. We could easily accommodate more players. But they are important tools of ministry. The games create an inviting atmosphere for children and youth and say to them and to their parents, "Children and youth are welcome here." The games also provide opportunities for adults to connect with youngsters. Conversation is often easier when there is something to occupy the hands.

The games in our church are not about rising to high levels of competition. They are not about determining winners and losers. They are about the joy of playing. Mind and body working together for the sake of fun. Joy is a gift of God and one we celebrate when we play.

Ping pong is a good game. To English-speakers the name sounds funny - a sort of verbal description of the sound of play. The little white ball often bounces in unexpected ways. The paddles, called "bats" by serious players, are a bit awkward and just figuring out how to grasp the handle is a bit of a challenge. Unlike regular tennis, most of the game is played backhand, with only a few dramatic strokes hit with the forehand. It is a very difficult game to master, but it is an easy game to play. Young children can learn enough basics to engage adults in a fun game. There are variations on the traditional game, involving multiple balls, additional players and other dynamics that make for great ways to increase communication among participants.

It isn't the main business of the church. It isn't even one of the big priorities of the church. It's only a game. And it serves our mission and ministry best when we remember that it is only a game.

May we never lost the joy of simply playing a game.

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## April 2, 2008 – Sustaining Easter



I made a quick stop in the grocery store the other day. There is a large display of Easter items reduced for quick sale. For the folks in marketing, Easter is over. This presents a bit of a dilemma, because Easter came so early this year. It is still quite a while before Mother's Day and graduation - two other big days for sales of specialty items. Of course not all Christians observe Easter on the same day. In the orthodox church, Easter falls on April 27 this year - nearly as far from the day observed by the Western church as it can get. In our way of counting, that will be the fifth Sunday of easter.

Easter is not just a day in the church, however. It is a season. Our tradition is to celebrate Easter for fifty days - until Pentecost. That comes to seven weeks of stories of the resurrection, seven weeks of focusing our attention on life. It is not just about Jesus' life, but also our own lives. We live in the conviction that God calls us to be fully alive and engaged in this world.

In the early church, celebrations of the resurrection were weekly occurrences. Every time Christians gathered, they shared a meal in remembrance of Jesus and in celebration of his presence. As the early Christian movement began to become mainstream, there were increasing references to a future coming of Jesus. The Biblical term *parousia*, which can simply mean presence is also interpreted to refer to a future coming or advent. When specifically applied to Jesus it refers to a future, visible return of Jesus for judgment and to usher in the realm of God in this world. The Nicene Fathers included a belief in Jesus coming again to judge in their creed.

The problem with too much emphasis on a future coming of Jesus, however, is the failure to recognize the reality of resurrection in the present. We seem to have a natural tendency to focus our attention on the past or on the future without appreciating the present. Easter invites us to celebrate in the present. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Alleluia. This is not a denial of a future coming, but a focusing of our attention on the blessings of life in the here and the now. Easter is our season for that focus and celebration.

To choose to be fully alive in the present and to be fully present to others in this time is to open ourselves to the possibilities of service, mission and ministry as imperfect people living in an imperfect world. We do not have to wait. Now is the time. Easter invites us to live in the present tense.

But it is difficult to sustain Easter. We worry about the future - what problems may come. We become anxious when we think of our place in time and the frailty of our existence. The pressures of our culture are always calling us to the next season, the next sale, the next event. In a growth-oriented economy, sitting and enjoying the present isn't enough. But our faith invites us to enjoy this day and to live it fully without undue anxiety about the future.

Today is another day in the season of Easter. Life has triumphed over death. Today is a day to be fully alive.

May your life bring you joy today.

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## April 3, 2008 – Not so Routine



One of the things about the life of a pastor is that while there are routines and events that happen on a regular basis, the tasks are varied. Yesterday I attended a pastors' Bible Study, taught a Kerygma Bible class, met with a couple planning their wedding, served communion in a nursing home and attended a meeting about church softball league. Around the edges, I worked on the church newsletter, made plans for worship next week when I will be away attending a meeting, and tried to catch up on correspondence. My days are full, and there are events that I do at set intervals, but there is a lot of variety in the tasks.

One of the joys of the beginning of each month is sharing communion with Min, a woman who is 107 years old. Min is completely blind and nearly totally deaf. It seems to work best to bend over so that my mouth is close to her ear when I talk. Her speech is clear and easy to understand. Some days are better than others and yesterday was a good day for Min. She had a smile all the time I was with her.

I asked her if she had any special requests for our prayers. She told me of a friend whose wife had had a stroke and who now was unable to live independently and had to move from his home. She asked for prayers for another family that had experienced two deaths that were close to each other. And she asked for prayers for the daughter of the activities director at the facility where she lives. Min's days give her plenty of opportunities to think and she chooses to think about others. She is amazingly aware of the people who live and work in her care center and quick to place the concerns of others above her own.

I had Min on my mind as I listened to the concerns about this summer's church softball league. There is a need for additional volunteers to help with clean up and with umpire duty, the fees have to be raised because there is a fence at the field that needs to be replaced, and there are the usual struggles of working with volunteers who have personalities that don't always mesh. There was more than a little bit of complaining about others. I felt like saying, "Hey, it's a game. We play it for fun and for fellowship with others. There's no need to get upset over a game." But some people take the church softball league seriously and without them, we probably wouldn't have one.

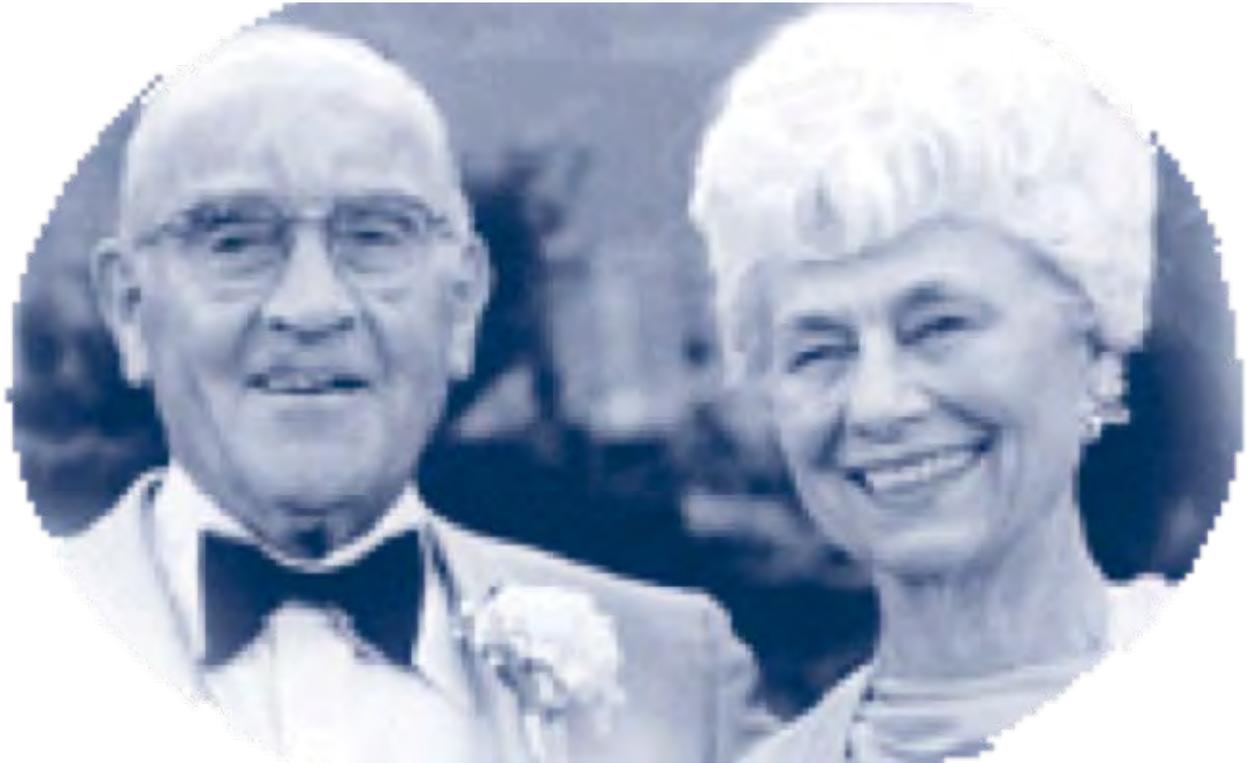
I have some kind of sinus infection that is keeping me from having the usual energy for projects and work. I'm not really sick, just quick to grab for the tissues and a little low on energy. But it is amazing how much being tired colors all of the activities of my day. It does remind me what a blessing good health is. When I think of those who are living with chronic health problems and those who face each day with a disability or physical challenge, I am grateful for the health and energy that I am given.

Today promises to be a day with fewer routines as well. We need to finish the newsletter, there is a work day at our Habitat for Humanity house, a meeting about a cros-cultural camp we are planning in partnership with the Dakota Association. I'm on call for the LOSS team and that means that there is the potential of an interruption that will re-shape my entire day. It will probably be another "not so routine" sort of day.

And, along the way, I hope I can learn the lesson from Min - to listen to the needs of others and to include them in my prayers.

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## April 4, 2008 – Farewell Albertsons



A new Family Thrift Center opened in our community yesterday. We have other stores of the Nash Finch Company in our city, so we knew about what to expect. The building where the new store opened was, until Monday, an Albertson's Grocery Store. It was, for me, an event worth noting not so much because of the store that opened, but because of the one that closed. Having lived ten years in Boise, Idaho, home of Albertsons, we had gotten used to shopping in Albertsons grocery stores. The way they were organized, the selections in the deli and bakery and other features were familiar to us and made shopping for groceries easy in those days of transition when we were adjusting to life in a new community.

The event was, for me, a sign of the passing of time. I can remember when Joe and Kathryn Albertson were the principal shareholders in the company that Joe had started. Joe worked in the grocery business all of his adult life, but he was in his thirties before he started his own store, financed with their savings and money borrowed from an aunt. He was incredibly successful: I suspect beyond his wildest dreams.

Their success in business led them to great acts of generosity. Both Joe and Kathryn were supportive of education and they always had a generous relationship with the College of Idaho, the liberal arts college they had attended. Over the years their gifts to the college exceeded \$100 million. They formed their own foundation and set it up in such a way that it could continue their charitable work beyond the span of their lives. A few years after Joe died, Kathryn transferred a huge block of Albertsons stock to the

foundation, making them, for a while the corporation's largest shareholder and enabling the foundation to grow to the point where it can give gifts of more than \$30 million per year. The foundation focuses on the improvement of college education in Idaho.

Beyond the huge acts of charity, however, many will remember Joe and Kathryn for personal acts of kindness: scholarships to individuals who had special needs, memorials in honor of workers of family members of workers, In the days when Joe was actively engaged in the management of the grocery stores that bore his name, he was very sensitive to the needs and life situations of his employees. He responded to personal crises, deaths in the family or other situations that his employees experienced with kindness and generosity. He engendered great loyalty in the people who worked in his stores. Joe and Kathryn were known in Boise for their community involvement and their generosity.

Joe died in 1994, just before we moved from Idaho. Kathryn lived eight or nine years more. The corporation and stores that bear their name have been publicly traded and bear little connection to the family. Time goes on and leadership is passed from generation to generation.

So the changing of the ownership and the signs on a grocery store in our town is not a really big event. We will continue to have a very easy job of finding reasonably priced food to feed ourselves and our guests. We will learn the arrangement in a new store and we'll not experience any significant change in our lives.

But it seems appropriate to pause for just a minute this week and think of Joe and Kathryn as people of incredible grace and generosity. Shaped by the great depression as were our parents, they turned the challenges of their lives into an incredible spirit of generosity. They both were forced to drop out of college before graduation because of a lack of money. They went on to pay for the education of hundreds of students and their legacy will be an on-going system of support for college education for students in perpetuity.

So Farewell Albertsons. The name will still appear in many stores in many other cities. But in our town it is no more. The employees will get used to a new employer. The customers will adjust to a new store. Life will go on.

And back in Idaho the legacy of Joe and Kathryn will continue to provide funds for each new generation of college students to engage in serious education and begin to discover what contributions they can make to their community and world. I hope that some of those students will take time to learn about the two incredible persons who learned to turn selling groceries into giving to others.

**April 5, 2008 – Evening**



It can be risky, in this country, to get spring fever too early. I can remember the year when I set out the tomatoes only to have the frost get them. That happens to most folks around here. But that particular year I did it twice. Only the third set of tomato plants survived. We know that we can have spring blizzards for another month yet. But there is a change in the air around here. The deer are finding a few shoots of tender green grass in the yard. And we are enjoying the return of evening.

In the winter, when the days are short, the transition from daylight to darkness occurs while we are at work and we rarely take time to appreciate it. It is dark when we drive in and it is dark when we drive home. Sometimes, I am treated to spectacular sunrises and sunsets during the portion of the day when I am driving from one place to another.

But the days are definitely getting longer. And once again there is a sweet time, after supper, of lingering daylight at the end of the day. A few minutes to sit on the deck and look over the town, a few minutes for a short walk around the neighborhood. Soon evenings will be occupied with yard work and home repairs and all sorts of tasks that must be accomplished. But for now, the evenings are too short to start anything big. Last night, there was just enough time to carry a cup of tea out on the deck and watch the deer munching in the back yard and think about the day that had passed and the day that is to come. It was a quiet time, a beautiful time, a peaceful time.

I couldn't avoid the mental inventory of undone tasks in the yard. There is a bit of garden fence to mend. I should be raking up the pine cones that fell over the winter. It is

probably not too early to till the garden and seed some lettuce and peas. The compost pile needs to be turned. The decks need to be scraped and painted this year. The list goes on and on.

But I didn't tackle any of the jobs last night. I just enjoyed a few minutes of calm. A gift of the season and the end of the week.

There is so much of my life that is focused on what I do. The ministry of action has always called to me. In the organization of tasks, I like being a worker bee. Show me things that need to be carried or papers that need to be collated or needed repairs or other tasks, and I am happy. Although not very good at it, I enjoy janitorial tasks. Moving furniture, cleaning, setting up for the next meeting or activity - these are ways of serving that I understand.

But there is also a ministry of presence. A ministry that is not defined in the tasks we accomplish but by simply being there for others. The prayers offered in the still moments of life, the neighbor that you know is there even when you don't exchange words, the voice that you know you can count on to be on the other end of the line - all of these are important aspects of the ministry to which we are called.

Having lived in this community for more than a dozen years there are opportunities for ministry opening that would not have been available had we moved on earlier. The people of this congregation are getting to know us. They've seen our children grow up and our parents moving to a point of needing care. They've seen us on our good days and on our bad days. We've been through some struggles and disagreements enough to know that our shared ministry is more than a puff of emotion - it is a commitment over the long haul. There is less of the flash and excitement of a new relationship, but there is trust and commitment that endure over time.

I'm not ready to describe this phase of ministry as the evening at all. There are still many long days of work ahead and "wind down" certainly does not describe the needs of the congregation at this point in its history. But it is good to know that the days are getting a bit longer and that there are a few moments to pause, reflect and simply say "thank you, God." Without a need to make petitions or seek direction I am able to simply experience and express gratitude. The beauty that surrounds me every day becomes more apparent in my consciousness and there is great wonder in a moment of calm.

May we never forget the joy of pausing in our doing long enough to give thanks for our being. Rest is an obligation of our relationship with God. We are commanded to remember the sabbath and keep it holy. Perhaps there is a sabbath in each day when we recognize its holiness.

**April 6, 2008 – Tanager**



Photograph by Brian E. Small

Just to remind us that we still live in South Dakota, there is an inch of fresh snow on the ground this morning. Yesterday was a day of spring-like weather. As I worked at the Habitat house in the morning and attended various meetings in the afternoon, I was really enjoying being outside. And when I stopped by the house for lunch, there was a Western Tanager at our feeder.

The arrival of Tanagers is a special time for us. Tanagers winter in Costa Rica and we have a special relationship with Costa Rica. The hills are close to the eastern border of the range of Tanagers, and most of the ones we see are transients - on their way farther north to breed in Canada. I suspect that the tanager that visited our feeder yesterday is not a city bird in the winter. There are plenty of rural areas in Costa Rica, filled with lush vegetation and lots of food for a tiny bird that makes the trip from Central America to the northern States each spring and returns in the fall.

Of course, I don't know exactly where the particular birds we see around here spend their winters, and birds are not constrained by political boundaries. But I know that life in Costa Rica's big city, San Jose, can be tough. There is a lot of concrete and pavement and not too much natural growth. There are a few ornamental plants in private lawns, and a few parks with grass and trees. And there is a lot of ground that is covered with buildings - many landowners build out to the boundaries of their property, leaving little or no open space at all.

But tanagers might fit into the culture of Costa Rica. The males are spectacular birds, with bright yellow and varying amounts of red on their heads. The females may be a bit less showy, but are still incredible birds. There is much gender variation in many areas of Costa Rica as well. Machismo is alive and well in the culture. Men are often physically and psychologically dominating. Women often bear the brunt of responsibility for family life and child rearing. More than a few children grow up without positive male role models. The church is mostly an organization of adult women and children, with a few notable exceptions.

Over the years of our relationship with our sister church, we have seen capable and promising boys develop into young men and disappear into gangs, drug culture, petty crime and life on the streets. The church works hard to provide an alternative for all of its participants. With a woman as pastor and a male youth leader, the church offers a model of a different kind of relationship between men and women. But it is an uphill battle in a community of deep poverty and often transient men. People do what they have to do in order to survive and don't have much time for philosophical discussions of ideal relationships.

In this place the church teaches primarily by example. Nutritious, hot meals served five days a week, demonstrate the commitment to serving others. The presence of the church for more than two decades in a community where people and institutions come and go demonstrates a commitment to ministry over time. A pastor and other church leaders who live in the neighborhood and share the life of the folk demonstrate the ability to live lives of deep faith in the midst of everyday problems.

There is a spine of mountains that stretches from Canada's Northwest Territories south across all of North America, through Central America to the tip of South America. This chain of mountains connects all of the people who live along them. There are many national boundaries that cross the mountains, but the birds who fly over them don't recognize the boundaries and remind us that we who live alongside the mountains are deeply connected. The life and faith of one affects all.

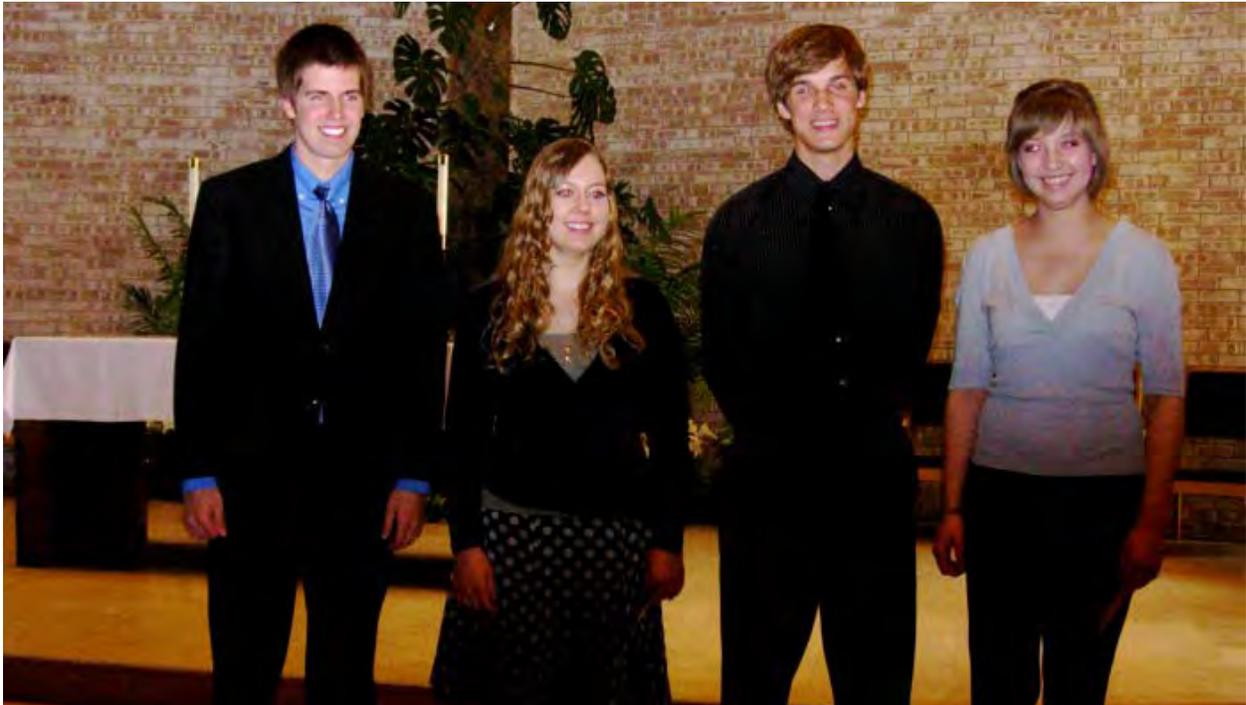
The arrival of a couple of tanagers, even if they are on their way through, reminds us of this connection. We are closer to one another than we sometimes recognize. The "pit-er-ick" of their call in our yard yesterday was a song of Costa Rica freely offered in the hills of South Dakota. It is a reminder of love that transcends the distances of this globe and faith that is not constrained by language, culture or location.

Like the people of Costa Rica, the birds seemed a bit vulnerable and fragile. This morning's snow must be a bit of a shock to the system of tiny birds who winter in 80 degree weather. But like the people of Costa Rica, the birds are resilient and stronger than we might think. We haven't heard the last of the tanagers - and our relationship with the people of Costa Rica will continue.

As we say in Costa Rica, Gloria a Dios!

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## April 7, 2008 – Young Artists



Each spring for the past few years, I have been the presenter of the awards at the Young Vocal Artists' Competition sponsored by the Dakota Choral Union and the Black Hills Chamber Music Society. It is an intense day for the competitors. They each perform in front of a live audience and a panel of judges, singing in at least two different languages. There is a lot of emotional energy as the students await their time of performance, and after performing, await the results of the judging. Before the awards ceremony, each student has had a brief session with one of the judges to receive feedback and comments. In addition they each receive a professional recording of their performance and written feedback from the judges.

Being the host of the awards ceremony and the presenter of the awards is a fun job. I get to introduce all of the competitors, invite the audience to express appreciation for the incredible talent and artistry of these young people, and recognize the support system of coaches, accompanists, parents, friends, siblings, and volunteers who have been a part of producing a wonderful day of music.

The fact of the matter is that the 16 artists in this year's competition represent a very small slice of the high school students in our community. There are approximately 4,200 students enrolled in the two public and two private high schools in our community. The competition draws students from area towns as well, so the participants in the contest are less than one quarter of one percent of the teens in our area.

Not all of the teens in our community could afford private vocal coaches. Not all have the active support of their families. Not all are interested in classical music. Not all have the time that it takes to develop their musical skills. It is probably the case that the

contest showcases the best of the best in terms of classical vocal abilities, but there are many brilliant, talented and wonderful teens that one would never meet at such a competition.

Still, the sixteen teens who did participate in the competition are truly wonderful people and truly wonderful artists. And it is a valuable investment of our time and energies to recognize their artistry and potential. The winners will be featured artists at public concerts of the Dakota Choral Union and the Black Hills Chamber Music Society and they receive scholarships to a summer opera camp as well as a small cash prize. They will be recognized in a circle slightly larger than the small group that gathered for the awards ceremony.

What those larger audiences may not know is how small the separation is between all of the artists who competed. They might hear the winner without knowing that there are at least fifteen other teens who have the confidence, poise and artistry to grace such a stage.

There is something incredibly energizing about hearing a teenage voice sing music that has moved audiences for hundreds of years. The contemporary pieces that are presented are also moving, but when one thinks of the history and heritage of vocal artists and the lineage of performers in which these teens stand it gives one a sense of continuity. There are a few great songs that last much longer than the span of a human life and that can be renewed by the passion, energy and artistry of a new generation of artists even though the composers and original audiences have been dead for centuries. In the presentation of these young voices, even ancient music was all fresh, exciting and powerful. I have no doubt that 500 years from now there will still be young voices who sing out these old tunes with energy and artistry all their own.

As my hair and beard continue to sport more white than any other color and I move, sometimes ungraciously, into the senior side of middle age, I draw great inspiration from the time I am privileged to spend with teens. I read the statistics about the disintegration of the family in our time, about the incredible pressures put on teens, about the loss of childhood and the loss of innocence, about lengthening adolescence and the effects of poverty on children and youth. But my experience paints a different picture. I meet wonderful, talented, energetic, creative, passionate, caring, disciplined teens with incredible potential.

It is hard to be depressed when one is in the presence of such greatness. Our generation is unlikely to be labeled "the greatest generation" by pundits and authors. But greatness will not have disappeared from this world when our time has passed.

## **April 8, 2007 – No Photo, Late Blog**

No picture today. And if you read this blog regularly, you'll notice that it was not posted at my usual time. I was sitting at my computer, scanning the morning's headlines, preparing to write my daily blog when the phone rang. By the time I made it back to the computer, I had spent almost six hours driving all over Pennington County with a Sheriff's Deputy trying to deliver some of the world's worst news to members of a family that were just beginning their day not yet realizing how this day would become one they would never forget.

Law enforcement officers hate the job of delivering the news that someone has died. It is somehow even worse when you deliver the news to a parent of the death of their child. It doesn't matter what age the child is - the order and pattern of the world seems upset when a child doesn't outlive their parent.

I'm just a volunteer. I'm not an officer, but from where I sit, I realize the amount of pain and suffering that the officers share - no matter what the media might say - no matter how they might be portrayed on television. Real human beings respond to real human tragedy and they try to put a real human touch to their work. We were driving all around looking for people because there is some news that no one should receive alone. There is some news that no one should have to receive over the telephone.

So we finally found the correct address. We finally found the right person. And as I looked into her eyes I couldn't help but notice that she seemed to be an age similar to me - and I already knew that her daughter, who had died, was the same age as our daughter. You don't miss those things, even when the business of the day is all about someone else and not about me. We are human, after all, and we look for a connection - which is exactly why it is better to deliver the news in person - no matter how awkward the job.

I said to the coroner after it was over, "I know you hate this part of the job. But for you, the difficult job is now over - for them, it has just begun."

This is Easter - the season of life triumphing over death.

But death still exists. And from now on today will be "Good Friday" for one family. And on Good Friday we have to be patient - we have to be willing to wait - we have to hear the cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Because the gift of Easter is given in God's time.

It is a crazy, hectic day that has been disrupted by a totally unplanned activity.

But it is wonderfully easy compared to the day of the family I've been visiting.

Don't delay in telling those around you how much you love them. Don't delay in taking delight in the beauty of this world. Don't delay in thanking God for Easter's blessings. For there is a dark road ahead for each one of us and there are days coming when today will be a memory.

May your memories be rich in meaning and deep in joy.

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## April 9, 2008 – Circle of Friends



In the youth room at our church is a sculpture of four friends standing in a circle. There is room in the center of the circle to place a candle. I have a smaller replica of the piece in my study. When a lit candle is in the middle of either piece, it is reminiscent of a circle of friends gathered around a campfire. Over the years there have been a lot of meaningful campfire circles in our lives.

I have spent a portion of every summer of my life at church camp. My mom was a camp nurse and we went to camp the summer that I was born. I participated in the programs of that camp through my 25th year without ever missing at least one event a year. After that I have participated in some event at some church camp every year.

The sociology of our church was quite different when I was a youth. Youth groups were larger and camping programs attracted bigger numbers. But the camp I attended was in a remote location and the United Church of Christ has never been a majority movement in Montana. A camp with 60 or 75 campers was a big event in those days. Most of our camps were smaller.

The sculpture in the youth room is an expression of a bit of our theology of youth ministry. We see the basis of all youth ministry to be healthy relationships and not a mass movement. Like Jesus walking down the road to Emmaus with a couple of his disciples, the process of youth ministry involves listening, teaching, and sharing sacrament in small groups where each individual is encouraged and enabled to discover a personal relationship with God in Christ. The church is often at its best when

it is a small circle of faithful people engage in mission and ministry. While there are forms of church that find their expression in stadium meetings and mass public events, our calling does not lie in that area. Bigger is not always better and faithfulness is not best measured with statistics.

So the cornerstone of our confirmation program has been relationship with mentors. Encouraging and enabling significant safe relationships with adults outside of the confirmand's immediate family gives the opportunity for a young person to consider faith alongside an adult who also is seeking, struggling, growing, and expressing faith. The experience of joining the church is an experience of coming into a system of meaningful relationships. To the extent that we foster relationships beyond that with the pastor, we help confirmands to understand that they are joining a church not following a particular pastor.

Our program is inefficient and sometimes poorly organized. We rely heavily on volunteers and our youth have complex schedules. Unlike the sculpture, our youth come in all different sizes and shapes and just placing their hands on each other's shoulders requires a bit of stretching up and bending down. But we do form some life-long relationships. And we do seem to have a group of young adults who have gone through the program, moved on with their lives, and are becoming significant leaders in the new congregations that they have found. The generation of those in their twenties is not marked by any participation in church, so the fact that our congregation produces two or three youth each year who remain active in churches through their twenties is significant. And when those young adults return to their home church, it really is a homecoming. They remain at ease in their church.

The gospels are filled with stories of Jesus in relationship with small groups. He heals one by one. He reaches out to lost and lonely people. Much of his ministry was focused on individuals. Rather than address an entire Samaritan village, he had a significant conversation with one Samaritan woman who told his story and spread the gospel throughout her community. Many more people were touched by her telling of her story than by Jesus' initial visit.

So we continue to find working with individuals and small groups to be very meaningful. Don't expect any announcements about stadium events from our congregation this year. Instead there will be a handful of youth who are at home sharing faith with people whose ages and circumstances are different than their own and who will go out into the world with stories of faith that will sustain them in times of sorrow and in times of joy.

And, from time to time, we will hear the stories of others whose lives have been transformed by the caring actions of the youth whose confirmations we have celebrated.

## April 10, 2008 – Travel Day



Yesterday was a travel day for me. I am still impressed that I can get from Rapid City to Cleveland in less than a day. I worked until about noon and was in Cleveland by midnight. Of course that meant a short night by the time I got to the hotel and get settled. However air travel doesn't seem to be as fun to me as it once was. Don't get me wrong. I still enjoy airplanes and flying. And the hustle and bustle of airports is fascinating for me when I am not too rushed. The increased security and other considerations mean that we get to the airport early and are actually less rushed than it was before 911 and TSA. Airports are good places to watch people. The five year old dancing to music that only she could hear. The young mother with a tiny baby headed (perhaps) for a first meeting with grandma and grandpa, the weary business travelers who are bored with airports and travel weary, the military personnel headed to or from deployments, the couples heading off on vacations - all are interesting to watch and many are interesting to meet. And the weather was interesting enough yesterday to make sky watching fun in Denver. Traveling through Denver also gives me a chance to see the one airline in America that has a perfect name - OK has a name that I can recognize and remember how to spell.

This trip is for for days of meetings. I am sure that a certain number of meetings are required for the mission and ministry of the church of Jesus Christ, but I am less enamored with meetings than some of the others in the church - less enamored than I was a couple of decades ago as well. Jesus' upside down theology of leadership might be summed up in the saying, "Whoever wants to be leader of all must be willing to be servant of all." But, in my experience, the next four days do not promise a gathering of

servants. The majority of the participants are probably more focused on working their way up the ladder and securing their own position than on serving others. It may be that I am getting a bit too cynical for this particular work in the life of the church. Maybe it is some kind of penance or divine punishment for my sins.

I am resolved to treat it as a spiritual discipline. No schedule, no matter how hectic, should be able to keep me from praying. No meeting, no matter how boring, should be able to keep me from listening carefully for the needs and concerns of others. No power plays, no matter how silly, should be able to keep me from seeking ways to serve others. If countless saints of the church throughout generations of the church can endure hardship and deprivation, poverty and hunger, pain and even death for the sake of the gospel, I suspect that I can find the energy to endure a few days of meetings. And I resolve to keep a smile on my face.

The trick is sitting on my hands and not talking. That, in and of itself, is a spiritual discipline.

The work of our church in its national setting is prayerful work. The best part of the next few days will undoubtedly be the worship. We will hear some engaging sermons and we will be challenged to think of the scriptures in new ways. We will share in prayer and sacrament. Surely God is in this place. The Holy Spirit is freely given. I will learn to be open to the presence of the holy in every place that I believe.

Years ago, our grandfather Abraham and our grandmother Sarah discovered something that we take for granted, but that was a revolutionary concept for their time. God is present in other places. When one travels the same God is at the destination. Unlike previous generations who thought that leaving parents and home meant leaving God behind, they experienced God that was with them - in every time and every place.

Despite the shortness of sleep last night, I intend to keep my eyes open. Perhaps God is in Cleveland too. I am.

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**April 11, 2008 – From the Hotel**



The sunrise comes earlier here than home. But it shouldn't take me long to adjust to a couple of time zones. I love to travel and things like that don't seem to have much effect on me most of the time.

But it is hard to have much of a sense of time and place when I stay inside. Except for a brief walk on a crowded city street during one of our breaks yesterday, I have not been outside since I arrived at the hotel Wednesday night. Everything that is in on our schedule takes place in the same building. Our room is on the 19th floor, meetings and meals are on the 6th and 7th floors for the most part. There is a coffee shop and lounge on the first floor and a restaurant in the basement. The schedule is full, with few breaks. We are tempted to squeeze meetings and conversations into mealtimes and break times.

There are dozens of people whom I do not see very often who are participating in the meetings and I want to catch up on their lives and hear about their families and their home congregations. I've been around this church for enough years that almost any gathering of the church has a bit of a "family reunion" feel to it.

The hotel is quiet this morning. People haven't gotten up. And, judging from the traffic outside our hotel, much of the city is still asleep as well. But I can see the glow of the sunrise off to the East and I know that there are open places not far from here where the world still is connected to the natural. Cleveland sits right on Lake Erie, so a short

trip north puts one out on the water. But for the next few days I will live as most of the people in this world live, in the midst of a city.

I'm not a city kid by nature. There are just too many people, too many cars, too little privacy, too little space, too many locks, too much fear, too little nature, too many buildings for me. I long for the deer and wild turkeys and stepping out on my deck and knowing that I am alone. The best I can do here is to get up early and sit in an empty hotel lobby for a few minutes before the others wake up. I don't think you can hear the coyotes sing from this hotel. All of which is good because it makes me homesick.

Today we get to the heart of our discussions: conversations about what structures and models of governance will best serve the church as it moves into the future. The statistics on denominations are not hopeful. Though ours is the oldest of the mainline denominations in the United States, it is also the smallest and all of the mainlines are getting smaller at a rapid rate. The emerging church - the church that will be the center of faith in the future - is not yet clear. And there is a sense that what is going to come will be much different than that which has been.

But we live in the transition - in the space in between. As a pastor, I need to be aware of and faithful to the congregation that has been. There are many who belong to the church because of its great legacy of love and service. And I have been called to be their pastor. Statistically, most of them will die in the next fifty years, but that does not mean that we should abandon them now. But at the same time as we are called to provide a meaningful church for them in this time, there is an emerging church - a church of the future that is quite different than what has been. Perhaps part of the challenge of being a pastor in this generation (or any any generation) is learning to serve both churches: the church of the future and the historical church.

There is much talk at this meeting about the emerging church. Words like "postmodern" and "post denominational" are tossed around. I even heard one speaker use the term "post Christian." We seem to be able to talk about the future only in terms of the past. "Post" refers to what has been, but does not describe what will be. We don't seem to have the right language to address that which is yet to come.

I confess that part of that challenge is that I know that the emerging church is, in a sense, "post Ted." I probably belong more to the past than to the future any more. I'm sort of at the transition point, where more of my career is behind than ahead. I know that the long term future of the church is based on leaders who are younger than I. The church has never been dependent on me. It will do well without me when the time comes for me to die.

But it is not yet that time. I suspect that I still have a few things to offer. I can still feel the surge of energy that comes with new ideas and new possibilities. But I think that I need to be very careful with my language. I'm not going to spend many words talking about

post this and post that. I am far more interested in speaking of what is to come than what is past. Mission and the call to service beckon from the future. I know that the church of the future will focus its energy on serving others. Bridges and connections between people who have been divided also belong to our future. Just as the historical Jesus crossed so many boundaries to provide connections between people, the resurrected Christ continues to call us to reach beyond the borders of our experience and our comfort zones to greet those who had once been beyond our circle.

It seems to be a good season to spend considerable time and energy studying the words of the prophets. Their call to justice will be an important call to us as we seek to envision the future.

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**April 12, 2008 – Being the Church**



The meeting I am attending is a joint meeting of the corporate boards of the different parts of our church who operate in the national setting of the church. At this level, the church is not a single entity. Local Church Ministries, Wider Church Ministries, Justice Witness Ministries, Office of General Ministries and the Executive Council are all different entities in the church. And for much of the history of the United Church of Christ these bodies and their predecessor boards have acted as autonomous, independent entities. We are not skilled in working together and there are some very awkward moments as we try to figure out how to be one church.

There is more than a little bit of “turf protection” and power brokering. There are those who make impassioned pleas for their point of view. We have witnessed tearful statements about people needing to have their place at the tables of power or the points of decision-making.

As a male with an European-American ethnic heritage, i am well aware that throughout much of the history of the church, my group has had more than our fair share of power and representation in the decision-making bodies of the church. As a result, it is not possible for me to know fully the situation of someone who belongs to a group that has been underrepresented in the decision-making circles of our church. Having said that, however, it is important for me to note that I do not have to be present at the table in order for my concerns to be represented. A woman could faithfully carry my concerns, as could a Native American or a person of another racial or ethnic background. As an

ordained minister, I am not at all fearful of having a lay person be the representative from my area in the church's national setting.

I believe that representational democracy implies a certain level of trust in those who represent us. And being the church requires that we trust as well. I do not have to be the one standing in front of the microphone in order for my voice to be heard.

We affirm that the church is the body of Christ in this world. But that body is imperfectly constituted. Even after generations of practice, we are not anywhere near close to being the perfect manifestation of Christ in this world. Like Jesus' body on the cross, we are broken and flawed, torn and full of holes. We are at once the church that is in this time and place and the church that is still becoming. We are present and future potential come together.

So often, my role in these meetings is to be quiet and to listen carefully.

It is often tempting, as one listens, to look for the points of dissimilarity and disagreement. "I am not like this person." "I don't agree with that idea." "I would say, act, believe . . . differently." Indeed, I often assume that attitude. There have been preposterous statements made. There are many points of view that are not my own. There are loud voices whose assumptions I do not share.

But to focus my attention on disagreement and different is a poor investment of my time and energy. The bridges between people of dissimilar background and experience are not found in our dissension, but in our agreement. The future is not born of our conflict, but of our common humanity.

The tensions in our corner of the church are mild in comparison with those in some corners of the world. We have not practiced genocide against one another. We have not even committed physical violence in defense of our theologies. We have argued. This is not northern Ireland or Sudan or Cambodia or the Balkans. This is a small corner of the church. We have far more in common than the things that divide us. Even the most ardent spokesperson for a point of view with which I disagree could speak of a love for Christ and a passion for the church that I share.

I embarked on these days of service in this particular setting of our church as a spiritual discipline. It is not the corner of the church where I feel most at home. It is not the setting where my gifts are most matched to the task at hand. But it is a place of spiritual growth for me and there are discoveries and connections that can be used to develop the mission and ministry of the congregation I serve at home.

At the mid point of these meetings, I am eager to be heading for home. I long for my people and hunger for my place. But I am resolved to be fully present in this place. I intend to sharpen my focus and listen with intensity and with care. Like Ezekiel, I am

learning that God's voice is not in the earthquake, wind or fire, but in the still small voice of calm.

May I seek that voice today.

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## April 13, 2008 – A Grinding Process



There were many times during the day yesterday when it wasn't clear what was going to happen. At times it seemed as if agreement was beyond those of us who had gathered. Sometimes it seemed as if we might not be able even to agree to keep talking. The governance proposal was amended with some votes that were too close for comfort. Tempers flared. Inaccurate accusations were made.

We went to bed with a vague sense that some sort of agreement was close, but without certain knowledge that we had gotten far enough down the road to make it work. Some of the groups continued to meet after others of us finally reached the end of our day. The results of those meetings will be reported this morning. It is still possible that the decision will be not to go forward, but it appears that the vision of some form of common board is beginning to emerge.

We are a long way from agreement. This process is far from over. But perhaps we have taken a few steps.

At the core of our discussions is the genuine desire to be inclusive. There is a shared commitment to the principle that all voices should be represented in the decision-making of our church and that justice demands that leadership be shared. It is the questions around how we do that that give us pause. Listening to others, many of whom see things very differently than one's self, is an exhausting process. Most of us have far more passion and energy for the mission and ministry of the church than we do for the structure of its governance.

But this work must be done. We must find a theology of organization that enables us to move forward without wasting the resources that we have been given. We must continually discover the unity to which we have been called. In a climate of extreme individualism, we must reach for the common good and renew our commitment to living in covenant with one another.

And we must come to terms with the simple fact that the church is changing. We are not the same as we once were. Our church came into being with deep European roots. The pilgrims, puritans and German immigrants that formed our predecessor denominations adopted much from the countries that they had left. But their passion for justice meant that our church soon grew to include African Americans with whom we shared a passion for justice and a belief that this country could move beyond human slavery. Our work with Native Americans gave rise to new voices and re-shaped our church. As different immigrant groups came to this country, our church formed new relationships and grew in different ways. The broad category of Pacific, Asian and Islander peoples is the fastest growing corner of our church at present. Hispanic individuals and congregations have invited us to think about God in new ways.

We remain committed to being the people of the table where everyone is welcome.

But there are many moments when our structures do not make everyone feel welcome. The extravagant welcome that we envision is imperfectly embodied in our day to day living.

Although I am exhausted and wondering where I will find the energy for one more day, I know that we are engaged in important work. I know that we are at least being open to the future and to the new places where God will call us. I am grateful that we have been able to forge a sense of unity, though dim and fragile, that opens a few doors to continue conversation and to continue working together. We may not have come up with the perfect plan for the multi-racial, multi-cultural church of the future, but we have engaged each other significantly, we have listened intently, and we have agreed to keep talking.

It is enough. Not that we have done enough. Not that we are sufficient in and of ourselves. But that we acknowledge that we can't do this alone is the critical first step that we must take.

This morning we will once again engage in the most important act of the church. We will worship together. Together we will install a new minister for local church ministries. Together we will ask God for guidance. Together we will hear the scriptures and pray for understanding. Together we will lay aside the maneuvering for power and the political processes of church government and reach out our hands to one another.

Even when we are not yet ready to trust each other, we can trust God.

It is enough.

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**April 14, 2008 – Home**



When I approached the Continental counter in Cleveland to check in for my flight home yesterday, the agent asked, "Is Rapid City an international destination?" At first I didn't know what was being asked, but after a short pause, I answered, "No, it's domestic." Not satisfied with my answer, the agent turned to another agent and asked the same question. That agent was more direct, "It's in the United States."

I guess it seemed exotic and far away to the ticket agent, who must meet a lot of people who are traveling to distant and exotic locations. At the time, it seemed to me to be a long way from Cleveland. Rising this morning in my own home, Cleveland seems a long way away.

I spent less than eight hours traveling yesterday. I had meetings, worshiped with my colleagues and had lunch before heading to the airport. I had a bit of waiting before my first flight departed and another wait in Denver. It isn't that big of a distance traveling in airliners at over 500 miles per hour.

But it is a mental and psychological transition. The change in governance of the United Church of Christ isn't the biggest priority for the folks at home. The Black Hills Association of the United Church of Christ postponed its spring meeting yesterday because the road to Placerville Camp was muddy. Our church board will meet tomorrow and high on its agenda will be discussions on how to increase attendance at worship. There are families with loved ones in the hospital for whom adjusting to a new level of health is a big challenge. There are a lot of places I will be in the next weeks where the

governance of the United Church of Christ will not be the most important topic of conversation.

One of the challenges of all who participate in the different settings of the church is to find ways to make connections between those settings. The church that installed Steven Sterner as Acting Minister for Local Church Ministries yesterday in Cleveland is the same church that listened to Associate Conference Minister Marc Stewart preach yesterday and it is the same church that will have its Association meeting at Placerville in a couple of weeks. But the different settings of our church often result in large gaps between our concerns and difficult challenges for communication. Those of us who fly back and forth between the various settings of the church carry special responsibility to tell the stories of our various church homes in all of the places where we participate in church.

Quite frankly this isn't an easy task. The difficult conversations about race and gender and inclusivity of many different groups of people have an impact on our local congregation and are important to our future as a church, but discerning appropriate ways to engage local people in those conversations is a challenge. In some of the places where our church is undergoing dramatic changes when viewed from a national perspective, our local church is staying quite the same. There is little concern for the precise theological language of the role of the church's General Minister and President or the length of the terms of those serving on the governance implementation task force for those who are sitting in the pews in Rapid City.

Yesterday, as I sat waiting for my flight in Cleveland, a loyal member of our local church called my cell phone to ask where the main water shut off for our building is located. He was spending his Sunday afternoon repairing a leaky valve in our church kitchen. His service to the church of Jesus Christ is as important, as valuable, and as meaningful as that of the committees that continued to meet in Cleveland. Sometimes we are better at living out our faith in the everyday tasks than we are in the high level discussions.

So today is a day of changing gears and remembering what is important here. I don't intend to forget the discussions about the governance of our church, nor do I intend to become disengaged from them. I just need to re-connect with the everyday life of one local congregation and re-engage in its struggle to be faithful in its mission and ministry.

We will celebrate the resurrection in one person going home from the hospital and another family working through their grief. I'll meet with a couple planning a wedding and go over the financial reports from another month of our church's life. I'll sort the mail and make another attempt at cleaning off my desk. I'll discuss the book we're reading with my local colleagues and figure out rides to camp. We'll be the church in our time and place and we'll do the work that needs to be done.

And along the way, I'll talk about the thoughts and discussions that are going on across this church about how we might structure our ministries. And I'll keep thinking of ways to tell the stories of this congregation to those who have not heard of the work we do.

And, yes, Rapid City is an international location. It is a city in South Dakota, U.S.A., that is actively engaged with people all around this globe who together make up the church of Jesus Christ. We belong to our sister church in Costa Rica and are influenced by events that happen in many distant locations. But if you are from Cleveland, we won't ask to see your passport when you come to visit us.

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**April 15, 2008 – Windsong**



Hotels keep trying different things to get repeat business. The hotel where our meetings were held in Cleveland last week featured seven pillows for each bed. I'm not sure what one does with seven pillows. I piled up six of them on one side of the bed and slept with one under my head on the other side. There also was a very fancy alarm clock that, according to the brochure, could be set with 15, 30, 60 or 90 minutes of nature sounds to lull you to sleep. Choices included ocean and wind chimes and a couple of others that I have forgotten. I don't think they had coyotes or the neighbor's dog or chickens or bawling calves.

Here at home we don't have such a device, nor do we have a need for one. The windows in our bedroom open. We go to bed with the sounds of our neighborhood, the most common of which is the breeze blowing through the pine trees. I grew up in a part of the world where the wind blows considerably harder than it does here. Most of the time our evenings have very gentle breezes and the winds are light, but even when the wind blows harder, the pine trees provide a shelter from the winds and they move in the wind with a gentle swoosh. It is a good sound for going to sleep.

Of course, the windows in the hotel don't open. I suppose that it would create problems with the modern heating and air-conditioning systems and that there might be some safety problems with open windows in high-rise buildings. But mostly, the sounds of the city are not very soothing: sirens, garbage trucks, traffic and the like. Outside of the neighbors' teenage sons, most of our neighborhood sleeps at night and the sounds that

come in an open window in the wee hours of the morning are natural sounds. The birds respond to the sunlight and are quiet in the dark.

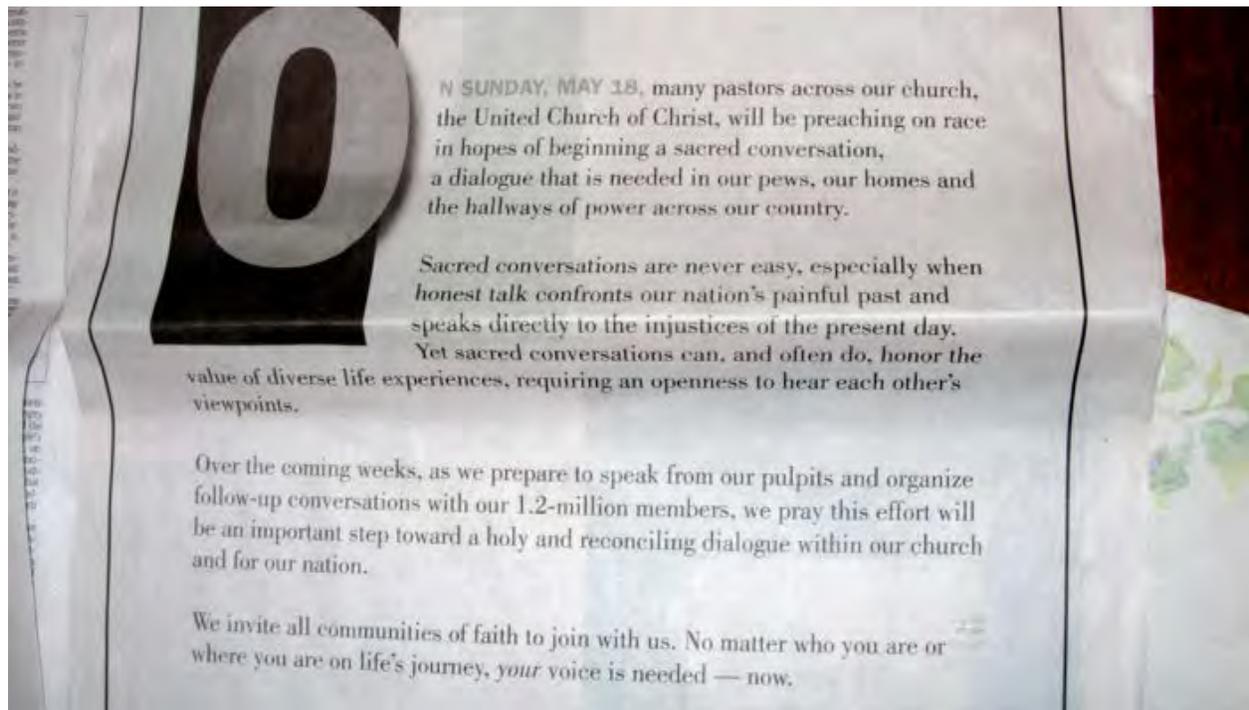
It is easy to become accustomed to the sound of the wind in the pine trees and one has to pause and listen consciously in order to be aware of it. But it is one of the sounds of home for me. Except during heavy blizzards or blowing rain, the window next to my bed is open most nights and the sound of the wind in the trees is just right for comfortable sleeping. The luxury of having a home that is not too close to the neighbors in a place with pine trees and the beauties of nature far exceeds the luxury of pillow-topped mattresses with seven pillows and down comforters and lavender-scented spray to freshen the linens. I would never trade the song of the wind in the trees for the fanciest alarm clock with pre-recorded nature sounds.

Of course most of the people of the world sleep in structures that are not air-tight and that allow for the flow of sounds in and out. The tents of a refugee camp or the shacks of a squatters' village are not insulated from the sounds of the other people that surround them. Urban poverty usually results in sleeping in noisy places and a distinct lack of privacy. So it is important that we acknowledge the luxury of sleeping the way we do and of the space that we are allowed.

Indeed we are a people of incredible privilege and we are fortunate to live in this place. May we never forget how fortunate we are.

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## April 16, 2008 – A Big Conversation



Last Friday, our church ran a full-page advertisement in USA Today inviting a national conversation about race. A few of our members saw the ad and have spoken to me about it. I've never had much of a sense of the value of advertising in the life of the church, feeling that marketing is not a very high priority for my understanding of the church. It has been my contention that if we are faithful in mission and ministry, our actions will speak louder than words and our lives are more valuable tools of communication than public relations.

But the advertisement has provided a way of starting some very important conversations. The ministers of the United Church of Christ have previously been challenged to preach on the theme of racism on a common Sunday as a way of engaging in church-wide conversations. Not being a thematic preacher, this is a challenge for me. Although I intend to rise to the challenge, I do not yet know what it might be appropriate for me to say, in the context of worship, that will be meaningful and valuable to those who worship with us that day. The advertisement, however, pushes the conversation beyond our congregation - and beyond our sister congregations. The conversation is not just a matter of what we say to each other, but a conversation that we will have with the wider community.

We live most of our lives in isolation, speaking and associating with people who are very similar to us. Churches tend to be among the most segregated of institutions in part because they are based on voluntary association. While the United Church of Christ,

taken as a whole is very multi-racial and multi-cultural, individual congregations tend to be less diverse.

Our church has taken some pride in its self-image of a place where everyone is welcome. But the way we seem to ourselves is quite different from the way we seem to others. Our address, our building and our style of worship has not attracted any number of the Dakota, Lakota and Nakota people of our community. Our Conference has a separate association of Dakota congregations. The contrast in wealth between native and non-native congregations in South Dakota is impossible to ignore. Our belief in equal access to all has not yet been realized in our state. There is privilege associated with being born off of the reservations. Native Americans encounter profiling and other acts of racism that challenge our notion of the way our society should be.

The truth is that the sacred conversation cannot be initiated by any sermon that I preach in our church. Like most other sacred conversations, it does not begin with my speaking but with my listening. There are sacred conversations that take place in the meetings of the Dakota Association to which I have been invited. The planning of a shared summer camp, set for Bridger this summer, is a form of sacred conversation. The native and non-native youth who participate in that camp will engage in sacred conversations. There are sacred conversations to be held with Faith Temple, the congregation that makes its home in a building our congregation used to own.

The idea that a relatively privileged European-American will be the initiator of the sacred conversation on race is probably a mistaken notion. But that does not mean that we will not have opportunities to become involved in the conversation. The first step, I suspect, is careful listening.

So today I am praying for the growing ability to be a careful and active listener - to open myself to the forums in our community where race and racism are discussed and to be honest in my assessment of my own attitudes and behaviors.

I am sure that our congregation will respond to the invitation for a sacred conversation on race. I am sure that the conversations we have in the months and years to come will be more important than a single sermon on a single Sunday. And I believe that is true of all sacred conversations we will need to invest more energy in listening to God's voice than in speaking.

May we listen carefully as the sacred conversation proceeds.

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## April 17, 2008 – The Organ



The organ chamber at our church is a construction zone this week. In preparation for the addition of a new division of about 14 ranks of pipes, the chamber has to be prepared for the new air chests, louvers and other components that will hold the pipes. We've had the electrician in to move a few things around, there is new sheet rock and insulation in the chamber to provide appropriate surfaces for the sound to reflect off of the inside of the chamber. The new air chests are loaded in the van and ready to be installed. It is an exciting time for those of us who are fans of the pipe organ. We know that dramatic new sounds are just around the corner.

I recently heard a presentation by a consultant and expert in new church development. He spoke about the younger generation of seekers who are looking for a church that is different from the traditional church. He spoke of some of the elements of traditional church services that are not inviting to these people. He made a couple of references to organ music as identified with boredom. He specifically said that new congregations should not worry about using the organ as their primary instrument.

Of course there is nothing new in this argument. Detractors of pipe organs have come up with all kinds of arguments against their use as instruments of worship. There are those who think that the extravagance of such an expansive instrument is a luxury that the church cannot afford in the face of great need. There are those who argue that the classical repertoire for organ is music of the past and that the church should focus on new music. The organ has experienced rises and falls in popularity throughout its

history. And it has been a primary instrument for Christian worship since the third or fourth century. It is unlikely that it will disappear from the church in a single generation.

The pipe organ does not need me to defend it or its use as an instrument of worship. The arguments have already been made. The organ is a communal instrument. The instruments that are installed in churches are of the size and quality that they need to be owned by groups of individuals and not by single owners. The organ is the highest and best of musical technology and offering our highest and best to God is a worthy endeavor. The organ delivers sound waves to the congregation on columns of moving air and the impact of the music on the worshiper is different from instruments that deliver sound waves across static air. The power to inspire comes from the unique use of air. Organ pipes are not just some whim of popularity here today and gone tomorrow. Properly constructed organ pipes last for 500 or more years when well maintained. Congregations that invest in pipe organs are making a gift to the future and thinking beyond the scope of a single generation.

But, as I said, I do not need to defend the organ. I do know that raising the money for this particular project was an easy matter in a church where raising money is not always easy. I know that there were generous donors who also give generously to mission and outreach. I know that some donors to this project had not previously been inspired to donate as generously to other projects. There were some once-in-a-lifetime gifts made to the organ.

And I know we are eager as construction proceeds, to hear the completed instrument. I do, however, admit that an organ is never truly completed and there will be people at a future time who choose to add to the instrument.

To those who say that investing in an organ is a sign of a dying congregation, I am comfortable saying, "time will tell." The truth is that there is much in new church development that is not much more than a puff of emotion. An exciting project rises, inspires new people to become involved. Then the involvement and enthusiasm wanes and the project founders. The life expectancy of new churches is not greater than that of existing churches, even congregations that are in need of revitalization. I am more interested in the big picture than in what happens in a five year time span. While some of the churches currently being planted will continue to serve for decades and even centuries, others are overly dependent on a single charismatic leader or the current mood of a neighborhood and will not be around years from today. The same could be said of existing congregations. Some will survive. Others will not.

In this generation of temporary solutions and short-term fixes, it is a source of joy and hope to be working on a project that will be providing music for worship long after the span of our own brief lives. Investing in the long-term future and building something that will last is a distinct joy in a throw-away society. Few of the electronic devices that we use will still be in use a decade from now. The money we invest in digital technologies

will not be evident in the next generation. But air will still flow through organ pipes. And the sounds of thousands of pipes will be combined to provide moments of inspiration, to lead congregations in singing, to accompany choirs, and to challenge musicians.

Our organ builders are meticulous and careful craftsmen. Sometimes when I ask about the completion date, one will sigh and say, "In our lifetime." Their pace and style is a delightful contrast to the rush and bustle of much of the rest of our world.

Perhaps a healthy church is one that is able to answer the question, "What can we do today?" as well as "How can we invest in the future." The congregation I serve seems to be an appropriate balance of genuine ministry and outreach in the present and also visionary investment in the future. The pipe organ project is not the whole story of who we are. It is one of many projects.

Maybe the sounds of the organ will inspire future generations of the church to mission and ministry in their own time.

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## April 18, 2008 – How to Build a House



The Department of Education is sponsoring a brunch at the church this Sunday where there will be display tables where various people show how certain things are done. The organ builders will have a display of how to build an organ pipe. A potter will have a display on how a pot is made. A leather-worker will show how leather is tooled. I had planned to do a demonstration on how to cane a canoe seat. But this has been a busy week and I don't have any un-caned seat frames ready. The only easy way to have the display would be to undo the caning of an existing seat and that doesn't seem to make any sense. So I decided to use the space for a brief display on how to build a house.

I've put together a series of photographs from our current Habitat for Humanity project along with a list of tasks and a few words of thanks for the many volunteers. As I was working on the display words from one of our most faithful volunteers kept ringing in my mind. "It isn't that difficult. We only have to build one house." The same person often says, "It's a house. We're not building a watch."

We've worked through the seasons on this project. We began in August with sweltering summer heat. We were framing through the fall, but weren't fully enclosed when the first snow came. I had to shovel out the house twice before we got the roof on. The weather cooperated for the most part and we got the house fully enclosed before the hardest part of winter set in. We shingled in the week between Christmas and New Years.

Building a house is simply a matter of stringing together a couple of big jobs plus a long list of small jobs. You just take it one step at a time. There are lots of things in life that are like that.

Of course the goal isn't quite as simple as building one house. Our goal is to eliminate poverty housing - to provide simple, decent housing for all of the people in our community. And then to provide it for all of the people in the world. Obviously we won't get this done by ourselves. We can build one house. And then another. And then another.

Construction work is good for a minister. Much of the work I do is mental. I talk. I write. I listen. I visit. I plan. Building a house requires some of the above. But it also requires lifting and carrying and sweeping and caulking and nailing and measuring and cutting. The physical labor allows my mind to wander in different directions than the intense mental concentration and focus that is required for much of my work. The camaraderie of working with others is different from my often solo work. Construction can humble someone who often wears a suit and tie. There are tasks where I feel a degree of competence and others where I feel that I am in over my head.

I have a colleague who spends an hour with a masseuse when stress compounds and there is a need for self-care. I go to the Habitat site and pound nails. It is very effective for me.

The first thing that is on my list of tasks for building a house is surrounding oneself with partners who know what they are doing. The most important part of the job, like so many others in life is the people. When we work together we can accomplish big things. It's not the only thing we do as a church. It is one of the things we do. And it is good work. It is meaningful work.

Who knows? Maybe one of the young people in the church will see the display and recognize that ministers get to do a lot of really fun stuff. The life of a pastor is rich and varied and full of exciting and interesting tasks. Perhaps someone would look at what I do and say, "Hey, I'd like a job like that . . ."

I may not be able to teach someone else how to build a house. But I might be able to share the joy of ministry.

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## April 19, 2008 – Tools



Building canoes and kayaks involves making a lot of precise cuts in wood. Many of the joints and connections are compound angles and since it is a boat that is being built, the pieces have to fit tightly. I have discovered that its worth it to own a few very precise hand saws. The Japanese saws that I use cut on the pull stroke instead of the push. They are very thin saws with fine teeth and it is easier for me to make precise cuts with these saws. In the boat building that I do, hand saws and block planes are among my favorite tools.

It would be fair to say that I am in no way limited by tools. I own a lot of tools and the tools I own are capable of being used to do much more precise work that I am able to produce. But there is something that is very pleasing about making a precise joint or cutting a piece of wood to fit exactly.

I got out my saws last night because we are moving to the stage of finish carpentry in the Habitat House that we are building. Today we will focus on hanging doors and installing trim. We have baseboards and door trim to fit and install. Like most other phases of house building in this time, this process is accomplished with power tools. Find hand tools are not required. A precise compound mitre saw with a good blade and air-powered finish nailers are the tools that are used. The days of mitre boxes and nail sets have passed in home construction. Accurate tape measures and power tools mean that the process of installing trim is quick and the finished product is pleasing to the homeowner.

But I still do a few tasks by hand. It might be said that I am more of a “putzer” and a producer. I can be distracted by one small detail and can slow production on the entire

project. But sometimes I can solve a small problem or correct a small mistake by taking time and working slowly.

We are trying to maintain a reasonable balance in our building. We want to work fast enough to get the house finished before the enthusiasm of volunteers and the patience of the new home owner are exhausted. But we want to work slowly enough to produce a quality home. Habitat for Humanity often focuses on volunteers rather than rapid production. We want to build houses, to be sure, but we are usually short of cash and long on volunteers. We can afford to invest time where a commercial builder would not have the same luxury.

So I'll take my hand saws to the job site today. We'll see how the flow of work goes and which volunteers are able to work today. Perhaps the saws will just sit in the truck. Perhaps I'll use them. Either way, I'll be glad that I got them out and took them with me. They are a symbol of the personal investment that I am making in this home. It is the personal investment of many volunteers that makes the house a home. It is not a product, produced as quickly as possible to make a profit. It is a home, filled with time and energy, commitment and generosity. Even if the homeowner can't see the difference in the work, our spirit adds to the quality of their life.

It is a good day for building.

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April 20, 2008 – Spring Days



The seasons are definitely changing. There is a bit of green in the grass and spring yard chores are beckoning. It's still a bit early for planting much of the garden yet, but there are plenty of other chores to complete.

When we moved into our present home, I naively thought that not having any deciduous trees would make yard chores easier. There would be no leaves to rake. Little did I know that pine trees produce truck loads of needles and cones. And pine needles are harder to rake than leaves. Of course the forest is carpeted with pine needles at all times and no one rakes them and hauls them away. But they make the soil acidic and if one wants to grow grass, it is necessary to rake them up and compost them away from the areas where grass is grown.

And pine cones are their own adventure. Part of the cycle of the forest is that trees produce more cones when they are stressed. And the drought and bark beetles have stressed the forest for several years now. So there are a lot of pine cones. This is good in the forest, where new trees are being planted. In our yard, however, we mow and we want a little control over where the trees grow, so we don't raise many volunteer trees. For the most part, we plant trees from the nursery or transplant trees from the forest when we want new trees.

So part of spring chores at our house is raking pine needles and picking up pine cones. Yesterday was a good day for the chore. We quit work at the Habitat House early and

the day was pleasantly warm for outside work and a few hours made a big difference in our yard.

The warm weather has me thinking of loading up a kayak and heading to the lake for a little time to explore and reconnect with the feel of the water under my boat. My days are busy, but I think I'll find some time in the next week to check out the spring happenings around the lake.

Spring days also mean that my mother can spend more time outside. She likes to take her reading out onto the deck and watch the birds and feel the spring breezes. It is a lovely time to be outdoors and enjoy the beauty of this world. The fact that we live in an area with large changes from season to season makes it all the more fun to experience the drama. A little over a week ago, we had snow on the ground. Now we're thinking of planting the garden.

Of course I am subject to spring fever and there have been many years when I've set things out in the garden too early and the frost has changed my plans and required re-planting. I know better. The problem is not a lack of information or understanding. There is just an exuberance to the ending of winter that makes one want to move forward. Spring blizzards can fall well into May around here and patience is called for, but patience is tempered by the joy of warm weather and spring days.

Like all of the seasons of life, the pace and the timing is not in our hands. We don't control the weather or the passing of the seasons. And being out of control is part of the fun. The surprise of each new day, and sometimes of each hour is part of the joy of life. A touch of spring fever is good for each one of us.

How fortunate we are to live in this place. How appropriate to begin each day with a prayer of thanksgiving.

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## April 21, 2008 – How Things are Made



Over the past year, our Department of Education has been hosting a series of after-church events where people share their hobbies. One Sunday, they invited people to bring their collections to church and display them. Yesterday, they invited a few people to set up tables displaying things that they make by hand and how they are made. There was a table of hand-made pottery, another displaying how organ pipes are made, one with knitting and prayer shawls and a table with with leather tooling.

Watching the people gathered at the tables I was reminded once again about a wonderful dynamic of our life together: our church brings together people of a wide variety of ages and gives them opportunities to work and play together. So much of our culture is based on activities where people are divided by age. Our schools teach grade-by-grade, sports activities match children of similar ages, recreational programs are often geared for specific ages. Many social organizations are designed to bring together people of similar ages.

Churches, too, are often tempted to divide people up into age groups. The division of church school classes is usually done in a similar manner to public school classes. We have programs for young adults, for parents of young children, for middle aged folks and for seniors. There is nothing inherently wrong with bringing people together with others who are of a similar age and interest.

But there is great joy in intergenerational activity. And there is great learning when people of different ages interact. Faith is not a subject that is taught in a conventional

manner. It is a way of life that is caught when people share their faith with one another. So much of the life of faith is learned by watching others and engaging in faith practices as a community. The lives and faith of adults are shaped by the faith of children as much as the lives and faith of children are shaped by adults.

The prophet Isaiah described his vision of a world where resources are fairly shared and where peace is genuine. In his vision, “a little child shall lead.” We are often lead by children when we take time to engage in genuine relationship with them. Our church strives to be a place where not only are all ages welcome, but where those many ages of people genuinely encounter one another. While we do have classes specifically for children and activities where participants are of similar ages, we continue to seek times of worship and learning where all ages are gathered together.

As people were sharing yesterday, I asked 4-year-old Evan what he was doing. “I’m pounding,” was the answer. His sister said, “He’s making a bookmark.” “No, I’m pounding!” responded Evan. When we get older, we often get our attention focused on the product - what will be made. But Evan was focused on the process - what was going on. The product was secondary to the process of pounding.

We can be tempted in our church life to think of the product - the size of our building or the status of our budget or the number of cars in our parking lot. But as critical as the product is the process: the relationships we build, the faith we share, and the way we treat the people that we meet. Thank God for the process.

Evan and Emily, Michael, Nation, Clair and Martin may not have produced any great works in leather yesterday. But they did share faith in ways that impacted their lives. The real products of our work aren’t as simple as organ pipes or pieces of pottery or prayer shawls. The real products of our work are lives of faith. May what we make together be pleasing to God.

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## April 22, 2008 – Messing About in a Boat



I got a little time to take a kayak to the lake yesterday. I was almost a month late getting my first paddle of the season this year. I don't know if it was the timing of spring snowfalls or the busyness of my schedule, but yesterday the elements came together for a paddle. As usual, I was a bit stiff and awkward for the first little while. It took me a few minutes to get settled in the boat, adjust my spray skirt, etc.

But soon I was out exploring the lake. Using a double paddle is a good basic exercise for someone who is out of shape. The motion involves a gentle stretching of the arms and shoulders and paddling on a lake allows the paddler to choose a comfortable pace. There is no reason to rush. Yesterday I had the lake to myself. A couple of fishermen were launching their boat as I returned from my paddle, but they had the only other boat that I saw on the lake.

It was good to get out, breathe fresh air and have a look at the ducks. It is still too early for chicks and the ducks are mostly busy finding food at this time of the year. We see a few Canadian Geese, but for the most part, they are transient. Not very many of them nest at Sheridan Lake. It was only 38 degrees when I launched the boat, so a good paddling jacket and a pair of gloves were in order. But a kayak is a warm boat to paddle. With the spray skirt in place there is plenty of insulating air around one's legs and lower body.

In Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the Willows*, Ratty says to Mole, "There is nothing - absolutely nothing - half so much worth doing and simply messing about in boats. In or

out of 'em, it doesn't matter. Nothing seems really to matter, that's the charm of it. Whether you get away, or whether you don't whether you arrive at your destination or whether you reach somewhere else, or whether you never get anywhere at all."

So I guess yesterday morning was about simply messing about in a boat without worrying about whether I might get anywhere at all. Sheridan Lake is relatively small and it is not difficult to paddle around the perimeter of the lake in a little over an hour. I like to poke the bow of the boat into the little nooks and bays and sometimes I paddle up the inlet until I reach a beaver dam. Yesterday, I just explored the shoreline and paddled gently. It probably wasn't much of a work out from the standpoint of calories burned or physical conditioning gained. It was just a few moments of solitude.

We affirm that we are never truly alone. God is with us in our endeavors, what ever they are and wherever we go. So time alone can be time to be reminded of God's presence. Time away from other people can be an opportunity to pray without words - to listen to the still small voice of calm. Over the years, we have discovered that significant moments in the wilderness are critical to maintaining balance in our ministry. We love being with people. We love working with people. We love having the opportunity to be of service to others. But sometimes we also need to get away - away from schedules, away from intense problems, away from the demands that others can place on us.

Simply messing about in a boat at the lake is a good way to encounter the wilderness. It doesn't require much mental focus. My mind is free to wander as I paddle. Unlike whitewater paddling, lake paddling carries few sudden actions or quick judgments. One simply sets a pace and a direction and allows the boat to glide as the paddle gently glides through the water. If you get tired, you can change the pace or even stop and rest for a moment. The boat is stable and is a good place for just sitting for a spell.

Today my schedule is back in full swing, with meetings to attend, tasks to complete, calls to make and plenty of activities. It is good to have had a few moments yesterday to paddle.

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## April 23, 2008 – Music in the Church



Yesterday was a fun day in our organ project. The organ builders brought over a lift and the heavy air chests were lifted into their position in the chamber. Crates of pipes were lifted into the balcony. In the next few days duct work will be installed to connect the air chests and the pipes will begin to be installed in their places. It has been a long process of building and preparing and the work has progressed to a stage where the results are visible.

I must admit to a fascination with music. Music of all genres has its role in our lives and we do well to pay attention to new forms of music and to the work of contemporary musicians. At the same time, knowledge of and appreciation for music of other generations is also a wonderful tool for the worship of God and for life itself.

It is an amazing thing that a living musician can transform notes on a page into an emotionally charged and transforming experience. The process of communication through music that allows a melody to flow from the heart of Bach into the hearts of men and women in churches today is as powerful as any human experience. The reformer Martin Luther had a special appreciation of music and its role in the church. Although other reformers such as Calvin and Zwingli mistrusted music and feared excessive emotional manipulation in their world of rational thought and intellectual faith, Luther had a hearty appreciation of music and a deep joy in its presence in the church. He spoke of good music as being an echo of the primordial first note of Creation.

Certainly music does have an incredible power to provide links to the past and to allow the realities of previous generations to come alive in the experience of people today. God's question to Job, "Where were you . . . when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?" receives its answer in part in the fact that we were not present for creation, but the sounds of music made by those who lived long ago continue to echo and reverberate in our lives today. Our music is shaped by the music of previous generations. Themes played by Bach and other historic composers show up in contemporary pop and rock music with great frequency. Perhaps the masters of years ago were also reflecting musical themes that connect us back through history to the song of Creation.

The hymns and songs we sing and play in church provide a connection with our past. They call us back to our origins. They recall for us the stories of the beginnings of our people and we are reminded that we are beloved children of God, created in God's own image. We are reminded that we are loved. It was in love that we were born, it is in love that we are called to live. Music has a unique power to enable us to recall our origins and our connections with God's continual creative activity.

But music is not just a story of our past. It is also the story of our future. Countless people of faith have included music in their vision of God's realm. Heaven is envisioned as a place of good music. There is a sense that music provides a certain order and rhythm for events and that harmony is not just the juxtaposition of certain notes, but a reflection of the way that we are intended to live with one another. We use a musical term, "harmony," to describe the state of genuine peace. The peace that passes all understanding, the peace of God, is a peace of harmony and the songs of peace are the sounds of the world as God intends it to be.

And so we invest heavily in music. And a big slice of that investment is in music that has been meaningful to generations of faithful people. There is a sense that music that withstands the test of time is music that will endure. Certainly there is new music being created in this generation that will provide meaning for generations to come, but the gifts of the past will also continue into the future.

So when all of the pipes are installed and all of the adjustments are made and the first sounds of an instrument designed to last centuries are being played, I will request that the organist play a little Bach. Not so much in honor and in memory of Luther, great reformer that he was, but in celebration of the ability of music to bridge generations and to inspire the children of today as well as the grandparents of generations past.

For now we wait. And as we wait, we will sing the songs of our people in this new place where our history has brought us.

## April 24, 2008 – Storms



A line of thundershowers moved up from the south and we had a few flashes of lightning and a few drops of rain last night. The severe weather was all south of us. It was interesting to be in a severe thunderstorm warning simply because yesterday was severe weather preparedness day and there had been exercises earlier in the day to make sure that emergency personnel were ready and the public informed about severe weather events.

But what we got was just a little rain. It was enough to make everything smell good. A little rain settles the dust and makes the countryside smell fresh. I stood outside and it felt good to see the damp trees and smell the good smell.

A phone call from an old friend came as a reminder of the past earlier this week. It brought news of hard times in their family as one daughter is going through a difficult divorce and another is facing surgery. As I hung up the telephone, I could remember when the scariest thing we were facing as parents was our children learning how to drive. We would talk about the risks they faced and wonder about what we could do to keep them safe. Now that seems quite trivial. The risks for which we prepared are not the threats we now see. All of our kids have done pretty well with driving. No major accidents. Good, safe records. But new fears and worries have entered their lives.

The storms that we see coming are never as severe as the ones that take us by surprise. And in this life, there are storms that we can't or don't anticipate. The sudden appearance of a tumor and a delicate surgery to remove it - we never think of such an

occurrence when we are thinking of our children. One day you are holding a tiny baby and marveling at what a miracle she is and you think to yourself, "I don't know if I could stand it if anything bad were ever to happen to her." Then time goes by and life happens and something bad does happen and you don't know if you can stand it but you do because you need to be there for her.

Life has its storms.

So today we surround our friends with our prayers. And we wait for the phone call that will tell us that the surgery is complete and gives some news of how the doctors evaluate what they have encountered. And we know that things will not be finished today. The best outcome, for which we pray, will still mean a time of recovery and adjustment and it will not remove future risks from her life. But it will still be a precious blessing to have her alive and conscious and able to converse with her family.

We take the gentle rains when they come and rejoice in the gift.

Like the weather, which is only partially predictable and always full of surprises, the course of our lives is not perfectly mapped. It takes turns and reveals surprises that we cannot anticipate. And we need to learn to let go of control. Because the control that we have is mostly illusion, really. There are major events and forces in our lives which lie well beyond our control. We cannot control the behavior or decisions of another person. Even with the best and most modern medical technologies, we cannot control all of the aspects of disease and disability. We cannot control the mighty sweep of history and the way in which our lives are influenced by decisions made in places far away from our sphere of influence.

Acknowledging that we are not in control does not remove from us the responsibility of the decisions that we do make. We are still called to choose and act wisely in the places where we can exert our influence. But while we can shape our destinies, our futures are truly in God's hands.

A little thunder and lightning served to remind us of the power of nature. The next storm could bring hail that will take the roof off of the house or flooding that will overwhelm homes in the valley. We strive to be prepared for whatever might happen and we work to have the resources to help our neighbors when the time comes.

Which is why we call each other when life gets overwhelming. We know we couldn't take all of this alone. We need our friends and neighbors. A simple phone call. A blast out of the past. A cry for help. A reminder of how much we really need each other. The distances that separate us are not too great to be overcome by the bond that we share.

How truly fortunate we are. As frightening as today's surgery is, it is good to be reminded that we are all in this together. And that there is a love and a power that is greater than us who shares our worry and eases our pain.

And, from time to time, sends the gentle refreshing rain. Alleluia!

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**April 25, 2008 – Vision**



The cloudy days change the view of the hills. Yesterday, as we drove to Spearfish and back, I commented that the hills weren't showing off at their tourist best. Much of the normally beautiful vista was shrouded with clouds. The things that we can see appear to be a bit more fuzzy when viewed through the clouds and rainfall.

Today my mother has a long-anticipated visit with an ophthalmologist. We are hoping that the doctor can provide some therapy and correction for the vision problems that she is experiencing. Like most people who have lived with diabetes for more than a decade, she experiences diabetic retinopathy, damage to the retina that is a complication of diabetes. Blood vessels at the back of the eye leak and cause blurred vision. Additionally, there are sometimes spots caused by leaked blood. The blurred vision seems to be worse early in the morning and when blood sugar levels are low. Constant vigilance and treatment seem to be the keys to maintaining vision, but there are no guarantees that her vision will ever return to completely normal.

For anyone a decrease in vision can be frustrating and challenging. For an avid reader, losing focus is a major disruption of life.

I woke this morning with the ancient Irish hymn, "Be Thou My Vision," in my mind:

Be Thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart;  
Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art  
Thou my best Thought, by day or by night,  
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.

Tradition attributes the hymn to Dallan Forgaill, but it has been a part of Irish monastic tradition for 13 centuries or more. Mary Byrne translated the verse into modern English and it was first published in 1905. The version we know was versified by Eleanor Hull in 1912. The tune is an ancient Irish folk song. The tune name, Slane, refers to the hill where St. Patrick celebrated the great vigil of Easter and lighted candles during the night before Easter sunrise.

Light and vision are intimately connected, both inside and outside of Christian tradition. We cannot see without light. But vision has a delicious double meaning for faithful persons, for we use the word to refer both to what we can see and to what we cannot see. The reference to what we can see is obvious. Less obvious is the use of the term to speak of inspirational experiences that provide direction for life. It is the second meaning that is emphasized in Proverbs 29:18: "Where there is no vision, the people perish."

One of the miracles reported by the gospels is the restoration of vision to a blind person. This seemingly impossible miracle now occurs occasionally through the application of scientific medicine. New surgical techniques combined with advances in understanding of how the eye works and modern pharmacology can produce dramatic results.

We are less accomplished at enabling people to recapture their spiritual connectedness and sense of purpose in life. "Be thou my vision," is not just a prayer for what our eyes perceive, but also a prayer for what our spirits perceive. We know that human beings can survive and live meaningful lives without physical vision. It is less clear that we can survive without a sense of purpose and meaning.

Where there is no vision, the people perish.

The translation of the Hebrew is complex in this proverb. "Perish" may not be the most faithful to the original. The Tanakh from the Jewish Publication Society translates the proverb, "Where there is no vision, the people cast off restraint." The concept is that without a sense of the future, there is no reason to live within God's law. The covenant that binds the people to each other and to God is meaningless unless they can sense God's future - a future that is bright with promise and possibility.

We have high hopes for the medical training and clinical application of Dr. Slingsby. Our level of trust in his capabilities is very high. But we also know that he works within the restraints of our very human bodies and there are processes that he cannot control. So even as we place medical decisions in the hands of the good doctor, we acknowledge that his sphere of influence is limited.

We live our lives in God's hands.

The version of the hymn that I learned ends with the words,  
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,  
Still be my Vision, O Ruler of all.

God, who is closer to me than my own heartbeat, no matter what the future holds. You are the true source of light and vision for me. The confession that God is in charge of this world and the submission to God's law reveal the true source of our vision.

Whether our view is clouded by falling rain or physical processes within our eyes, whether we see clearly or "as in a mirror dimly," may our vision be inspired by our love of God.

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## April 26, 2008 – The Dictionary



When our children got old enough to occasionally have dinner at a friend's house they began to discover that there were some things that were unique about our house. One of the things that they discovered was that ours was the only house where an unabridged dictionary was kept handy for use at the dinner table. Susan and I began reading the dictionary to each other before we were married, but we couldn't afford an unabridged dictionary until after we finished graduate school. Still, our 2nd edition Random House has been a part of our family life for more than thirty years now. I'm sure that if we thought we could afford an Oxford English Dictionary, we'd find a way to store it in the dining room.

"The reason you keep misspelling ophthalmologist is that you persist in mispronouncing it." "Did you know that in medieval physiology humor was one of four essential bodily fluids? The use continues to the present: humoral is a medical term for 'pertaining to a fluid of the body.'" There is plenty of liquid humor in our family. Since there is no reason to cry over spilled milk, we often find ourselves laughing at the mistakes and foibles of our lives. And what could be funnier than a family that keeps their dictionary in the dining room?

One of the joys of our lives is a love of language. Since we love to read, the power and meaning of words is of great interest and since we share the interest, we keep a dictionary handy to look up new ideas or to better understand old ones. Learning to use the pronouncer in the dictionary was a great revelation to me. I grew up reading books

and mispronouncing all of the words I wanted. It is only when you begin to discuss literature that you need a common set of pronunciations.

The idea of an unabridged dictionary is, of course, imperfectly realized in any actual book. Even if the definition of “hootchy-kootchy” doesn’t say “see cooch,” you end up looking up the word anyway to see the origins of the dance. And cooch isn’t far from cookie cutter in the dictionary which leads to an entirely different conversation. Even if the dictionary does not make cross references for every synonym, it must use words to convey the meanings of other words. One word leads to another. “What is the difference between humor and wit?” And if you let your eyes wander for a moment, you can learn that witloof is another word for endive.

Ross Snyder once wrote that “home is a meeting place of friends from around the world for the interplay of mind upon mind.” In our home, the interplay of mind upon mind requires frequent consultations with the dictionary.

We have good dictionary programs on our computers and I have been known to be looking something up on the Internet while Susan is looking it up in the dictionary. But the computer doesn’t hold the same appeal for dinner table conversations as the dictionary. I doubt if you’ll see dueling laptops at our table anytime soon. So far even with the wonders of the Internet, the spell checkers in our computers don’t have all of the words in our vocabularies.

We love the dictionary.

And it appears that we’ve succeeded in handing down this quirk of personality to another generation. When our children reached the age of 18, we asked them to name a single present that might symbolize this momentous occasion. Our son asked for an unabridged dictionary. Few gifts have been so delightful to purchase and give.

I suppose we could get out and go to the movies more often, but who needs movies when you have so many words right here at home?

Language is associated with big and historic movements in the story of humanity. The rise of alphabetic languages corresponds to the rise in monotheistic religions. Hieroglyphics, as pictorial languages were insufficient for complex theological expressions. The invention of the printing press corresponds to the rise of modern democracies. The ability to place multiple copies of the same text in the hands of the masses changed the balance of power forever. Cultures from the ancient Assyrians to British colonialists have used the domination of language as a tool of assimilation of populations. It is said that the rise of China as a world power is directly related to mandatory multilingualism in school. People who speak both Chinese and English can be players in world trade.

Perhaps the Gospel of John, heavily influenced by Greek philosophy, thought and language patterns, got it right:

“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the word was God.”

Thank God for words.

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## April 27, 2008 – Skiff of Snow



Spring in South Dakota is full of surprises. We woke to a skiff of snow yesterday. I had a meeting in Chamberlain and we saw increasing amounts of snow as we drove across the state. Folk at the meeting reported snowfall amounts as much as 18 inches in other parts of the state. It is spring snow, and it melts quickly. The moisture is good, but it doesn't always fall where the moisture is most needed. On the way home we drove on dry roads and sometimes saw the blue sky above. Just before we got to Rapid City there was a flurry of snow so intense that we couldn't see the other lane on the Interstate. It was brief and soon over. The snow from earlier in the day having melted, there was a skiff of fresh snow at home. Not enough to cause any worry, just enough to make things a little white and when the sun came out late in the afternoon it was beautiful.

Being a boat builder, I am well aware of the other meaning of the word skiff - a small boat that can be powered by oars or sails or even an outboard motor, often used for fishing in inland waters. It is the type of boat referred to in Hemmingway's "The Old Man and the Sea." There are regional variations of skiffs. Thames skiffs are usually double-ended. Maine skiffs have a flat-bottom and a flat transom at the stern. Alaskan skiffs are usually powered by an outboard motor and have a raised bow like a dory.

Being fascinated by words, it is interesting to note that the two uses of skiff in our language have different origins. When applied to a boat, skiff is a variant of the English word ship. It has its origins in German, where "skipam," means "boat" or "ship." There

are also variations of the word in Italian (“schifo”) and French (“esquif”). In Dutch the word “schip,” has a derivative “schipper,” from which the English “skipper” evolved.

Language being what it is, an unrelated term “skiff” was evolving in Scotland, meaning “to touch lightly” as in a gentle brush on the cheek. Perhaps it evolved from “scuff” which means “to brush against.” It came to be used a light gust of wind. Later it was applied to a slight shower or rain or a light dusting of snow.

At any rate the two uses of the word skiff seem to come from different origins to be the same word with two different meanings in contemporary English.

So we just had a skiff of snow. In the Eastern part of the state they got a whole boatload.

It was interesting to look at the doppler radar on the computer, which at one point showed heavy snow to the west of us in the Bighorns and heavy snow to the East of us in the Eastern part of the state, and no snow at all in our little island of hills in the prairie. Today the weather is clear in our region except for a few snow flurries way up in northeastern North Dakota.

The question for planners of the Spring meeting of the Black Hills Association is whether or not the skiff of snow made enough mud to discourage attendance at the gathering scheduled for our camp, Placerville, this afternoon. It has already been rescheduled once due to weather. I can't see any reason not to proceed with the meeting, but others may have different opinions. We will see.

Since we cannot control the weather, we have to learn to live with it. Most of the time that isn't much of a problem for us. There is an occasional heavy snowfall that demands tire chains, but those are infrequent. Many of us have a four-wheel drive vehicle for winter driving, but it isn't essential to live in this country. The roads are quickly plowed and getting around isn't much of a problem. Living in cold country teaches one to bundle up and be prepared, but compared to some places I have have lived, the weather is mild around here.

Sometimes canceling or postponing a meeting due to weather is a nice gift, an unexpected break in an otherwise full schedule. Like schoolchildren anticipating the next “snow day,” there is a certain joy in weather that is severe enough to force cancellations. We know that the hills need the moisture and we are willing to accept it however it falls.

But we are getting ready for the change from snow to rain. Spring fever sets in around this time of the year. Thoughts of gardens and lawns are encouraged by the bright sunny days and warm temperatures that come between the spring snowfalls. The grass

is sprouting green, most of the calves have been born and the hills are looking good for now.

Spring teaches patience, a quality of which I do not have an excess. So it is good for me to watch the weather and learn its lessons. There is much in this life that is beyond our control. And that is a good thing.

Yesterday gave us moments of gray and moments of sparkling brilliance. All of it is a gift of God. It brings to mind Cecil Alexander's hymn:

All things bright and beautiful,  
All creatures great and small,  
All things wise and wonderful:  
The Lord God made them all.

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## April 28, 2008 – Remembering Wilderness



It has been nearly two years since a sabbatical took us to Uluru - Kata Tjuta National Park in Australia's red center. When we were there, we were warmly welcomed by the Anangu, the traditional owners of the land.

"This is Aboriginal land and you are welcome  
Look around and learn, in order to understand Aboriginal people  
and also to understand that Aboriginal culture is strong and alive."

The land of the Anangu is incredibly beautiful. And there is space to enjoy it. With 90% of Australia's population living on the coasts, the center is sparsely populated. This is appropriate for the desert, where there are limits on the ability of the land to sustain large populations. It is a place where time moves slowly and the Anangu are deeply connected to a long heritage - a distant past. The Anangu at Uluru are direct descendants of and contemporary participants in a culture that has been living in the same area for at least 5,000 years and perhaps longer. Before Christ - before Moses - before Abram and Sarai left the land of their parents and grandparents - the Anangu lived and taught their traditions at Uluru.

When we were there, we commented that this unique landscape and its people had forever changed our lives. The walk around the base of the giant rock has infused a bit of that place and its traditions into our lives in a way that we would never forget.

Now, nearly two years later, it is important to remember our time there.

Tjukurpa, the orally transmitted history and culture of the Anangu, is filled with story and ceremony that enable both Anangu and Piranpa (non-Aboriginal) understand the importance of interpreting the landscape. People are shaped and formed by the land and the stories of the people are contained in the sacred places and paths in the desert.

Experiencing the wilderness is significant and life-altering. Learning how the traditional owners interpret that landscape is important to understanding the sacredness of the wilderness.

Encountering wilderness has been important in our ministry. We are the descendants of people whose journey from slavery to freedom involved a significant time of wandering in the wilderness. Our grandfather Moses used to go up on the mountain alone to pray and to obtain for us God's law and direction. Many generations later, Jesus came to us and shared our lives. When the people pressed in upon him and the shortness of his time was apparent, he "went off to a lonely place to pray." Like our forebears, our relationship with God is strengthened when we take time to get away from the everyday and go out into the wilderness to renew our relationship with God. From the perspective of the lonely places, we are more able to recognize that God is with us in all of the places of our lives.

Now, in a different phase of our lives, we recognize that we cannot always travel to the distant lonely places. There are times when we will need to encounter wilderness much closer to our home. There are times when we need to stay at home. It is in these times that our ability to remember wilderness is important.

We are fortunate to live in a time and possess the technology to surround ourselves with pictures. I keep images of wilderness on my computer and regularly look at them as I go about the business of everyday living. The pictures serve as reminders of a deeper reality. Having stood in the open country as the sun set on Uluru we can remember the rapid changes in temperature and the dramatic changes in the vista as the evening approached. Having walked in the open places, we are aware of the sounds of the desert and the feel of the sun.

But our memories are imperfect. We have forgotten as much as we can remember. That is why the Anangu call us Piranpa. We are not people of the desert. We do not daily walk barefoot on the land of their story. We came to visit and to learn and we returned to our own home and the stories of our own people. And the stories of our people are much less connected to a single place. Although the promised land figures deeply in our story and Jerusalem - the city of heavenly peace - figures boldly in our religious traditions, we are wanderers. Jesus owned no property. The apostle Paul found himself preaching far from the land of his birth. Our people have always been on the move. We have encountered many different wildernesses, most of them sacred to other people. Part of our story is that we are descended from wanderers. Our story contains the tales

of many places and reads more like a map of the world than the description of a set of boundaries.

Instead of remembering one place, there are many that we remember. And we have sensed the presence of God in each place. Every place is holy ground. Every place is sacred. It is one of the early learnings and deep traditions of our people. The one true God is the God of all places. There is nowhere we can go where God is not present. So we remember not only the history of our people, but also our travels. And we accept that we are wanderers often welcomed in to the lands of other people.

Perhaps every place is a wilderness for us.

That is an idea worth remembering, even as we remember the special encounters with God in the many wilderness places we have visited.

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## April 29, 2008 – Dry Hills, Refreshing Water



According to the National Weather Service, in spite of some improvement in certain areas, a moderate drought persists in the hills. It is dry and the forest remains stressed. Despite a few spring blizzards, total moisture from rain and snow remains below average amounts. We are hoping for a wet spring with more rainfall. May and June can be months with plenty of thundershowers and heavy rainfalls. It would help to fill the reservoirs, but with thundershowers come increased fire danger as well.

The people of the Bible had a deep appreciation for the value of water. The Mid-East and northern Africa where the Biblical narrative takes place, is a desert area. There are some lush river valleys and some places where crops and fruit trees grow easily, but there are also great expanses of barren and dry ground where water and food are difficult to find. Our stories include times of hunger and thirst in the desert as our people learned to trust God in their journey from slavery to freedom. The wells discovered by some of the early leaders of our faith figure prominently in some of our stories. The well where Jesus met the Samaritan Woman is attributed to Jacob.

We have learned the value of water. And we have learned that all water is a miracle - a gift of God. Without water there is no life.

Even in these times of lower rain and snow fall, the creeks are trickling down the hillsides and there is some inflow into the reservoirs this spring. Geologists have reminded us of the porous nature of much of the Black Hills and of the large underground aquifer that provides an additional source of water for those of us who live

here. Although the soils have some filtering properties, we have to be very careful with surface pollutants as they pose a threat to the entire water supply.

As a canoe and kayak person, I tend to evaluate bodies of water and streams in terms of their potential for recreation. I often drive by Spring Creek on my way to Sheridan Lake to put a boat in the water. The creek is too small to kayak. But a walk along the creek is a refreshing and joyous trip. There is much life that is sustained by the creek and areas close to the creek contain plants that do not exist elsewhere in the hills. There are pools of water that provide excellent fishing as well as cool resting places for hikers.

It doesn't take an ocean for the miracle of the gift of water to be evident. There is a gift of God in every drop of water. In the midst of the extravagance of God's generosity, we fail to recognize the value of the gift. Sometimes it takes scarcity for us to truly appreciate what we have. The people of Israel learned to appreciate the spring of water welling up from the rocks after dry and thirsty wandering in the desert. At this time of the year, we become aware of countless tiny springs in the hills where fresh, clean water bubbles up to the surface and runs down to add to the creek.

So this spring we pray for rain and learn to be grateful for the water that we have been given. Compared to most of the rest of the world, we have easy access to water. We turn on the tap and cool, clean water comes out. We do not lack water for bathing or cleaning our clothes. We live in the midst of abundant blessings.

May we never take the gift of water for granted. And may we find new joy in each drop of rain and each flake of snow.

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**April 30, 2008 – Daffodil**



There are more signs that spring has arrived in the hills. There should be. Today is the last day of April. The neighbors have a small bed of bulbs between our houses and it burst forth in color in the warm temperatures yesterday. There are a few grape hyacinths, some crocuses, and quite a few daffodils in the bed. So far there isn't any sign that the deer have been munching. The grass in the yards is so lush and green that the deer don't need to check out the flower bed.

Daffodils are one of the sure signs of spring around here. We have a few tulips and some years we get the flowers, but they are a favorite of the deer and this isn't a place for them to thrive.

Daffodils and Jonquils both carry the botanic name *Narcissus*. In Greek mythology, Narcissus became so obsessed with his own reflection as he kneeled and gazed into a pool of water that he fell into the water and drowned. In Greek etymology, Narcissus' name is connected with *Narkoa* - from which our contemporary term "narcotic" derives. There is a sense, in the tale of Narcissus that he literally became drugged by his admiration of himself and that he was addicted to looking at himself.

I suppose that there is something narcissistic about the beauty of spring. At least I go through an annual ritual of deciding that spring is a time to do something about my own appearance. I resolve to exercise more, to lose weight and to shape up for the summer that lies ahead. I don't think that I'm in any danger of falling into a pool because I'm looking at myself, and my experience has been that falling into pools or lakes or other

bodies of water is not particularly life threatening for me, but I do weigh myself more often in the spring than at other times of the year.

There is a quality about spring daffodils that invites me to look closer and to spend a little more time with the visual, however. The beauty isn't mine, but it is nonetheless captivating. I enjoy taking a few extra moments to look at the blossoms and to marvel at their sudden appearance. Yesterday was a perfect day for such an enterprise, with highs in the seventies and although there was plenty of work looming, I lingered in the late afternoon looking at the flowers.

It is one of the fascinating features of the universe. To our knowledge, human consciousness is the only point in our universe where the universe is self-aware. There is some evidence that some other primates, such as gorillas and chimpanzees can at least recognize themselves in a mirror, but the ability to examine the universe and contemplate one's place in it seems to be a uniquely human characteristic. The creation stories that appear at the beginning of Genesis hint that the ancients were aware of this quality - in all the plants and animals and other living beings God did not find a helpmate - only in the human was one created who was capable of being in relationship with God - of receiving the love of the Creator and passing it on.

Deer, being mostly nocturnal, probably do not pause and marvel at the beauty of a flower before eating it. It probably is not evaluated by the deer in any other fashion than "Is this food or is it not?" We, however, not only appreciate the beauty of plants, we have developed techniques for cultivating and transplanting them so that we can get them to grow and bloom in the areas we designate, according to a plan created solely for our enjoyment - beauty for the sake of giving us pleasure. And we, perceiving deer to also be beautiful and enjoyable neighbors are torn between our love for our ornamental plants and our enjoyment of the deer. I have more than a few neighbors who currently are coming down on the side of the plants, devising ways to keep the deer at bay. I usually come down on the side of the deer, allowing them to munch at my plants. I do, however, draw the line at tomato plants and have a high deer-proof fence around my vegetable garden.

The forecast is still uncertain. We'll probably experience freezing temperatures by the end of the week and the prospect of snow is not totally eliminated. But yesterday, for a few hours, spring reigned in the hills in all of its glory. It is a promise of things that are yet to come. And it is a joy that we do not have to wait for the generous beauty of this world.

New life continues to emerge. Alleluia!

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**May 1, 2008 – Rainy Day**



Some days just suck.

That really isn't accurate. Some parts of some days just suck. Or some things happen to some people that seem really unfair and really hard to understand. I got one of those phone calls last evening - the kind you dread - the kind you don't want to get.

It was a friend in another state. Despite what the doctors had predicted, despite how it seemed last weekend, the results have come back from the lab. The tumor was malignant. It is an extremely aggressive and fast growing form of cancer. There are no further surgical options. There are forms of radiation and chemotherapy that have been shown to slow the process slightly. In most similar cases, we are talking months, not years. Best case would be a couple of more years.

Some news just sucks.

There isn't a Dad's manual. But if there were, it would say that you should teach yourself to put your children first. You should be attentive to your marriage to make their home stable and you should work hard to provide for their needs. You should spend the money on the piano and the lessons and you should figure out how to be home as much as possible when they are home. You should help with their homework and protect them from unnecessary harm. You should teach them safety when they learn to walk around the block and when they learn to drive a car. You should be interested and invested in their lives. And if you do, the chances are that you will be able to partner

with your spouse to raise children who are healthy and well adjusted. Maybe some day they will become parents themselves.

When you are a parent, there is a certain stage - maybe when your child reaches 25, or when that child graduates from college, or when she or he gets the first full-time job or first apartment - there are stages when you feel like you've accomplished some of the things you sought to do. You know, by then, all of the dangers and threats to your child. You've worried about most illnesses in the book. You've lectured about drugs and alcohol and you've watched the friends that come into your home. You've tried to be supportive, but also have tried to set firm limits. You've even learned that there are some things that aren't your business and that children grow into adults who make their own decisions.

So when you have raised a daughter past her mid-twenties and one day she comes to your home and announces her engagement and the young man seems to be very nice and she seems to be very happy, you are happy too. That's the way dad's are supposed to feel.

So the Wham! of the news that there is a small tumor and that she needs to see a surgeon hits you hard, but you're a dad. You're supposed to be there for her. You act strong and take her to doctor's appointments and go to the hospital early on the morning of her surgery and you pace the waiting room and you try hard to understand everything that the doctor is saying. And when she is visibly better the next day and goes home from the hospital early because she is feeling so good, you allow yourself to hope that this event isn't life-altering.

And when the doctor uses the "C" word you go numb.

You know you have to call your friends. They have been praying and hoping and supporting you. And you haven't got a clue what to say.

Heck, calling friends is easy.

What do you say to your daughter, who just found out that a 30th birthday is not in the picture for her?

Dads are supposed to protect their children from all manners of evil. If there were a Dad's manual it would be in there. In bold type. On the first page.

Even though none of this is about you, you can't help but feeling like an utter failure. Dad's aren't supposed to let their daughters die. Dads are supposed to walk their daughters down the aisle in the church on their wedding day. Who knows if there will even be a wedding now?

I listened on the phone. I tried to offer what support I could from a distance that is too great over a medium that is totally inadequate. I went home. I said my prayers. I went to bed. And I slept. I woke up feeling vaguely guilty. I know my friend, the father of the daughter with stage III brain cancer, didn't sleep very well last night.

Dads are supposed to protect their children. Sometimes they just can't. When all else fails, or sometimes even before that, you call your pastor. A pastor will say comforting words and offer calming prayers and make it better. Sometimes they just can't.

There isn't a Dad's manual, but there is a pastor's manual. It's called the Bible. Our people have survived the death of children before. We have endured life-ending illnesses. We have witnessed great miracles of healing. We have been shown that death is not the end. There are a lot of words in that marvelous book. None of the right ones are coming to mind at the present.

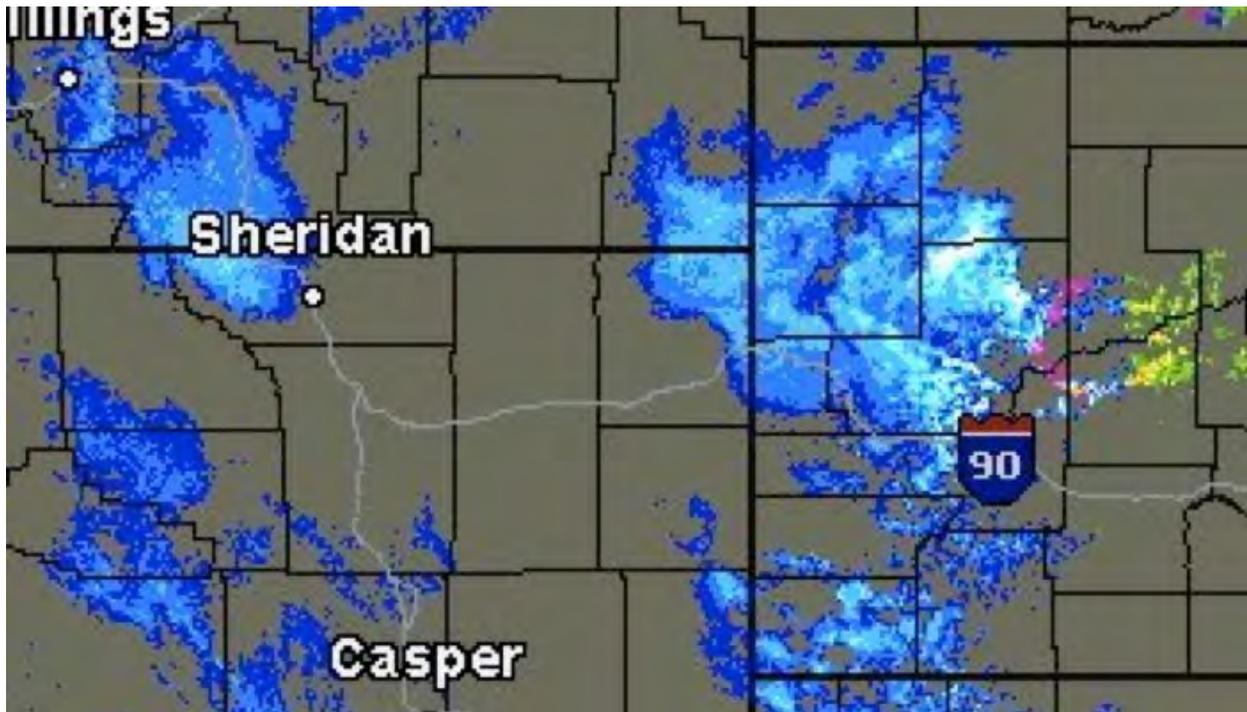
I know that I will call my friend this morning. I know that I won't have the right words to say. I know I can't make it right. In this one, we really need God.

It's raining. I'm crying. I know the rain will turn into a blessing for our hills. I hope someday I can see some blessing in these tears. OK, the day doesn't suck. But it doesn't look like it will be one of the easy ones.

Pray for Andrea. Pray for her dad and mom and sister and fiance. We're all in this together. God knows I can't do this alone. Thank God we are not alone.

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## May 2, 2008 – The Day of the Blizzard



Radar image courtesy of weatherunderground.com.

Old timers in this area like to talk about the blizzard of '67. Spring blizzards are a part of the place where we live and even for those of us who have not lived her for that long can remember events being cancelled by blizzards in May. The wet snow of a spring blizzard is different from the snow we get in the heart of winter and the temperatures usually warm up quickly and the snow doesn't last more than a few days.

We had plenty of warning on this one. The forecasters have been telling us for almost a week that it was coming. Yesterday it snowed all day in the high country, as much as 18 inches in some places, but we were getting rain. The winds began to pick up in the late afternoon, but our rain didn't turn to snow until nearly 11 in the evening. We've had enough time now, however, to know that there will be some disruption to schedules due to the snow.

People will have trouble getting around because the snow is piling up and the wind is howling. The drifts will pack, visibility will be diminished, and it will take the plows a while to get the roads cleared. A blizzard warning remains in effect until 6 p.m. today and more snow is expected throughout the morning. We could get another 5 to 10 inches and with winds gusting to 65 mph, it will be drifting. It is a good day to stay indoors.

All of which means that the newsletter may not go out today. We'll encourage our volunteers to stay indoors and I may encourage my secretary to stay home. Church

bulletins will get done before Sunday, but we may not be doing them on schedule. Some folks will be late to work, others will miss today.

A snow day can be a blessing and it can be a hassle. Some area schools have already cancelled. Rapid City schools had already scheduled a professional development day for teachers and no classes for students will be held. It's too early to tell what will occur and what will be cancelled. There aren't many cars going by on the road. The newspaper delivery, usually accomplished by now, hasn't happened yet.

I'd love a snow day, but suspect that I'll be out and about in the weather getting a few chores done. We have reliable four-wheel-drive vehicles and are, for the most part ready for snow. There are plenty of folks who will have to be out in the weather. Power crews will be making repairs to fallen lines, highway crews will be plowing snow, emergency crews will operate as usual, but with more problems due to cold and drifting snow.

We like the illusion that we are in control. We set schedules that we think we can maintain. We like to think that we are in charge of when things happen. Our plans are based on our experience of what we are capable of doing. But every once in a while we get the gift of the reminder that we are not in control - there are forces beyond our power that effect our lives.

The ancients didn't have any trouble seeing weather as a sign of God's power and presence. "The winds of the spirit blow where they will." We like to use our knowledge of science and the technological advances of our time in an attempt to forecast what will happen and explain the natural phenomena that surround us. It is only a matter of semantics. The words we use to describe the weather does not change the reality.

So I say, "let it snow!" It will do no good to wish otherwise. Maybe I'll get a bit more reading done. Maybe there will be time to catch up on correspondence.

Maybe I'll sit by the window and watch the snow pile up.

After all, I'm likely to be out with a shovel when it stops. I rarely just wait for it to melt.

Be safe. Be warm. Enjoy the change of pace. The illusion that we are in control has always been an illusion. Thanks be to God that we don't control the weather.

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## May 3, 2008 – Digging Out



It looks like we get to parlay our spring blizzard into a couple of snow days. Most of the events and meetings that I had scheduled for today have been cancelled or re-scheduled. I'll have to go into the office and do a few things that we had planned to do yesterday, but the day should be fairly laid back. The county and the city have been out with the snow plows and while there are still some side streets that need to be plowed and a few intersections that need to be cleared, for the most part it is easy to get around.

The deer kind of hunkered down for the storm, but as soon as it started to melt, patches of lush, green grass began to appear and by late afternoon yesterday they were out and about looking no worse for the experience. The deer seem to be pretty good at weathering the blizzards, they haven't begun to have their fawns yet, or if they have, we haven't seen any of them. The yearlings and adults seem to find places of shelter during the storm and soon are out and eating after the snow stops.

The wet snow is heavy to shovel. Fortunately we have a good snow blower and so I had our driveway cleared before the county plows got to the road in front of the house.

Today would have been our annual community walk for the Front Porch Coalition, a local group that works to prevent suicide. We will reschedule the walk, but it is a day to pause and think. Suicide carries a lot of stigma in our community, and by walking we hope to overcome some of that stigma. We need to talk about suicide in order to prevent future deaths. In the United States, a person dies by suicide every 16 minutes.

More than 32,000 lives are lost to suicide each year. In our community that translates to about one death by suicide each month.

By raising awareness of suicide, and providing for educational events in area schools and our community, we can help people find the resources in our community for the effective treatment of mental illnesses and for the prevention of suicide.

Every survivor of suicide knows the feeling of digging out. It isn't the same as the snow, however, because the load of grief under which a family gets buried will not melt on its own. It never goes away. Lives are altered forever. You don't get over the suicide of a loved one, you get through it. You become a survivor.

The annual walk has been a way to raise funds to support our local organization. It is also an annual opportunity to connect with survivors and to hear their stories. It is a time to raise community awareness and promote suicide prevention education. In addition it is an opportunity to remember some remarkable people who have touched our lives. Their death by suicide marked an ending, but their impact on our lives was permanent. And, as the pain begins to soften and the time lengthens, remembering becomes more pleasant - and important.

In recent years, public attention has been given to depression. New treatments are more effective than some of the past treatments and public attention has helped people get effective treatment. Depression is a mental illness that can result in death if not treated properly. But there are other psychiatric disorders that can lead to suicide and public awareness is essential to effective treatment. Persons suffering from bipolar disease (sometimes called manic-depressive disorder) have the highest suicide rate of any psychiatric disorder, over 20 times the rate of the general population. And although bipolar disorder can lead to times of severe depression, the treatment is not the same. Bipolar patients who receive treatment for depression alone have their symptoms increase and their disorder becomes even more disabling.

Alzheimer's disease, the least stigmatized brain disorder, receives \$4.7 billion in research funds each year. Bipolar disorder receives less than \$250 million and wasn't even included in the most recent report of the National Institute of Health as a separate category. That's less than a quarter of the research devoted to diabetes. Yet this disease has stricken 5.8 million Americans. The lack of funding is due in part to the social stigma.

So we walk. We raise public awareness. We tell anyone who will listen that these diseases don't just affect statistics - they affect people that we know and love.

If you are in crisis, call 1-800-273-TALK (8255). Memorize this phone number. Give it to everyone you know. Prevention is possible and help is available.

For a suicide survivor every day is a day of digging out. One way that the work of digging out from under the grief is to educate others and to raise public awareness.

For more information on suicide prevention, go to <http://www.afsp.org>. Help is available. There are a lot of us who are digging out. Knowing that we are not alone is important.

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## May 4, 2008 – On the Frontier



Part of the story of our congregation is that we began as a frontier church. The Black Hills were settled relatively late in the story of the United States, but our church was the first church in the area known as “Hay Camp” that later became Rapid City. One of our founding stories is about Rev. Joseph Pickett, who came up from Colorado and started five churches in the hills, of which ours is one. Rev. Pickett was killed in a stagecoach accident. Life on the frontier was risky business.

Of course, we’ve become more sophisticated in the way we tell our story. Now, when we talk of the founding of our church, we acknowledge that our forebears were not the first to come to this area. We did not bring religion and culture to the hills. The Lakota culture and religion was highly developed before Europeans came to this area. And there were others who lived in the region before the Lakota. The hills were not a place of permanent dwelling, but rather a religious and cultural center for people whose life involved moving to follow the buffalo herds on the upper Great Plains.

But there is a sense of frontier in our self image. And there are frontier issues that are a part of our life today. Issues of land and people, relationships between natives and newcomers, management of the forest and mining are still very real in our community. Christianity is a faith that is at home on the frontiers. Jesus was continually crossing boundaries of tradition and convention to explore new frontiers of faith. His disciples are similarly called to challenge boundaries and explore new frontiers.

A good spring blizzard can remind us of our life on the frontier. There are many people whose lives are so unaffected by the weather that they never experience the joys of getting snowed in and changing their schedules because of the weather. But here, we take such an event in stride, acknowledging our limits and working around the weather. When the snow melts, we feel like survivors and enjoy the fact that we live in a place where we are still affected by the wind and snow.

One of the biggest problems of any frontier is the management of fear. People who are constantly confronting the unknown also have to confront their own fear. There are many stories of courage in the history of our church and in the stories of life on the prairies and in the hills. Sometimes we are tempted to erect fortresses in order to create havens of safety. But fortresses, with their walls and barriers, are just the opposite of our faith. Our faith calls us to overcome barriers and to come into contact with the world.

It is a continuing struggle for an institutional church. We have a building and a heritage and traditions that we have built up over the years. Our architecture and appearances of stability and permanence can be barriers to some who seek to explore their faith. Our established relationships and strong community can be hard for newcomers to penetrate. Our frontier attitude of seeing folk as native or newcomer can be a barrier that makes it hard for our congregation to grow.

We see ourselves as living on the frontiers of faith. But sometimes others see us as living in a fortress. The problem is not the existence of a building or a sense of history or a loving and caring community. The problem is our attitude toward these things. If we see them as possessions to be maintained, we can enjoy them, at most, for the short span of our lifetimes. If we see them as legacies to be shared, they become seeds for the future.

One of the frontiers of our faith is learning to give. Sharing is always a challenge, for we fear scarcity. But overcoming our fears is one of the invitations of the frontier.

The land has been settled. Despite an occasional spring blizzard, or an occasional visit from a mountain lion, life in the hills is not very wild. The frontiers have moved. Some look to space as yet another frontier. But our frontier is internal. Now we are invited to cross the boundaries and discover the newness that lies within.

We can see our life together as frontier or as fortress. Which way we choose can make all the difference in the world.

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## May 5, 2008 – Mountain Goats



From time to time we see mountain goats in the hills. They tend to stay in the higher places, and can be observed around Mt. Rushmore, the Crazy Horse, Harney peak and other places, usually on the granite outcroppings. Recent years have seen a decline in the mountain goat population. There are several theories. Some think that the increased population of mountain lions has meant more predation. Others think that the rising population of big horn sheep has meant competition for habitat. Others speculate about diseases that may be present in the population.

From time to time, since the 1930's fish and game officials have transplanted mountain goats from other parts of the country, predominantly from Colorado. Officials are not certain that mountain goats are native to the Black Hills. They seem to do well here most of the time. But it is certainly possible that the newer transplants, when encountering the goats who were already here are encountering distant cousins, who themselves are descended from transplants.

The people of the hills are kind of like the mountain goats. Most of us are transplants. It is just a matter of when we showed up. The arrival of miners, ranchers and other settlers from other parts of the United States placed pressures on the way of life for the Lakota people. A century or more earlier, the arrival of the Lakota in the area placed pressures on Cheyenne, Absarokee, Mandan and Hidatsa people. After a century there are enough children who were born here that there are all kinds of people who consider this place to be their native ground.

There are a few historical markers that are used to distinguish natives from newcomers. Some Lakota people consider all people of European descent to be newcomers. There were almost no people of European descent in the early 19th century in this area. By the dawn of the 20th century they were the dominant population. The destruction of the buffalo culture took place in an even more narrow window of time, perhaps 40 years. Families who can trace their heritage back more than 100 years in this area, often consider themselves to be native and others to be newcomers. The hearty pioneers who founded the community and who started new institutions in this place have made many contributions to the overall way of life in this place. Ranchers and community leaders have left a legacy that reaches beyond their direct descendants. Another marker is the flood that devastated our community in 1972. Folk who were here at the time of the flood see a distinction between themselves and those who arrived after the flood. The newcomers, who arrived after the flood did not share the experience that shaped the lives of those who were living here at that time. In our congregation we have yet another marker. With the number of people who have joined the congregation since Susan and I began to serve as pastors approaching 30%, there are “before the Huffmans” and an “after the Huffmans” groups in our church.

The question of who is native and who is newcomer is at least as complex with the people as it is with the other critters that inhabit the hills. And the populations have been affected by a fair number of management policies, both wise and unwise, over the years.

Our family isn't even like the Mountain Goats. We moved here in 1995. We're definitely newcomers. But Susan had an aunt and uncle who moved to the area in the early 1960's and there are some distant cousins who are still here. And this community has a large number of people who spell their last name the same as ours and it is possible that some of them are related to parts of our family who lived in North Dakota in the early decades of the 20th century. And each year that we live here it begins to feel more like home. And from time to time we catch ourselves thinking of the people who live in the subdivisions that have been built since we moved here as “newcomers.”

I guess we're all like the critters of the hills. It doesn't matter if you're a mountain goat or a bighorn sheep or a whitetail deer or a mule deer, a coyote or a mountain lion. There may not be a consistent genetic trail that goes back to the beginning of time for your kind in our place, but we all live here together now. And there is good evidence that there are a fair number of transplants in all of our family trees. And we need to learn to live with each other - natives and newcomers. In fact we may be related in ways that we do not know.

Recounting the injustices of the past is important for understanding of the way we have been shaped by those events, but it is not a roadmap to the future. Our future together is as shaped by the way we treat one another in the present as it is by the decisions that were made by previous generations.

Like the mountain goats, we don't consider ourselves to be flat-landers. We enjoy the high places in the hills and sometimes scoff at the people who seem to be intimidated by winding roads and spring blizzards and occasional migrations of huge herds of motorcyclists. We've learned to take those things in stride. They are a part of the place we live. So is the trickle of newcomers who move here each year.

It does us well to remember that we, too, are transplants to this place. As we welcome even more newcomers we might discover that we are distant cousins. After all, we are all members of the same human family - related whether we are natives or newcomers.

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## May 6, 2008 - Splash



The photographs for the blog will be coming from the archives for a few days. The story goes something like this:

Yesterday was a warm spring day, with temperatures in the seventies. I had a day off from work and my thoughts turned quickly to boats and the lake. I'm trying to learn about Greenland paddles, and I have a rough paddle, with blades that are about right, but the shaft may still be a bit heavy. So, after doing some chores and running a few errands in the morning, I decided to take my Greenland kayak to the lake. This kayak took some getting used to do when I finished it and launched it last summer. It is 17 1/2 feet long and 25 inches wide. While not an unstable boat, it takes a little adjusting to sit properly and to get the feel of leaning and balance. I had the opportunity to paddle it quite a bit last year, both in the lake near home and on a trip to the Puget Sound in Washington. I had gotten quite confident in the boat.

But I had stored the boat all winter. And I've only been out with a kayak once this spring and that was a small plastic boat that had a lot of initial stability.

So, I took the boat to the lake. I decided to launch from the dock because launching from the shore sometimes means getting my feet wet or, if not wet, at least a bit muddy. There's a bit of gear to stow. I use a set of wheels to transport the long boat and I had a spray skirt and life jacket to put on. After getting things ready and the boat in the water, I stepped gingerly into the boat while holding on to the dock. Once in the boat, there are all sorts of adjustments, getting the spray skirt wrapped around the

coaming, etc. and such adjustments are usually easier to make when one isn't trying to protect the boat from rubbing against the dock.

I pushed off from the dock and before I knew what happened, I was way off balance. The boat was traveling sideways away from the dock and I was leaning towards the dock and it appeared that we were going to roll. I managed to get off an awkward brace stroke with the paddle and right the boat without going into the lake. Without the skirt attached to the coaming, I would have never rolled the boat all the way around, I would have had to eject from the boat in the water and swim to the dock. That didn't happen, but I tipped the boat enough to scoop a bit of water inside the boat through the cockpit opening and I splashed myself.

I wasn't very wet. The water inside the boat was not deep enough to reach the seat. The splash had mostly gone in my lap and a little on my life vest. I got myself situated and took a few strokes with the paddle and headed out. I paddled close to the shore for the next half hour or so, regaining my confidence and exploring the new paddle. After a while the feeling of balance and trust in the boat returned. Like a bicycle, the kayak feels more stable when it is in motion.

After a while I paused to take a picture and realized that my digital camera had taken the splash directly. It was soaking wet. I dried it as best as I could and slipped it into my pants pocket but by then the damage had been done. When I returned to shore, it would not work. Upon returning home, I dried it more thoroughly with a canned air duster. So far, it still is dysfunctional. I guess it will have to go to the repair shop. So the blog will get photos from past adventures for a while. I do that from time to time anyway. I tend to take a lot of pictures some days and hardly any on other days. And matching the photograph to the subject sometimes doesn't come easily. Often it feels like finding the picture is harder than writing the blog.

I often get comments from people about kayaking being dangerous. It doesn't feel that way to me. I've never gotten myself into trouble with a kayak. I use a life vest. I paddle calm waters. I have plans for self rescue and don't go far from the possibility of rescue by others. I often comment that I have found myself to be quite waterproof. I can take a dunking without any real harm. Had I gone into the lake yesterday I might have lost my hat or glasses, but that would have been about it. The boat would not have been damaged, and I could have gone to my truck to warm up and dry off before I got seriously chilled.

I may be waterproof, but it appears that the camera isn't.

And the worst part of the story is that I have a waterproof camera - one designed to take the water. It isn't digital and one has to wait for the film to be developed, but it was in the glove compartment of the truck yesterday when I took my digital camera for a swim.

I may be wiser today than I was yesterday. I hope so.

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May 7, 2008 – Reeder



This year marks the centennial for Reeder, North Dakota. It isn't one of the big towns in the world. And, at 100 years old, it isn't a place of ancient history. It was one of many towns that were created as the railroad pushed across the southwestern corner of North Dakota and the land was opened up for settlement. We served as pastors of the Congregational church there for seven years, a fairly short slice of that history.

The census reports 181 people living in the town today. That is less than the number of people buried in the community cemetery. There are probably more vacant than open business sites on main street as well. The brick building that was built the year the town was founded has served as a bank and then the post office and then a variety of retail stores and still stands in the center of the community.

Since the school closed there has definitely been less traffic and less activity in the town. One wonders what will remain a century from today.

But the community will host a celebration this June to mark its centennial. There will be a reunion of sorts, and lots of picnics and good food. There will be special services at the three churches in town and some of the residents will dress in pioneer clothing. Mostly the celebration will be about old friends getting together with lots of story telling and remembering.

From one perspective, there is nothing unique about Reeder. The plains are dotted with towns that were once thriving and now are slowly dying. With no new jobs to attract

people and with the area's farms and ranches getting bigger with each succeeding generation there simply are less people in the area. The population of the county reached its high point about a decade after the town was founded and it has been a slow decline since that time. The average age of the residents is over 60 years, and it would be older if those who become disabled didn't have to go to Bowman or Hettinger in order to live in a nursing home. Hospital care is available only in larger towns. Retail shops cannot compete with those in nearby communities that are larger and residents travel to Dickinson, Bismarck and Rapid City on a regular basis for a variety of goods and services.

One by one the buildings are being abandoned. The town will one day be a ghost town.

The town is dying, but we would be well advised not to have the funeral too soon. Most of the residents of the community have been there for a long time - many for all of their lives. They intend to live there as long as they can. Their attachment to their little town on the prairie goes beyond a love of the land. It is a connection to a way of life that does not exist in a city, where there is ample space and adequate privacy, but where you know that your neighbors care and would be there to help you no matter what. It is the sense of knowing and being known, of belonging to a community.

Tight, intimate communities can be oppressive to teens and young adults. That, coupled with the lack of jobs, explains why almost all young people move away as soon as they are able. The residents who live there made the decision to stay years ago.

We never lived in Reeder. By the time we came along 30 years ago, the congregation was too small to have a resident full-time minister. We lived in Hettinger and served a congregation in that town as well. But the folks in Reeder were adamant about carrying their own weight. They contributed half of the costs of salary and benefits and they had a full range of activities, including a church school and a youth group. That little 42-member congregation had one of the highest rates of attendance and giving of any congregation we have ever served. Coffee hour after church was a community social event. It wasn't all uncommon to see members of the community who didn't attend worship slip in for a cup of coffee and tread with their neighbors. Cold weather was a challenge, not a deterrent to church attendance.

We, like so many others, are among the ones who left. We were called to ministry in other locations and have moved twice since we served that congregation. But the friendships remain and when we received the invitation to the Centennial celebration, we began to make plans to attend. We don't belong to one of the historic families of the community. We are just a small footnote in the story of the place. But on centennial weekend we know we will be warmly welcomed and good stories of fond memories will be shared.

It's possible that when one leaves a small town, the small town doesn't leave you. At least we know that for our short visit we will feel at home in a town where everyone knows your name.

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## May 8, 2008 – Stolen Children



Chiricahua Apache children at Carlisle Indian School four months after their arrival from Fort Marion, Florida. Courtesy of Cumberland County Historical Society.

I recently read the script for N. Scott Momaday's powerful play, *The Moon in Two Windows*, about the experiences of children who were taken from various Native American communities to the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Momaday's characters are well presented. Richard Henry Pratt, the career soldier and founder of the school, whose motto was, "Kill the Indian, and save the Man," is presented as a driven person who really did care about the children. The school was founded just three years after the Battle of the Little Big Horn, where Custer and his troops were defeated. Children from Rosebud were transported to Carlisle before the massacre at Wounded Knee, before the Ghost Dances began among the Lakota. Their people were defeated, however. The buffalo were gone, their culture was threatened from every angle. The means of survival were not clear. The belief was that taking the children and raising them in a boarding school that taught them to assimilate into the mainstream culture was the only way to save the children from abject poverty and premature death from a variety of diseases.

The experiment in social engineering is generally seen as a failure from the perspective of our time. Removing children from their homes, taking away their language and culture, changing patterns of dress, hairstyle, and social relationships had devastating effects on individuals and on the culture of the Lakota and other tribal people. The cemetery at Carlisle barracks stands as a silent testimony to the children who died far away from home and family.

The United States' experiment with boarding schools parallels the experience of other places. The attempts to make reparations from the damages of Canadian boarding schools has left several mainline denominations nearly bankrupt, and the effects of the abuses that occurred in those schools continue to the present.

The Australian attempt to remove children of mixed heritage from Aboriginal families and raise them in distant boarding schools resulted in the tragedy of the "lost generation" who grew up lonely and alienated both from mainstream culture and the ways of their families.

The persistence of tragedy in attempts to remove children from their families and culture and raise them in the culture of the mainstream makes me skeptical of the ability of any church or social agency to succeed in such attempts. I am fearful that the State of Texas is in the midst of another tragedy with its removal of 437 children from a FLDS compound and distributing them to foster homes, boys' and girls' ranches and group homes across the state. The children are being plunged into a culture that is radically different from the one they have known to this point in their lives.

The state argues that it must intercede on behalf of the children because some of them have been subjected to abuse, primarily being forced into marriage at a very young age - too young in the eyes of the state. It is uncertain how many of the 437 children have been subjected to such events, but some underage girls were pregnant at the time the children were seized by state officials.

I don't understand polygamy. I think that it is quite possible that women and children live lives of oppression in some polygamist households. I think it is possible that child abuse rates are at least as high in polygamist households as they are in the general population. And the state has a compelling interest in intervening to prevent child abuse.

But intervening in the lives of 437 children puts the state in the position of risking further, and perhaps more severe abuse. Can the state really protect the children more adequately than their families? The ways of life of the members of the FLDS are very different from mainstream culture, but being different from the mainstream does not constitute abuse. And certainly abuse has occurred in group homes and foster homes, and at boys' and girls' homes.

I do not have the wisdom or experience to advise the judges in the cases of this children. I would not be consulted as a strategist for law enforcement officials in the case. But I can't help the feeling, as an observer from a long distance, that we have just created another group of stolen children, who will grow up without being firmly rooted in either the culture of the FLDS compound into which they were born or the culture of mainstream society in which the State of Texas is attempting to raise them. It feels very

much like we are heading toward a tragedy that is very similar to other tragedies of our past.

At a bare minimum, every adult involved in any way with the 437 children should read N. Scott Momaday's *The Moon in Two Windows*, Carol Hodgson's *When I Get Home I'm Going to Talk Indian* and Bob Randall's *Songman* so that they are aware of the incredible risk that is being taken with the lives of these children.

The outcome will be even more tragic if it is undertaken without knowledge of the mistakes of the past. May our society somehow find a way to put the interests of the children first in our priorities and in our disagreements about how adults should live their lives.

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**May 9, 2008 – 40%**



We had a meeting in Pierre yesterday and a couple of us drove over and back together. I didn't measure but it seemed like the weather forecast was accurate. It had predicted a 40% chance of rain and I think the wipers were going about 40% of the trip. Today we have 50% and tonight 80%. For the first time this decade the rainfall amounts are slightly above average. The hills and those of us who live in them are breathing a sigh of relief. This is not, of course, a guarantee of how the rest of the year will go. We've seen moist springs that lead to completely dry summers, but the reservoirs are rising and the soil moisture is where it should be for this time of the year.

This morning there is fog. Fog always lends a wonderful quality to life in the hills. Everything goes into soft focus and you tend to focus your attention much closer to yourself than usual. If I stare into the woods, I can see a little farther, but nowhere near as far as I could see without the fog.

The rain and the fog make the forest smell wonderful. They settle the dust and pollen and make it easy for those with allergies to breathe.

Like the rain that refreshes the hills and prairies, our conversations in Pierre had a refreshing quality. The reason for the trip is planning a camp for native and non-native youth to gather for cross cultural education. The schedule is filling with Bible studies, horseback riding, hand games, traditional crafts, campfires, sing-along times, drumming, and other activities.

The camp promises to be a powerful experience for youth as reservation and non-reservation youth cross boundaries and begin to glimpse what they have in common instead of defining their relationships in terms of their differences.

Beyond the camp, however, relationships among adults are building. Trust comes slowly in a place where there has been so much betrayal and mistrust. Differences in history and culture can create divides. Patience and careful listening are required for conversation to take place at all. Little by little, year after year, we are learning to know and trust one another. Connections are being made. And we are ready to make a common investment in our future.

We have come to accept the fact that there are deep scars that are the product of decisions and actions made in generations passed. We ourselves were not present at the original massacre at Wounded Knee, we did not participate in the boarding schools, we were not party to reservation decisions and treaty violations. And life doesn't have a "rewind" button. We cannot undo the events of the past.

And we have come to realize that we will not solve all of the problems in the span of our lifetimes. We waited too long to start seriously listening to one another. We were too slow to discover the truth about our past. We participate in injustices without being fully aware of the consequences of our actions.

Our investment is in the next generation - the youth who have the opportunity to grow up without some of the stereotypes and prejudices that we have fostered. As we seek to overcome these barriers, we are committed to raising children and youth who do not build them up. Our camp is based in a deep faith in the future. Leaders will emerge from our congregations that will build additional bridges and together tear down walls. Perhaps they can live the gospel more fully than our generation. At least they can get to know one another at an earlier age.

The rain is rich with promise. So was our meeting yesterday. We have been blessed. Now may we treasure that blessing and be faithful with our lives and our time so that we can share the blessing with others. I think we have a good chance - definitely better than 40%. Maybe we're heading toward 80%.

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**May 10, 2008 – Miss Saigon**



Last night we attended a powerful and well-done production of the musical, Miss Saigon, performed by the performing arts department of Central High School. Youth from our congregation, including students who will be confirmed on Sunday are participating in the production. The production is so well done that for the most part, members of the audience forget that the actors, musicians, and technical production crews are high school students. It was even hard to remember that we were sitting in a rather poorly-equipped high school theatre, designed as much as a lecture hall as a space for an orchestra and a full dramatic production.

But when I stopped to think, it was a bit jarring to realize that these young people are playing characters that are my age. They were nearly the ages of the characters in the play, but the story was of events in the lives of characters who are my age.

The production was a bold move. Drama that tackles the subject of war, especially a war that the wider society has been trying for decades to forget, is risky. There are serious and controversial issues from the war that remain unresolved in our society. And the students in the production will be called to war in their own lives if we do not find a way to end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. As much as it makes me squirm to see our children portray the warriors of my generation, the thought that members of this cast will likely be involved in a war, not of their own making, within a few years, is enough to make one lose sleep at night.

The play reminds viewers that war never gets over for those who participate in it. It changes lives forever. Despite the rhetoric of politicians, war is an incredibly complex business of lives disrupted and lives destroyed. And the destruction does not end when the troops are withdrawn. History is a messy business with many victims. We count 58,000 casualties of the war in Vietnam on the memorial in Washington, D.C. That number doesn't count the wounded, the homeless veterans who sleep on the streets of our cities at night, the orphans in a dozen or more countries around the world, the refugees, or the people whose lives seem normal from the outside but who suffer from post traumatic stress and for whom the war will never cease.

The difference between the survivor and the victim is too narrow to distinguish. Every participant in war ends up a victim in one way or another.

So it is painful to bring up the subject. And yet, we have teachers who are courageous to tackle difficult and controversial works precisely because they believe in their students. They tell the story in part because those who do not learn the lessons of the past are condemned to repeat them. They tell the story because real education raises more questions than answers. They tell the story because despite death and destruction and devastation, there is hope.

The play teaches not only about war's devastation. It also teaches about sacrificial love. And about investing in the future, even though - especially though - the future belongs to others and not to ourselves.

Last night our children were teaching a lesson to our community. It is a lesson forged in the trauma of our generation, but one we have not yet fully learned. There is power in witnessing their production. There is hope in the fact that they know part of our story. There is courage in their telling us our own story. Last night they appeared far wiser than we. Therein lies our hope.

All wars shatter the lives of people. All wars demand sacrifices that are deeper than death. The question hangs in the air as it did in the days of our youth: "When will we ever learn?"

"When will we ever learn?"

When our children ask the question of us we cannot afford to ignore them. They have begun a dialogue that we must continue.

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May 11, 2008 – Confirmation



Today we will celebrate the rite of confirmation in our congregation. Eight young people will confirm their baptisms . We will speak individual prayers over eight souls who are making deep commitments today. We will celebrate the lives and faith of eight people who have already made a difference in our lives and in the world. It is a simple, yet powerful event. All classes of confirmands are significant. This class is no less unique. Three of the members of this class have traveled to Costa Rica with our congregation, one of them has gone twice. Members of this class have provided music for many significant services of worship. And we have watched them grow up. Susan and I have been pastors at this church for most of their lives. In fact this is the last confirmation class for us in this church where those confirmed were born before we came to be pastors here.

We have been about the process of ministry for some time now. There are persons at whose confirmations we officiated who are now in their forties. There have been a lot of changes over the decades. But there are some things that remain the same. One thing that remains constant is the outward focus of our actions. Despite what some people

think, confirmation is not about institutional maintenance. Confirming young people is not the process by which a local congregation gains members for its future. A young person who stays in our congregation for the rest of his or her life is rare. Most, if not all, of this morning's confirmands will move to other places and participate in mission and ministry in other settings. Like Jesus commissioning the disciples, we are sending them out into the world, not keeping them for ourselves.

Our children are never our possessions. We love them, we nurture them, we walk with them through the journey of childhood and adolescence. We become invested in their dreams and possibilities. But we cannot walk every step of their journeys with them. Nor should we. There are times when the most loving thing we can do is to step back and allow them to go forward on their own. This was true when they learned to walk and when they learned to bicycle. Somehow it is just a little more frightening when we stand back and allow them to step out in faith. But despite our fears this is a moment that must come in order for them to become adults. This is not just about the future. It is about today.

So today we will lay our hands upon these young people and we will pray that they will be aware of the presence of the Holy in their lives as they journey forth. We will give them simple gifts and recall some of the significant memories that we have of them. We know that while our ceremony has significance, it is only one moment in their lives and that confirmation is less about what we say or to today than it is about the faith that is already within these people - faith that will sustain them in the future no matter what life may bring.

Having become a sentimental old fool at this stage of my life, I will not ignore the deep emotions of the day. Love really is about letting go. It is about trusting the thoughts, feelings, intentions and decisions of those whom we love. We would do well to neither under nor over estimate the impact that we have in these people's lives. We remain with them as part of the complex network of relationships and experiences out of which they fashion their lives. Preparation for confirmation is not indoctrination. We do not shape or mould other people - we offer the faith that we have known - faith that we have received from others. And we trust the competence, intelligence, and the questions of others who encounter this faith. Skepticism and doubt are part of the process. Faith is threatened by neither.

Today we declare that faith is not our possession - it belongs to these eight young people as much as it does to us. Their faith has the power to transform the lives of others. They have the courage and strength to serve others in the name of Jesus Christ. They are disciples as are we. We are partners in the faith.

So we surround them with our prayers. We acknowledge that there are many other influences upon their lives and that we are one part of a complex and wonderful ecology of spirit that surrounds them. And we ask for your prayers as well. Today and tomorrow

and each day. We are connected in ways of which we are not always conscious. We do not control the movement of the spirit in our lives. But we can celebrate and enjoy its presence.

Thanks be unto God.

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## May 12, 2008 – Disaster



Photo courtesy of Guardian/UK

News of three different natural disasters keeps coming in.

The tragedy of the Cyclone Nargis and its aftermath in Miramar stagger the imagination. The official death toll has risen above 30,000 and on the ground observers are convinced that it will exceed 100,000. Cholera outbreaks are starting to be observed throughout the Irrawaddy delta where it is estimated that 1.9 million people are homeless and do not have access to basic human needs such as clean drinking water. Aid efforts continue to be tied up in a seemingly hopeless maze of government bureaucracy that is denying trained disaster relief experts from coming into the country and holding plane loads of relief supplies in neighboring areas. The disaster continues to get worse as the monsoon season with more storms bears down on the area.

The scene is much different 57 miles northwest of Chengdu in southwest China where an earthquake, measuring 7.8 on the Richter scale has resulted in the death of five persons, four of them school children. Chinese president Hu Jintao has called for an all out relief effort and supplies and trained personnel were speeding to the scene as soon as news of the disaster reached the outside world.

And here in the United States, residents are digging out from the rubble after powerful tornadoes killed at least 22 people in Missouri, Oklahoma and Georgia over the weekend. Again, outside relief was quick to arrive and support for the victims of the storms was quick.

The truth is that fear kills more people than the power of nature. In Miramar, formerly known as Burma, government officials are so suspicious of any outside influence that even United Nations disaster relief supplies and experts are being denied entry into the country. There is a plane load of high energy biscuits that has reached Rangoon, and it is estimated that delivery can begin in about 12 hours. The first U.S. plane load of disaster relief supplies has also finally been allowed to land, days after the disaster. The fear of the government is seriously constraining relief efforts and even though people are hanging on to life in nearly impossible circumstances, there are daily deaths to preventable causes.

Food, water, and temporary shelter can be brought in and thousands of lives can be saved, if only the distrust of outsiders and the fear of foreign influence can be suspended for a while to allow the compassion of the outside world to be expressed in the sharing of supplies and expertise.

The attitude of a government makes a huge difference in the lives of its citizens when disaster strikes. The world is filled with compassionate and caring people who are willing to be generous and to help when disasters occur. There is considerable expertise in the United Nations and in a variety of non governmental organizations who have decades of experience forged in events ranging from Tsunamis to blizzards to hurricanes.

It would be easy for us to point our fingers at Miramar's government and its attitude, were it not for the incompetence, corruption, and outright fraud that we witnessed when Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast and devastated New Orleans. We know that we, too, are capable of allowing political aims and fear to get in the way of providing the help that is needed. And in the slow struggle to rebuild homes and lives, our response is often less generous than when the news first comes to us.

Natural disasters cannot always be predicted. They cannot always be avoided. But we can prepare to respond. Blankets and portable plastic shelters save lives. Bottled water and high energy foods save lives. Organization and quick deployment save lives.

May we continue to learn effective ways to overcome the fear that paralyzes the world's efforts to show compassion and save lives. Franklin Roosevelt said, "We have nothing to fear, but fear itself." That is still true. Recent events have shown us how dangerous fear can be and how fearful are its results.

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## May 13, 2008 – Repairs



I had planned to spend the morning yesterday getting the lawn mowed and the garden tilled. By the end of the day there was still some trimming that needed to be completed. Mowing was mostly a normal task. We have about 1/2 acre, so it is quite a bit to mow with a walk-behind mower, but it is good exercise and usually is about a 2-hour job. I was just finishing the front yard, which is steeper, but smaller than the back yard, when one of the drive wheels fell off of the mower. The axle bolt had sheered off. This is the 14th summer for this mower, which is still a very good mower, but a few repairs shouldn't surprise me. So I went to work. The end of the bolt had to be drilled and removed with an easy out. But there is a rather extensive collection of tools in my garage and I had the end of the bolt removed in about 20 minutes. Not having the right bolt on hand, I had to run to town to get a new bolt. \$1.35 and a half hour later, I was putting the mower back together and soon I was back to mowing, with only about a one hour delay.

When I got to the shed to put the mower back in, I remembered that the line trimmer I use had a broken starter cord. The young man who sometimes helps with our yard work is a strong guy and at the end of last summer he gave the rope a pull and it broke.

So I did the tilling next. No broken tiller and the job took about a half hour with an other half hour to clean up the tiller and put it away.

Taking apart the line trimmer to replace 4 feet of nylon rope was an adventure. The outside case of the machine is plastic, held together with bolts with allen heads. One

has to take apart the housing for the trigger, remove the shaft to the line head, remove the casing from the motor and disassemble the bracket that holds the pulley for the starter head in place. Once one is inside of the housing, the engineers determined the torx head screws would be better, so I had to rummage for additional tools.

By the time I had it all taken apart, I decided that re-using the old rope wasn't worth the effort, so I decided to go to town to get a new rope. As I was getting into the pickup, I remembered that I was scheduled to participate in a conference call, so I had to stop for that meeting, which took nearly an hour, and then head to town. At the shop in town, while I waited for the clerk to cut me a piece of rope, I noted that two hours of shop time was about the same cost as a new string trimmer. A couple more dollars and I had the rope and a new handle "Why not be extravagant?" I thought. I was saving all that labor cost.

It was dinner time by the time I got it put back together and started up. There is always a nervous moment when I have disassembled a complex machine and put it back together, but I had no left-over parts and it runs fine.

After dinner I had to go to the church to take down the stage and put up some things to prepare for hosting a meeting today and by the time I got back it was dark. Three trips to town and I still don't have all of the trimming completed. But, to my knowledge, all of the machines are repaired. And, if you don't count labor or gas for trips to town, the cost of repairs was inexpensive.

Like many others, I am frustrated with our throw-away society, where instead of making repairs, we simply get a new item and add to the volume in the land fill and the consumption of more and more of the earth's resources.

My great Uncle Ted had weathered the great depression when he was in his thirties and he had learned to make things last. Around our house the saying was, "Don't throw that away, Uncle Ted can fix it." I'm not as capable as was he. I can't make sheet metal bend the way I want and I have never developed the touch for soldering and welding that is required for some metal repairs. But I own a few tools (OK I own a LOT of tools). And I can fix some things. Maybe, when I grow up, I can be like Uncle Ted and fix things instead of replacing them. I hope so.

Some say we are heading toward more difficult economic times. While people don't use the word depression and things probably won't be the way it was during the 1930's, I suspect that a little belt tightening, a slowing of spending and even a bit of sacrifice would be good for us all. Sometimes we forget what is most important. Sometimes we are wasteful and extravagant in unnecessary ways. I know having less and giving more would be good for me.

But I'm going to have to learn to work more quickly before my family says, "Don't throw it away, Uncle Ted can fix it."

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## May 14, 2008 – Prayer



We receive a lot of appeals for support of different causes at our house. Candidates and parties ask for votes and donations. Organizations advocating for a variety of different projects and causes write us letters and ask for our support and our checks. These appeals get varying amounts of attention, depending upon how much time we have and what our mood might be. A certain number of them simply end up, unopened in the garbage. Sometimes I open some and read them at the end of the day when I am too tired to focus my attention on something more substantial. We rarely respond with donations to appeals we receive in the mail. Our gifts are generally directed through the church. We support a few other causes and respond to the annual appeal from the alumni association at our college. We prefer to plan our giving rather than act on impulse.

One appeal caught my attention yesterday. It was an appeal for support of the people of Tibet in their quest for independence from China. The appeal contained a small string of Tibetan prayer flags. The paper flags are bright colors, blue, white, red, green and yellow. They are strung on a piece of string and can be placed, like a streamer, in a place where the wind will make them flutter. I have seen pictures of the strings of flags in various locations in the mountains of Tibet. I am not very knowledgeable about Buddhist traditions, but it is my understanding that the prayer flags are not hung in the wind in order to speed prayers to God, but rather that the wind might carry good will, peace, compassion, strength and wisdom into the world that it might be shared by other people.

The bright flags remind me of the tobacco ties, wrapped in bright cloth, that are hung in the trees near sites that are sacred for Native American ceremonies and prayers. The

colors are similar, but I believe that tobacco ties are placed to symbolize prayers that are offered to God. Prayers for courage, compassion, humility and strength are among those offered in sacred ceremonies.

Our public worship is filled with symbols. We hung a large piece of red fabric on our cross on Sunday to remind us of the gift of the Holy Spirit as we celebrated Pentecost. The seasonal colors of red, white, green and purple are displayed in the stoles we wear in worship and other places. My private prayers and devotions, however, are generally accomplished without visible signs or symbols. God does not need symbols, or even words from me in order to know the needs of the world and of the people for whom I pray. I go through my prayer list of individuals and concerns more for the sake of focusing my attention than as an appeal to God to pay attention. I suspect that prayer flags and tobacco ties have a similar function - they represent a discipline that is more about the one offering the prayers than God, who hears and responds to prayers offered in many different ways in many different cultures and languages.

I have been privileged, on occasion, to share sites that are sacred to others. I have climbed to the top of Paha Mato (Bear Butte) several times. I have visited temples and sites sacred to other religious traditions. I have visited cathedrals and other places of worship. Cemeteries and memorials are also places of sacredness. And I have offered my prayers in these places. Usually my prayers are silent and without outward signs or symbols. The words that come to my mind are from the traditions of my people. The Lord's Prayer often provides words when words are needed to focus my mind. Hymns and songs of our people often are in my mind when I visit sacred places. When, on occasion I have been included in the rites and ceremonies of other traditions, I try to show respect for those traditions and honor those who have welcomed me, but my silent prayers are offered in the way that I know how to pray in the name of Jesus. I do not believe that I am directing God's love or compassion when I pray. God does not need my advice or my requests. Most often I am focusing my own attention and reminding myself of the limits of my abilities and strength. I trust God to already provide what is needed. It is not God who needs my prayers, it is I who need to pray. The spiritual reminds me, "It's me, it's me, it's me, O Lord, standin' in the need of prayer."

I believe that God understands prayers, whether offered with flags, or tobacco, or smoke or steam or incense or simply a quiet honest heart.

I don't intend to donate to the cause that sent the prayer flags at this time. But I am grateful for the gift - not the gift of the flags - but the gift of getting me to pause at the end of a busy day and think about my own prayers. "Not my brother, not my sister, but it's me, O Lord, standin' in the need of prayer."

## May 15, 2008 – Time Zones



One of the stories of our career is that in thirty years of serving churches in three different conferences of the United Church of Christ we have never served a congregation that is in the same time zone as the conference office. I often share this information when meeting with colleagues from the Eastern part of the United States so that they can get some sense of the size of the geography in the West. Of course, the time zone story is not just a matter of the size of a state. Montana is larger than South Dakota, but it is all in the same time zone while South Dakota has the boundary between two time zones going through the middle of our state.

Lately, however, I have been aware that there are differences in time that are not a function of geography. It is almost as if our home is in a different time zone than our office, or that there are different time zones for different members of our family. Susan and I have a continuing sense of busyness about our jobs. There are so many things to

be done and there is so little time to get it done. We are used to long days and hard work and both of us tend to respond to additional demands by putting in more hours at work. We also have had to develop a style of work that keeps us moving. Today is a good example. We are hosting the Black Hills area UCC Clergy and Spouses group. The group meets from 10 a.m. until 1 p.m. with a lunch at the end of the meeting. For the members of the group who are retired, it is the big event of the day. But I'll start with a meeting at 7 a.m., another at 8 a.m. before the clergy group and so I won't get to the usual office chores of answering phones, sorting mail, etc. until after the meeting. And I have an evening meeting today, too. My day will be busy and will seem to go by quickly and when I get to the end of it, there will be a sense that I didn't have enough time. This is usual for me.

At home, however, there is a different pace. My mother, who raised seven children and worked in our family business is no stranger to the hectic pace. She understands the meetings and the long days. She still is not afraid to get up early or stay up late when circumstances demand it. But the pace of her life is different. Some days she just goes along with our hectic pace, attending events and meetings at the church and sharing meals wherever we happen to catch them. But other days, she stays home. She helps with household chores wherever she can, folding laundry, setting the table and the like. But these chores don't take up her whole day.

Not being one to be bored, mom always has a book with her and reads when she has time to fill. She used to be an avid knitter and her fingers were always flying when she had to wait for dad or one of us kids. But she is having some challenges with eyesight and there are times when her eyes are too tired to read or when she needs to hold a magnifying glass to read fine print. And not seeing as well as she used to makes it harder for her to knit.

So, there are some days when we are busy with all our activities and mom is at home where she has too much time on her hands. She's not a complainer, and we never hear a word about it from her, but we know that there are days when time goes more quickly for us than it does for her.

We are, after all, two different generations at two different stages of our lives and it makes sense that we would have different experiences of the passage of time.

I have decided that I like living in two different time zones. I use the two times zones in South Dakota as a bragging point to talk about the size of our state and the challenges of gathering people for meetings and events. And I find it to be a good thing to have the knowledge that my mom is at home and that time sometimes moves slowly for her as a continuing invitation that calls me away from all the meetings and the hectic pace of my life. I'm aware that all of my rushing about is not the most efficient use of time.

For now, it is good to have a different time zone at home, where there are not quite enough activities to fill up the time and where stopping for a cup of coffee or a conversation is a pleasant interlude. And, occasionally, I get a glimpse at how our hectic pace looks from my mother's point of view and am reminded that much of our business is self-chosen and not necessary.

Someone coined the term "sandwich generation" for those of us who have responsibilities for our parents and our children at the same time. I doubt that there is anything unique about us - people have been caring for their elders and their children around the world since time began. And I don't feel particularly squeezed. It is just life as it should be, I think. So the term "sandwich" doesn't seem to apply for us.

But we do live in at least two time zones. And that is a good thing. I hope that we are achieving a kind of balance between our time zones so that we enter into Mom's pace as much as we drag her into ours.

As the old song by Chicago asks, "Does anybody really know what time it is?"

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May 16, 2008 – Radishes



Photo courtesy of UMass Amherst. [www.umassvegetable.org](http://www.umassvegetable.org).

I'm not much of a gardener. I enjoy tilling the soil and preparing the garden. And I like to plant. But I'm a bit impatient, and I've been known to be inattentive to thinning, weeding and watering. We grow tomatoes most years and plant a few rows of corn and even I can grow zucchini squash. Our garden is small. But we do enjoy fresh vegetables and we like the idea of growing some of our own food. And this early in the spring we can be optimistic about gardening with a new growing season ahead.

My father-in-law, on the other hand, used to be quite a gardener. There was a phase when about a third of his back yard was devoted to vegetables and he was successful with lots of flowers. He had flower beds around the base of all of his trees and his roses were the envy of the neighborhood. He had a knack for pruning and trimming and watering and weeding and all of the skills it took to have beautiful flowers and delicious vegetables. As he got older, the vegetable garden began to shrink and when the time came for him to sell his house, the roses helped clinch the deal, but he declined the

opportunity to have a small garden in the apartment complex where he lives. He has a couple of house plants that he keeps blooming year round, but that is about it.

Meager as my garden is, it does provide a topic of discussion for us. The other day, I was reporting to him that I had gotten the garden tilled for the first time this spring and that I was planning to till in a few wheelbarrow loads of fresh compost and get the garden planted this weekend. He asked what I was going to plant, and I mentioned the usual. I spoke of corn and tomatoes and zucchini. I said that if I get it taken care of this weekend, it wouldn't be too late to put in a little lettuce and maybe a few peas, which do well in the cooler weather.

He suggested radishes.

We haven't done too well with root crops in the past. In the early years, our garden was shallow, because we hadn't built up the soil. The ground around here is pretty acidic with all of the pine needles and there is lots of limestone, so we have a small garden that is essentially a bit of topsoil placed on top of the ground. We've lived here long enough and we've been adding compost and stirring the soil for enough years that we've got pretty good soil now, but in the early years, root crops didn't do too well and I got out of the habit of planting them.

Besides, to have nice radishes and carrots, you have to thin. Too many plants too close together produce funny, small, misshapen vegetables. And, as I said before, I'm a bit lazy about thinning and weeding.

I didn't mention all of the reasons, but commented that we usually don't plant root crops. My father-in-law said, "Radishes are easy - and they grow quickly."

With each turn of the conversation that evening, I would try to steer the conversation away from the topic of what to plant in the garden, and he would try to return to the topic of radishes. I guess this year, what he misses most about gardening is fresh, crisp radishes.

Of course, I will be planting radishes this year. I've got a spot in mind, near the gate, where I will have to look at them every time I go to the garden. I've made a resolution about thinning them. And I know a young man in our neighborhood who I paid to weed my garden last year when we had to take a trip in June. He did an excellent job and he said that he enjoys weeding. I hope he will be in need of a little extra spending money early this summer.

I'm a bit nervous, but with a little luck I can grow a few radishes. If not, there's always the farmers' market.

I'm beginning to see how my father-in-law's vegetable garden grew to take up the biggest area of open space in their back yard. In my imagination, I can see our garden about double its present size. Since we have to fence out deer in order to garden at all, it wouldn't be that hard to add a few posts, expand the fence and start to grow a bigger garden. Our composting is well established and we have a lot more good soil than we used to have. It probably wouldn't be that much work.

I'm glad my father in law didn't decide that potatoes was what he missed most about gardening. Between the amount of space required and the battle with insects, potatoes might be beyond my gardening skills. And when you talk to my father-in-law all plants, including those beautiful roses are easy to grow. "Plant 'em. Water 'em. Forget 'em. That's all it takes."

My experience discourages over-confidence in the gardening department. My garden is a small pleasure in my life, but it is not my passion. I continue to make commitments to other projects and ideas and my love of my work means that I spend less time in the garden than is required for great success.

So this year I will be contented with a few rows of corn and a half dozen tomato plants. I'll plant a bit of zucchini. God is good and we are fortunate to have a good place for a garden and the wells produce enough water for our neighborhood to have plenty for gardening. I may produce a few things for us to serve at our table.

I'll also be planting radishes - I'll definitely be planting radishes.

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**May 17, 2008 – Country**



We live in a small subdivision called “Countryside.” It was developed in the 1980’s, more than a decade after the initial rush of development that followed the first stages of recovery from the flood. At the time that our neighborhood was developed, Rapid City’s growth was at a slower pace and land prices were much lower than they are now. The lots in our area are each at least 1/2 acre and when the initial development occurred, covenants were developed to insure open space, natural colors and materials for homes, and a mood of casual living.

The neighborhood appealed to us and it has been a good place to live. But we have noticed a lot of changes. We are no longer out in the country alone. The larger subdivisions of Countryside South and Red Rocks estates have more homes that are closer together. People have added to existing homes and expanded them. There are more three-car garages and larger homes than there used to be. Each year sees the addition of more lawn sprinkling systems, and more landscaping. Although we are not yet within the city limits, we no longer live out in the country.

We are lucky to live next door to a home where they do not mow all of their lot. They have a very attractive lawn around the house with lots of ornamental plantings, but the back of their lot remains wild. It is a great place for the deer and turkeys and the view from our deck is of nature’s beauty and bounty rather than the most obvious signs of human habitation and development.

I know that as more people move into the area and there is a demand for more services, there will be fewer wild places. When we moved here, there was no cell phone service in the immediate neighborhood. Now we have a strong signal - in fact it is getting hard to find places in the hills that are not served by cell phone towers. Cable television and high speed internet are available in many areas. And, of course, we all work in town. Our livings don't come from the country. We are used to a lot of conveniences and services and our lifestyle is more urban than rural. There's even a convenience store less than a quarter of a mile from our home now.

We are funny creatures, really. We move out into the country and then we bring the city with us and soon the country isn't very rural. We say we want to live simply and we make sincere attempts to do so and then we proceed to make our living more complex and cluttered. I say I like having a little separation from my work, with my home and office far enough apart for home to not feel like a place of work. But if I go home for lunch, I can spend an hour each day in the car - a whole hour of time in a life that seems to busy and complicated already. We say we want to live simply and then turn our lawns into a time and energy demanding project that is always in need of attention. We move into the country, but don't take time to enjoy the outdoors.

I have no fewer contradictions in my life than my neighbors. We are all caught up in our ways of living and we all sometimes do things which make our lives unnecessarily complex. I suspect that we all resolve, from time to time, to make things more simple and return to the basics of living. We slow down and we spend more time outdoors and we enjoy our homes more and then we say "yes" a few too many times in a row and we accept obligations and we find ourselves back in the cycle of too little time, too little resources and too many demands.

But we haven't become fully urbanized. Not yet. A little over two weeks ago, we spend half a day snowed in. I can still go out my front door with my morning coffee and watch the sunrise unobstructed. In the evening we can watch the deer grazing on the hillside and in the morning the turkeys come out of the woods into the yard. Most of the folk out here don't have our yards fenced and we know our neighbors pretty well. And we have a luxury of space that few people in this world will ever know.

Yesterday's weather felt like summer. It drew us outside every spare minute that we could find. In the early evening, I took a walk around my yard. I made a mental list of the chores I need to do. The garden isn't planted, there is trimming that is undone, there are some low rock retaining walls that need my attention, the deck needs to be painted and the house needs stain. The garage and shed need to be cleaned.

But the list was just mental. I didn't do any chores after supper last night. I sat on the deck for a few moments, I read part of a book. I enjoyed living in the country. The chores are still waiting. I'll be at them today. And, in a sense, the chores are part of the

fun of living in such a wonderful place. But I don't take time to just enjoy it often enough.

We have so many blessings that we take them for granted. When we stop to count our blessings, there is a deep gratitude for the many joys of this life. Taking time to enjoy life - having a sabbath to count one's blessings is a fundamental commandment in our faith. It is one of those ten most basic rules for living a life that is free. To the extent that we fail to observe time off and celebrate the sabbath, we restrict our own freedom. God made it clear to Moses - if you want to be free, remember the sabbath and keep it holy.

It is a lesson we need to learn over and over again.

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## May 18, 2008 – A Sacred Conversation



Today is Trinity Sunday. The Sunday after Pentecost is set aside in many Christian congregations as a celebration that we have come to know God in many different ways. Often we think in terms of three aspects of God's nature: God creates and through God all things come into being. God comes to us in Jesus Christ and in so doing shares every aspect of human life and becomes accessible and known by us. God is Spirit and God's Spirit dwells among us and comes to us in fresh and surprising ways in each generation. The concept of trinity is relatively complex and as a doctrine it has become a problem for some believers. Our faith tradition is firmly rooted in monotheism. There is only one God. God the Creator, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit are not three separate entities, but one. The way we have talked about God, however, can often lead to confusion. The problem is not with the nature of God, it is with the limits of language to express a reality that is far beyond any language or any single generation of people.

This year, on Trinity Sunday, an invitation has gone out across the United Church of Christ to congregations to begin a sacred conversation on race. While great strides have been made to decrease racism in America and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1850's, '60's and 70's has made some major changes and increased justice and equal protection under the law, we remain a country with many divides between people.

One of the problems with the conversation is that we don't know what we mean when we use the term, "race." It often is used to speak of differences in skin color. When we talk about African Americans, skin color seems to be the major identifying feature. Race can be used to address ethnic and cultural heritage. We often use ethnic categories for

self-identification. "I come from an English and German heritage." But we also use race to refer to language groupings. Hispanic persons are not of one skin color, nor do they represent a single ethnic heritage. And it is not uncommon for us to lump Pacific, Asian, and Pacific island people into a single category - a category that represents dozens of languages, ethnicities and traditions. Similarly, the terms "Indian," and "Native American," are used as ways of referring to all of the indigenous tribes of North America.

So what do we mean when we use the term "race?" It may be that the term is elusive because the concept is not based in real differences. The distinctions and divides that we make between ourselves are more the products of human minds reacting to the fear of the unknown than they are meaningful categories. The Lakota phrase, Mitakuye Oyasin, "We are all related," expresses a basic truth about the nature of human beings. The indigenous peoples of Northern Alaska and Canada often use the term "Inuit" to refer themselves. In literal translation, it simply means "the people who are here now."

We are the people who are here now. And some of us are descended from those who came to this area in search of gold or in search of land or because they were trying to get away from something in some other place. Some of us are descended from the Lakota who were living in this area for hundreds of years before the arrival of the first settlers of European heritage. Others were brought here by service in the Air Force or a particular job that needed to be done. Others came to this place to retire after living many years in another place. We represent a lot of different stories. And we are the people who are here now. And we are all related, if not genetically, then we are related in the simple fact that our life's story has brought us to this place.

A sacred conversation, it seems, might start with us telling our stories and listening with great care to the stories of others. Living together in peace might be fostered by knowing the people with whom we live. Of course, telling our stories will require a degree of honesty. When we visit the cemetery and monuments at Wounded Knee, it makes a difference whether we remember what happened at that site as some kind of military victory in a necessary war or as the slaughter of innocents in a misguided quest for revenge. And maybe we will never come to complete agreement about all of the details or the interpretations, but some honesty about the facts will help us to continue the conversation. Pretending that nothing significant occurred at Wounded Knee does not foster genuine dialogue.

These conversations are not easy. We have built up years of resentments and no small amount of distrust and fear. But these conversations are critical as we learn to live together in this place. The Lakota are right in declaring that these hills are sacred. Their sacred nature arises not only from the traditions and stories of the Lakota, but from their very nature as created by God. They are sacred because of the stories of many people who have been a part of this place.

So we gather in a sacred place for a sacred conversation. May the holiness of this event not escape our attention and may the conversation be only the beginning of many more conversations yet to begin.

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## May 19, 2008 – The Creek



Yesterday we had our Church School picnic at the park. There was a large, bright parachute, a beanbag toss game, balls to toss and other equipment. The park has a swing set and well-tended lawns. So, of course, the place where the children went to play was the creek. The day was warm, with temperatures near 80 degrees. Just two weeks after our last spring blizzard, we seem to have fast-forwarded to summer weather. Rapid creek is a gentle little stream that wanders through the park. Stream flows are controlled in part by upstream dams and water is being stored in the reservoirs, so the creek is a safe place for children to play. And we had plenty of adults to provide gentle supervision. There were rocks to throw and skip, mud to squeeze between the toes, and clear running water to rinse off. What more could be needed for an afternoon's entertainment.?

The parks department works hard to provide a wide range of recreational opportunities. They have baseball and softball fields, soccer fields and places to play football. There are tennis courts and swimming pools and picnic shelters and horseshoe pits. There are paved paths for bicycles and scooters and walking. They have rose gardens and formal plantings and gazeboes. But perhaps the features that make the parks most appealing are those that were there before anyone started mowing the lawns and hiring landscape designers to choose the best location for each tree and bush.

The creek that runs through our town, always changing, babbling in its own course between its own banks in its own way, is the best feature of our parks system. And despite all of the planning and designing, the creek is something that we do not fully

control. The hills are prone to flash flooding, as several creeks demonstrated last August after thundershowers in the hills. Folk who have been in this area for a while remember the devastating flood on the night of June 9 - 10, 1972. More than 10 inches of rain fell in a 60 square-mile area. The hills are steep and the water rushed down the creek. The huge amount of water overwhelmed the small dam at canyon lake and the dam failed, sending a wall of water through the city. 238 people died, including National Guardsmen, fire fighters, police and others who were engaged in rescue efforts. Nearly 3,000 homes were damaged and destroyed.

Water can be destructive. Too much water can be a disaster.

But a little bit of water can be delightful.

The wide greenway of parks that occupy the center of our city on both sides of the creek are necessary to prevent further destruction of homes, businesses and loss of life when the next flood comes. There is always a temptation to push the limits of the flood plane and build a building or place other things in the path of the flood - after all these events don't happen ever year, perhaps not every century. But for the most part, the city and its planners are wise about maintaining an adequate greenway for future floods. Maintaining the area as a park, where dead trees are removed, branches and other debris are picked up, is helpful when large rain storms occur. Fewer branches and debris helps to keep the water moving smoothly through the city to the open areas in the valley below.

It is important to have parks and planners and community preparedness. But it is also important to remember that the creek is and always will be something that we control only partially. It has its own power and creates its own path.

And along the way it gives us great joy. A spot to cool your feet on a warm day, a place to play and enjoy the beauty and bounty of nature, a trout fishery in the middle of the city, the creek has much to offer to our community.

Our children lead busy lives. They have many structured and formal games, lessons, activities and opportunities. Perhaps one of the most precious gifts we can give them is the opportunity to wade in the creek in a totally unstructured manner. A short time without a rigid schedule, an opportunity to explore without an agenda, these are gifts that the creek has to offer.

As we were packing up to go, I overheard a conversation between a boy and his father. The boy wanted to stay longer, or if that wasn't possible, to come back to the park later that afternoon. The father was explaining that they had lots of things scheduled for the day and that it wasn't possible to come back that day. As a consolation, the father reminded the boy that it is the beginning of the summer and that there will be more days coming when there is time to play in the creek.

I hope it is a promise that can be kept.

Time to play in the creek, it seems, is exactly what God had in mind with the commandment to honor the sabbath and keep it holy.

No sacrament or ritual that the church has devised has ever been more holy than the free play of children in the creek.

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## May 20, 2008 – Silence



Chinese news agency photo.

The nation of China paused for three minutes of silence today at 2:28 p.m. exactly a week after the devastating earthquake shook the Sichuan province. The official death toll now stands at 39, 577. Millions stopped what ever they were doing and paused in a national display of shock and grief for the depth of the tragedy. Rescue efforts continue, but each passing hour means that the possibility of survival for victims still trapped in the rubble is lower and lower.

The impact of the loss and grief has left many workers and survivors unable to express the depth of their feelings. Rescuer Wang Chuan, whose team has been in Beichuan for a week, commented, "My heart is very heavy. So many people died. It's too much to bear."

Modern media have given the world a glimpse at the drama that is unfolding in China. The government of China has been more open about this tragedy and there has been more information and news as the fullness of the event becomes known. Still it is half a world away and it is difficult to take in the events or to begin to know how to respond. International aid and relief agencies will need financial support, but there is not very much that we can do.

Perhaps our response is not best measured in terms that can be measured. It may be that the best way to connect with the victims and the rescue workers is to share their silence. The event is beyond words. I'm not sure that I have the time conversions

correct, but I believe that it is evening in China as I write this - hours after the official three minutes of silence. But I paused for my own time of silence to think about the victims to numerous, the families grieving without the usual symbols for such a time, the rescue workers, whose task grows increasingly grim. The world cannot fix such tragedies. We survive them. We rebuild. We go on.

We can, however, remember. The haunting images remain: piles of debris, fields where bodies have been laid out, children crying as they are removed from the rubble, grieving family members as they learn the fate of their loved ones.

The age-old theological question arises: "Why?" Why did this tragedy occur? Why so many victims? Why do so many have to suffer so much? We know enough of geology and sociology to have technical answers about plate tectonics and earthquake fault zones. We know about concentrations of populations and buildings that are not designed to sustain earthquakes.

But we don't know why. Unanswered questions are a part of this universe.

That is not to say that we should not seek the answers. We should. And we should do whatever we can to prevent future tragedies. Better buildings could save lives. More preparedness could speed rescue. Increased international cooperation could decrease the effects of such events. Seismic monitoring might provide some warning. All of these things can and ought to be explored.

But it is clear that there is much in this world that we do not understand. There are tragedies that are too big for us to take in. There are events that are beyond our control and even beyond our ability to comprehend what has happened.

When all of the rescue efforts have been completed. When recovery and re-building have begun. When funerals have been held and families have started to pick up the pieces of shattered lives. When we have done what we can to prepare for the next disaster. When we have done what we can - then silence will again be an appropriate response.

Silence to pause and reflect and pray. Silence to listen.

China is a place of amazing diversity. While the Christian Church is growing at a rapid pace in China, there are many other religions that are observed. There is a history of official repression of religion and many people do not belong to any religious group. But today the world paused in silence.

And God, who hears every prayer heard the prayers. Not only the prayers of the Christians, but the prayers of all who paused. God is not subject to our manipulation. Human prayers do not control God. But I couldn't help but imagine, as I sat quietly this

morning, that it was not just the relief workers and nurses and family members who had tears on their cheeks as the silence unfolded.

I believe there were tears of sorrow and compassion on the face of God. Even in the deepest tragedy we can imagine, we are not alone.

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## May 21, 2008 – Coyote



Photo from University of Toledo.

Last night I heard the coyotes singing. For the last couple of years, I haven't heard them as often as before and they seem to be farther away. But it is a sound that I like to hear - it seems to be a sound of home for me. I know that there are people who consider them to be varmints and of little use, but, for the most part they are opportunists who are more likely to eat mice and rabbits than the larger critters that humans raise for food.

I grew up in sheep country, where coyotes are seen as the enemy. They do attack sheep, and sheep ranchers use a variety of different techniques to prevent coyote attacks, ranging from guard dogs to donkeys and llamas to chemicals that smell like wolf urine and poison. Coyotes are afraid of wolves and mountain lions and playing recorded sounds of either animal seems to be a deterrent to coyotes. Coyotes have carried a bounty in most areas where I have lived and they are hunted formally and informally from vehicles and airplanes.

But coyotes are survivors. And they adapt their diet and their ways to their circumstances. And at night they yip at the moon or at the world or for reasons that we don't know. Coyote packs tend to be small, four or six adults. But a few coyotes can sound like a lot, especially if they are close to where you are sleeping.

In the stories of Plains tribes, coyote appears often, usually as the trickster. The trickster role is not given exclusively to coyote, sometimes it is assumed by the spider or other

creatures. In some stories the trickster can change from a spider to a coyote and back again.

You can see how coyote got the reputation. A few coyotes can sound like a lot. When they get to yipping in the night the sound bounces off of the hills and echoes and it is hard to tell where they are. A single group can convince you that there are many groups. Camping alone in a tent it is easy to get your fears going when the coyotes are singing.

But at home in my bed with the window open next to my head, the coyote song is familiar and reassuring and the sound of being at home. Outside of stealing a few lambs or chickens for their lunch, coyotes don't bother humans much. Attacks on humans are rare and usually do not involve significant injury. They have adapted to the growth of population in urban areas, and I've seen a coyote in town and even near a very busy highway in a heavily populated area. I've heard of coyotes raiding garbage cans in the cities. Coyotes are one of the few native species of this continent who have actually expanded their range with the pressures of increased population.

Coyote makes a good character for a story. He is a survivor. The more ingenious the attempts of humans to get rid of him, the more persistently he hangs on to existence. Take away his favorite foods and he'll change his diet. Usually he eats critters like mice and voles to which humans don't have much emotional attachment. But he'll eat garbage to survive. And the more coyotes are hunted, the more puppies they produce.

But it is his singing that makes him the star of a story. Coyote sings for the joy of living and the pleasure of hearing his own voice. He likes the sound of an echo and the answer of another coyote across the valley. His song says, "I'm here, I'm alive, I'm free." And when the puppies begin to join in the singing the celebration is evident from miles away.

At least in the Dakotas, Montana and Wyoming, we have abandoned the Spanish pronunciation. For us the e at the end of coyote is silent. And someone who pronounces the "e" is identified as someone who didn't grow up here.

Despite all of the hunting, it appears that coyotes are not threatened. I'm confident that they'll be around for my grandchildren to hear their song. They may even be around for my grandchildren to hear their grandfather tell stories about coyote that he heard from people who heard them from others stretching back for generations.

In many coyote stories, the hero is chagrined to be tricked by coyote, but learns a valuable lesson through the actions of coyote. Those reluctant to share find themselves sharing when they didn't intend to do so. Those who are easily frightened find the courage to stand up to the bully. And, in a couple of tales, the hero becomes tricky enough to trick the trickster. The stories are fun and told in good humor. And they are

best saved for late evenings around the campfire on a night when the coyotes are singing.

It was good to hear coyote singing last night. It reminds me that we are not alone in this world. And even though we're not much like coyote, he has things to teach us about what it means to be human.

I woke this morning with a deep sense of gratitude that I am not alone in this world and that the coyotes still sing in the hills.

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## May 22, 2008 – Pansies on the Porch



I'm not very educated about the different kinds of flowers. I can tell the difference between a rose and a daisy and I know a sunflower when I see one. I know that Susan plants geraniums in the window boxes, but sometimes she tricks me and plants more than one kind of flower in the same box. I'm pretty sure she's got some petunias in with the geraniums this year. They wintered over in the living room and she's been taking special care of them.

One of the signs of spring is that we get confidence about setting out a few plants. Plants that have been living indoors during the winter get to go out for a little fresh air, and when we are lucky, a bit of rain.

What deer will and won't eat is a subject of conversation among gardeners in our area. My observation is that deer will try anything once, and there is a new generation born each year so whatever it is that the experts say deer won't eat will get chomped in our yard. The deer will poke their noses between the railings on the porch, but so far they haven't ventured up onto it - so a few flowers get set there each year.

For the last couple of days we've had a pot of pansies on our porch, which is a sure sign of spring. I'm not too observant, but I'm relatively certain they weren't there last week.

There are gardeners who go in for exotic blossoms and carefully design flower beds to display many different special varieties. There are plants that require special skills and

special conditions to grow. They study their plants and learn what kinds of soil are needed and which varieties they should cultivate. Tiny orchids, delicate violets, and a variety of other fancy flowers give pleasure to those who view them and instill pride in those who grow them.

But we don't need the fancy flowers. We have busy lives and sometimes the plants in our home and yard are neglected by tired folk whose attention is focused elsewhere. Don't look for the fancy varieties in our yard. But a few pansies on the porch are about our speed. A little water, a bit of fertilizer now and then, and the sunlight that doesn't require us to do anything, and voila! a splash of color that adds to our joy. The little flowers are really amazing and there are three or four different varieties in the pot, each with delicate details worth looking at closely.

Ours isn't the kind of home that is sought out for the "parade of homes." Better Homes and Gardens has never approached us to do a photo essay on our decor. Architectural Digest seems to be interested in fancier furniture than our collection of hand-me-downs. But we've got a home that we can live in. We have love enough to share. And we have pansies on our porch. I wouldn't trade for any home featured in the fancy magazines.

There is just one thing that is missing. We have a wicker rocking chair that spends the winter in storage and moves to the front porch in the summer. The cushions are a bit faded and the wicker is a bit worn, but it is a comfortable place to sit with a cup of tea in the evening and watch the world go by.

The chair is coming out of storage today. One wouldn't want the pansies on the porch to be lonely.

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## May 23, 2008 – The Rain



Photo from CNN.com.

We have had a day of rain and another is predicted. The rains have been, for the most part, gentle, with a few heavy showers and a little bit of runoff carrying gravel down the streets. The weather was not so gentle to the south and west. Windsor, Colorado is reporting more than 100 homes damaged or destroyed in the aftermath of a large tornado. There were reports of tornadoes in Laramie, Wyoming as well, with homes damaged and trucks being blown over on the highway. The Windmill daycare center activated its emergency plan, taking children to the bank across the street, where they all escaped injury waiting out the storm in the bank's vault. There was one fatality at a campground, but it appears that injuries are light given the power of the storm.

It is unusual weather for the Eastern slope. Tornadoes are more common on the plains to the east. But weather is unpredictable.

The National Weather Service has issued a flash flood watch for the entire Black Hills area and the valleys to the East. It doesn't take much of a memory to know that flash flooding is a part of our area. Many families are just getting their lives back to normal after flash floods roared through Hermosa and Black Hawk last August.

But we are high and dry and the rain is just what the garden needs. It is refreshing for the forest to not be so tinder dry as we anticipate another summer fire season. And our reservoirs are recovering from years of drought. Living in a place where we don't have too many rainy days, a few days of rain are refreshing. The woods smell good when

they are wet and the rain doesn't seem to dampen our spirits too much. The fog in the hills is fun when there aren't any big distances to be traveled.

But the events of yesterday remind us what a thin line it is between blessing and tragedy. Our days of gentle rain are on the edge of a storm that brought devastation to our neighbors. The rain loses its sense of fun when the roof has blown off of your house. The same general weather system that is refreshing the hills brought hail large enough to shatter the windshields of cars just a few hundred miles to the southwest.

Life is often like that: blessing and curse close together. The tears of joy and the tears of sadness mingle on our cheeks. Joy and sorrow blend together in our experience and in our memories. Even in the moments of clear celebration, our memories remind us that we cannot escape grief and sorrow and sadness.

Currently there is just a light rain falling with thunderstorms forecast for later in the day. We know that the weather, like our emotions, can quickly change.

Weather is a good metaphor for life. Despite significant advances in weather science and technology, predictions are not completely accurate. We are better at getting out warnings of severe weather, but far from completely accurate. Our lives, too, often defy our abilities of prediction. We have a general sense of what might happen, but there are many variables and conditions that can catch us by surprise.

So it is good to be prepared. Like the daycare in Windsor, we need to have disaster plans. But in the meantime, it is also good to enjoy the gentle rain. We never know for sure what tomorrow will bring.

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## May 24, 2008 – More Fog



We live on a hill. We are used to being able to see a long distance to the East. One of the pleasures of living where we do is the gift of dramatic sunrises. But today it is raining for the third day in a row. That doesn't happen very often around here. And with the rain has come fog. Thick fog. You can't see across the back yard fog.

It's pretty neat, really.

Wet springs may, in fact, be a part of the normal weather pattern around here. We've only lived here for a little over a decade, so we don't have enough memory to be sure about what normal is. I can remember the year when I was a child that our family headed to the Black Hills for a vacation as soon as school got out and we never saw Mount Rushmore. The fog was too thick for us to see the faces from the viewing platform. We had a meal in the restaurant and we waited. But we didn't see the carving that trip. We had fun in Wind Cave and at the swimming pool in Hot Springs. But we didn't see Mount Rushmore. The fog settled into the hills for days. Like this week.

So far the rain hasn't caused much inconvenience. There is a flood warning out and some flooding reported on the Cheyenne and Belle Fourche rivers, as well as Elk Creek and a couple of other drainages that come out of the hills. We'll be rescheduling the yard work day scheduled for the church for this morning. But, for the most part, life will go on. We're supposed to see sunny skies tomorrow, but there are thundershowers forecast for the rest of the week.

I won't need to water my garden or my lawn this week. Although it would be good for the plants, it is probably a good thing I didn't get the fertilizer on the lawn last week, it would grow so fast it would get ahead of me. As it is, it'll be pretty long when I get to it with a mower.

But the weather is mostly something to sit and watch.

The fog is fascinating because it changes our vision, our perspective. Things that we are used to seeing become different. Even simple things, like the trees in the neighbor's yard take on a new appearance. And we get this sense of being a bit isolated, a bit alone when we can't see so far and when things that normally seem so close are out of the range of our vision.

We use the term "in a fog" to refer to a state of temporary confusion. It is easy to see how one could become disoriented in the fog. Driving home last evening, I had to slow way down and concentrate on where I was on the road to make sure that I would be aware of when to turn to enter our neighborhood. Someone less familiar with the area would have had difficulty navigating in fog too thick to read street signs. The normal landmarks were not visible in the thick fog.

I think that we can cloud our minds in other ways besides clouding our vision. We can become preoccupied with a particular problem or decision and fail to notice things that are obvious to others. We can focus our attention on work so much that our families get out of focus. Buddhist teachers speak of a "clouded mind" and teach specific techniques of meditation to release distractions from consciousness in a way that allows greater concentration and focus. The basic concept is that when one releases the petty concerns of everyday living the mind is freed to look at a bigger picture - to gain perspective on one's situation.

I'm not a Buddhist and I don't practice their disciplines, but I do know that the Christian tradition of centering prayer helps me to clear the fog from my mind, to release the thoughts and ideas that prevent me from focusing my attention on what is most important, and to listen for God's call for my life. Days when I somehow convince myself that I am too busy for my normal prayer time become cluttered, less efficient, and unfocused. When I take time to center and to listen, I gain greater clarity and focus for the entire day.

Maybe that is why we teach children to stop, be quiet, and count to ten before acting on their emotions. Ten seconds to focus, to pause, to allow peace to re-enter an emotion-fogged state of mind.

The pause to clear the physical fog outside might take a bit longer. But the fog will lift, if we are patient. The rain will stop. And, most likely, there will be hot and dry days in the summer when we miss the rain terribly. Maybe the fog is an invitation to us to take a

little break - to allow for a little more prayer - to clear our minds as the weather outside clears up.

We don't get enough fog around here for it to become a burden. It is, rather, a delightful change. I like the fog and the qualities it lends to our home. A walk in the rain in the forest in the fog and rain is a treat not to be missed. And such a walk helps to clear the fog in my mind that comes from too many ideas, too many commitments, too little time, too much information, too many concerns.

It looks like I'll have time for such a walk - after all we won't be working in the yard at the church until next week.

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## May 25, 2008 – Pre-dawn Birdsong



The trees are alive with birds this morning. After a few rainy days, the fog has lifted, and for the time being the sky is clear. The sun will rise soon and it sounds as if all of the birds are chirping and singing at once. We often speak of the quiet of living in the country, but right now it isn't very quiet, though the sounds are the song of nature, not the hum of the city.

There are those who are good at identifying individual bird songs. I've never spent any amount of time learning which bird is making which song. The blue jays have a distinctive sound that I can identify, and a robin's chirp is easy to distinguish. The sound outside this morning, however, is the sound of many birds and the song of each individual is difficult to distinguish from the group. I'm sure that a good birder would be able to identify what I'm hearing, and it is possible that the flock in the trees around here are all or mostly the same kind of bird this morning.

What I do know is that there music is a gift.

Humans have crafted a variety of wooden and metal flutes, some of which are fairly good at reproducing the sounds of birds. Bird like sounds are often incorporated into symphonic music. The sounds of nature have provided inspiration for many composers over the years. And I know I'm not the first preacher who rose on a Sabbath day to the sounds of birds singing and was inspired by what was heard. Some days it is just good to be alive and the day begins with a prayer of gratitude. Today is one of those days.

I'm tired. I'm often tired, even after a good night's sleep. The demands of family and job are high and I probably am not sleeping as much as I should for optimal health. But the joys of early morning are too good to miss. The view from my porch and the song of the birds is worth getting up for.

The pre-dawn glow that spreads across the sky is full of anticipation. A new day, with new possibilities is beginning. Much of the rest of the neighborhood is still sleeping. I have the birds to myself. Of course the sense of having the world to myself is only an illusion. There are places off to the east where the sun has risen and life is in full swing. It's just before 2 p.m. in Cairo, nearly 8 in the evening in Tokyo. And even in Rapid City, there is always someone who is awake. The hospital is filled with workers who have been on shift since last evening. Police officers and fire fighters are alert and on duty. And who knows how many old fools like me are breathing the fresh morning air while listening to the birds and waiting for the sunrise.

Even if I were the only human awake in my area, I would not be alone. The birds remind me that the neighborhood is teeming with life and that this was a place full of life even before humans decided it was a good place to call home.

For now, it is as if I get my own private symphony of birds celebrating the morning, as the sun slowly creeps up to the horizon. The moment is rich with promise and hope and gives me energy for the day that lies ahead. Life is good and I'm glad to be here. And after a shower and a cup of coffee I'll be ready to tackle the challenges of this new day.

And as I go through my day, I'll be able to pause and remember this morning with its fresh, cool air, the gorgeous view and the riot of birdsong. And if I forget - tomorrow promises to be a good morning, too!

Good morning, friends.

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## May 26, 2008 – Wildflowers



A letter arrived at our home a couple of days ago with a packet of wildflower seeds. It was part of an advertisement for a car dealership. The packet gives directions for planting the wildflowers, including advice on fertilizer, preparing the bed. It says that the flowers are “well suited for low maintenance areas or ‘natural’ flower beds.”

It seems that carefully cultivated flowers in prepared beds that are given proper fertilizer have ceased to be “wild.” They are somehow domesticated. It is not that the flowers aren’t pretty. I suspect that they are. It is just that it seems that flowers whose seeds can be collected, placed in packets with printed planting and care directions are no longer truly wild. I’m sure I’ll plant the seeds in one of the beds near our house. And we’ll probably get some flowers from the packet. There may even be some new blooms. But they won’t be wild flowers in my way of thinking.

Maybe they are sort of domesticated - like the difference between a pet raccoon and a pet cat - one was just domesticated in this generation, the other is the product of generations of domestication. The wildflowers from the packet that came in the mail may be new to the garden, having been harvested from the wild. More likely there are carefully tended fields of so-called “wildflowers” that produce the seeds for the packets.

I know some places where there will be wildflowers this summer. A few of them will be blooming pretty soon, if we get warm weather - others wait until later in the summer to show their color. Some of the best places for wildflowers in the hills are accessed only by walking. There are some very beautiful places where not very many people ever go,

little creek valleys and hidden spots at the base of rocks that burst forth in extravagant color for a brief time each year. Other places don't bloom every year, but wait until the conditions are just right.

Jesus spoke of the extravagant beauty of wild flowers. "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these." These words, from the sermon on the mount are said in the context of anxiety and worry, but they also remind of God's gift of extravagant beauty in the world. It happens on its own, with out our needing to do anything.

Going to all of the work to cultivate wildflowers seems to be in a different spirit than Jesus' sermon. Maybe we ought to spend more time considering true wild flowers that grow in the field without our effort and less time trying to bring all of that into our yards and making formal gardens of the same flowers that grow naturally in the wild.

But we like to have the beauty of flowers around us. And we enjoy a few beds of flowers. There is something inside of us that wants to bring some of the beauty home - to have it close at hand.

People have long held a fascination with the wild, exuberant diversity of nature. There are so many colors and so many shapes for flowers. And there is a wide diversity of insets and birds that help the flowers to get the pollen from one blossom to the next. Arguing about whether this occurs by random selection or by design seems to be almost beside the point. The great beauty and wild diversity exists and it doesn't exist because we came up with the idea. It doesn't require our participation - or even our recognition - in order to be beautiful. It simply is beautiful. The wildflowers that grow in the remote corners of the world where humans have never been are still as beautiful as the ones that we have discovered.

Beauty is built into the very fabric of this universe.

And occasionally we take time to look and recognize the beauty. And the beauty adds joy to our lives. Our universe is not monochromatic - it is alive with a wide variety of color with many subtle variations and changes in hue and texture. To fail to discover the joy in all of this beauty is to miss a very important part of life. To pause and delight in the beauty is an inherently religious experience, even for those who do not use religious language and symbolism to discuss the experience.

God exists whether or not people believe in God. God does not require our participation in order to be God. But when we do get a glimpse of awareness - when we do have a bit of faith - there is great delight in the relationship. There is beauty that is as exuberant as a field of wildflowers on a bright early summer morning. Like so much in the world, the flowers are a part of something that is much bigger than their little corner of the

universe. We, too, are a part of something that is much bigger than ourselves, bigger than our world, bigger than our solar system.

And once in a while we become aware of the size, vastness and beauty of this universe. And when we do we glimpse a bit of the nature of God. And we don't have to have a complete understanding in order to delight in the beauty.

May you always have wildflowers in your life.

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## May 27, 2008 – Another Surprise



This is how I heard the joke at the City Cafe in Hettinger, North Dakota. It must, then, be an old joke. The City Cafe burned down over 20 years ago.

“Did you hear about the North Dakota Farmer who complained that it rained too much?”

“Um . . . no.”

“Me either.”

Maybe you have to have spend a few years in North Dakota for that one to be funny. I’m not about to start complaining about too much moisture, although I do have friends with water in their basement. But the weather certainly has some surprises.

The Old Farmer’s Almanac lists May 7 as the date of the last Frost for Rapid City. It should be safe to plant gardens any time after that. We know better than trusting the almanac completely - we’ve had spring blizzards as late as May 11. But the weather was so warm that I went ahead and put in the garden last week. The radishes and lettuce are up. The tomatoes are out.

I didn’t expect to wake to snow on the ground today. May 27 seems to be a safe distance from May 7. It’s past Memorial Day after all.

I can always get some more tomato plants, I guess.

You'd think that a pastor's blog would have some subject other than the weather. We live in interesting times, with all kinds of pressures on the contemporary church and all kinds of possibilities for mission and ministry. Our church has a lot of activities and there are many connections with other congregations that will be playing out during the summer. Some people turn to this blog for a bit of inspiration and hope from time to time. Some read it to get their day going.

And I write about the weather day after day.

But you do have to admit, the weather continues to have the ability to surprise - even an old fool like myself.

It really is quite pretty this morning. The skies are gray and cloudy and it has warmed up enough that it is raining. The snow will be gone in an hour. It is even possible that the tomato plants will survive - though not likely. In the glow of the yard light, the snow is sparkling and beautiful. And it is good to live in a world that has the ability to surprise. It never gets boring around here.

It's not really cold enough for the snow to last - about 40 degrees. The air must be colder a few feet up into the sky in order for the snow flakes to have formed. There was no mention of snow in the forecast, but the doppler radar shows a relatively large area of snowfall across the hills - and lots more in the Big Horns off to the west.

Part of the joy of gardening is the surprise. If it always worked out the same each year, it wouldn't be nearly as much fun. But there is something that invites me to take a look at the garden almost every day because I don't know exactly how it will look from day to day. There is something to invite me to get up and take a look at each new day because life isn't predictable. There are simply too many variables for accurate prediction in every arena of life.

And the Farmer's Almanac is so frequently right that it makes on a bit smug to realize that they can make a mistake, too. Like me, the people who put together that guide are human and imperfect. We're all in this together and we have not yet learned all that there is to know.

Our son was born in March. We had a lovely spring that year. In anticipation of his birth and filled with spring fever and the joy of new life, I started tomatoes from seed in the house. They did well. I set them out too early. We got frost. I waited until I was sure it was the last frost and set out some plants from the greenhouse. They got frosted, too. It was the third set of plants that survived. Odds are I'll make it with the second set of plants this year.

Who knows? And that is exactly the joy of this life. We don't know.

There are people who invest incredible energy studying the words of Biblical prophets and of the apocalyptic literature in the Bible looking for signs that predict the future. There are hundreds of books available that claim to be able to predict the future of politics and of major world events based on the interpretation of some passage of the Bible. But the truth is that the Bible is not a book of predictions. Being religious does not give one a magical sense of foresight. "But of that day and of that hour, no man knows, not even the angels." (Matthew 24:36) The Bible isn't in to prediction, no matter how many "hidden" symbols someone might think he or she has found there.

The Bible does, however, contain the stories of our people, who have survived some of the most incredible surprises that the world has to offer. And it is filled with the stories of prophets who, instead of predicting the future, called the people to be faithful to God. Warnings are issued not to predict, but to remind the people that there are consequences to their behavior.

So the faith lesson from today's weather. Pastors don't have special religious insight into the future weather. The prayers I say as I plant my garden do not protect my plants from the laws of nature. And I can still wake up in the morning and be surprised and have a smile on my face simply because this world is not in my control and it does not work to my personal advantage. And that is a good thing, indeed.

Hmmm . . . this really does have to be the last frost of the spring, doesn't it? I could stop by the nursery and have new tomato plants in this evening . . .

As we read in the Bible. Hope remains.

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## May 28, 2008 – Water and Life



The Phoenix Mars lander is sending back its first high resolution photographs this week. After a communications glitch is sorted out, the lander will begin using its robotic arm to dig in the soil of the Martian polar region and explore for signs of life. We are curious, and perhaps hopeful, that we might discover some signs of life in distant places. Mars isn't that far away in the vast scope of the universe - tens of millions of miles as opposed to millions of light years. But the effort to send a lander that is capable of conveying reliable images and information back to earth is significant from our perspective.

We're looking for water - well more than water actually. We're looking for life. Evolutionary biologists tell us that life originated in water. Without water, life as we know it would not exist - so when we travel to distant places in search of life, we look for the conditions that might give rise to life and those conditions include water.

Observing life on this planet has taught us a great deal about its complexity. The statistical odds of life developing at all are staggering. Conditions have to be just right. Not every star in the universe puts out the right kind of light and establishes the right kind of orbits for its planets for there to be planets capable of sustaining life. Not every planet has the right combination of elements to produce and sustain life. Things have to be just right. Knowing what we do about life on this planet, it might be fair to say that the odds are against discovering life on any other planet - except the universe is so vast that the possibilities of other solar systems in other galaxies with other planets is

beyond our ability to compute. The universe is literally big enough to support one-in-a-billion odds.

So we are looking for life in other places.

Of course we are really looking for more than just life. We are looking for forms of life that might, like us, have a degree of consciousness of this universe. We are looking for life that might have enough awareness to understand and communicate with us.

This search for life in other places is pretty sophisticated by our standards, but it is a pretty small effort in the size and scope of the universe.

At the same time as we are making fledgling efforts to explore distant planets, we do not fully understand this planet on which we live. The Deep Underground Science Laboratory being developed at Lead is using an existing gold mine to create spaces for explorations of a wide variety, including examining the smallest particles we have yet been able to detect. Neutrino research is examining sub-atomic particles and the ways in which they influence life and the physical properties of our planet.

We have learned enough to know that what we understand is a very small part of the whole of this universe.

The truth is that we don't fully understand the simple miracle of water and life. We understand part of how water nourishes and sustains life. We have theoretical models of how life might have emerged from primordial waters eons ago. We have some sense of the vastness of time and the scope of the universe. But with all of our powers of observation and all of the logic that we can apply, we have not explored all of the mysteries in a single drop of water.

We are self aware, but we do not fully understand.

Which makes human claims of truth a bit ludicrous from a universal perspective. What we claim as truth, is certainly not the final or ultimate Truth. We know a few small truths, but we do not possess the Truth. The collective product of the world's most brilliant minds is far short of understanding just one small part of life. The idea that we might understand it all is ridiculous. And yet we hold on to the hope of understanding.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "Now we see in a mirror, but then we shall see face-to-face. Now we understand in part, but then we shall understand fully, even as we have been fully understood." He is not specific as to when "then" is.

Scientists make no claim on full understanding, just engage in the process of understanding more than was previously known. The slow progress of human

knowledge demands that we learn from our predecessors and build upon the discoveries of previous generations.

From a universal perspective, a biologist and a theologian arguing about the existence of God must seem very strange indeed. Neither knows what he or she is talking about. We know such a small fraction of the nature of God that to claim full understanding is pure vanity. We know such a small fraction of the nature of this universe that to claim that there is nothing beyond what we have observed is equally vain.

There will be no proving or disproving the existence of God in any foreseeable time.

If you want to be in love with God, you have to believe. It is not pie-in-the-sky magical believing. It isn't smoke and mirrors illusion. It is a genuine leap of faith that goes beyond examination and reaches beyond the limits of our ability to observe and to perceive. Believing does not require any suspension of logic, or a rejection of the discoveries made by science to this date, or an alteration in the laws of physics. It requires the simple admission that there is more to this world than we can know. There is more to be seen than can ever be seen, more to do than can ever be done.

What we understand, even with the best tools of science and logic, is a miniscule fraction of the whole picture. Not everyone likes the use of the term God for the greatness that lies beyond our ability to perceive. This is in part because we have, at times, used the term God in very petty ways to justify misperceptions and to manipulate others for personal gain. Sometimes others use the word God and what they are talking about is not at all what I mean when I use the word. When a terrorist invokes the name of God to justify the killing of innocents or a fundamentalist preacher invokes the name of God to justify the collection of wealth on false pretenses, they are not talking about the same thing as what I perceive God to be.

But this universe is so vast and so amazing, that I cannot help but believe in that which is beyond our perception. And with every fiber of my being I believe in God - not a god that can be manipulated by my thoughts or actions - not a god that does personal favors for me - but God who has created and who is creating - God who is beyond the farthest reaches of the universe. God who is grander than our ability to imagine.

The God in whom I believe will not be shaken by additional scientific discoveries or new insights into the operation of the universe, although increasing our understanding might enable us to glimpse a bit more of the wonders of God.

The Phoenix lander will not unlock the secrets of life on Mars - or on this planet. But it might help us understand a little bit more. And the thirst for knowledge and the joy of discovery that it represents stirs our imaginations and warms our souls. The discovery of a few drops of water or a primitive form of bacteria will demonstrate that life is far more vast than we had previously known.

Let the discoveries continue.

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## May 29, 2008 – Cultivating *Taraxacum Officinale*



A few years ago we had wonderful neighbors who were both doctors. Jeff is Lakota, Patricia is Navajo. In addition to his medical studies and advanced degrees, Jeff has made studies of the natural healing properties of plants and their uses in traditional Lakota medicine. He taught us that there are many plants that grow in our region that have medicinal properties that have been tested and recognized. Purple coneflowers, for example are the number 1 best selling herbal supplement in the United States: Echinacea. He showed us many other plants and taught us a little bit about their medicinal values. He always left a small patch of ground in his back yard that he did not mow so that the wild flowers and sage would grow naturally. Sometimes he would harvest some of the plants for his lectures on medicine or for ceremonies or private use.

It was good to have such a willing teacher in the neighborhood. Prior to that, I had not fully appreciated a small flower that we cultivate that is not native to our area. *Taraxacum officinale* is a member of the composite family that is related to Echinacea. It was originally imported to the United States from Europe as a support for bee colonies to simulate honey production. It now can be cultivated in all 50 states. It grows both as a tap-rooted biennial and also as a perennial, herbaceous plant. It has long, lance-shaped leaves that are deeply toothed. The leaves are 3 to 12 inches long and grow from a basal rosette. It has yellow composite flowers that are 1 - 2 inches wide and grow individually on hollow, purplish stalks, 2 to 18 inches tall. Each flower head is made up of hundreds of tiny rays.

This exquisite plant is not only beautiful, it is full of nutritional and medicinal value. Various Native American groups used these plants for food, a dermatological aid, a gastrointestinal aid, a cure for sore throats, an analgesic, a blood purifier, a sedative, a laxative, an emetic, a love potion, and a general tonic for good health. The first use of the plant as medicine was by Arabian physicians in the 10th and 11th centuries. References to the use of the plant as medicine was also found in the writings of physicians in Wales of the 13th century.

The plant is also an excellent source of food. Many enjoy the leaves boiled like spinach or mixed in salads. Baby leaves are often found in haute cuisine. The root, when dried, has been used in coffee substitutes. In England and in Canada the plant is used to make an herbal beer. It is also used to produce both tea and wine. Young buds can be sauteed in butter and taste similar to mushrooms.

It is, however, as a medicine, that the plant has its greatest value. The leaves are used as a diuretic. While most diuretics leach potassium from the body, these leaves provide an excellent source of potassium. They are also used to treat high blood pressure because of their ability to reduce the volume of fluid in the body. The roots stimulate bile production in the liver and can be used to cleanse the liver. Roots can also be used as a gentle laxative.

Herbalists consider it to be one of the most potent of detoxifying herbs. The plant works on the liver, kidneys and gallbladder to accelerate the removal of toxins from the body. It can also be used to relieve constipation, skin problems such as eczema and psoriasis, to prevent and possibly dissolve gallstones, and to treat osteoarthritis and gout. Medicinal preparations include consuming the plant as a tea or a wine as well as an extract or tincture.

In April, 1986, Steve Brill was arrested for picking these plants in Central Park in New York City. News of the arrest was circulated worldwide through BBC world news and the story made the front page of the Chicago Sun Times. It was also covered by the New York Daily News and the New York Times among other publications. Although he was booked and arraigned, the case was later thrown out of court when it was discovered that he had eaten all of the evidence.

The plant is not particularly difficult to cultivate, which is a quality that has made it a hit in our garden. Each plant produces a great number of seeds and the plant can also propagate through its root system. The seeds, however, are so tiny that it is difficult to control them and growing the plants in precise rows or other patterns is especially challenging, nearly impossible.

However it does appear that we will have another successful crop this year. Blossoms are already appearing and additional plants can be seen in several locations throughout our yard.

The scientific name of the plant, *taraxacum officinale*, is hard to remember, but if you know a few words of French the common name is a bit easier to remember. It comes from the sharply serrated edges of the leaves. The French found them so sharp that they gave them the nickname "Lion's Tooth," which in French is "Dent de Lion." In English we've shortened that to dandelion.

Happy gardening!

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## May 30, 2008 – Waning Moon



The waning crescent moon greeted me as I stepped out of the house this morning. I haven't yet learned how to use all of the features of this new camera, so the picture isn't quite how things looked, but close enough for a reminder. New moon is Tuesday or Wednesday next week, so we just have a sliver in the sky at the moment. It caught my attention today because it has been cloudy for several days in a row. The moisture is lovely, and we know better than to complain about any form of precipitation in the hills, but it was a nice change of pace to wake to clear skies this morning. There are a few clouds on the horizon, making a great show of the sunrise.

The people who came before us paid a lot more attention to the phases of the moon than we. Partly it was because they spent more time outside, and they had less distractions such as television to occupy their evenings. They had more time to just look at the sky. The moon's phases give a way to note the passing of time and several calendars have paid attention to the phases of the moon.

There is a lot of lore about gardening and farming and the phases of the moon. The waning moon is supposed to be right for planting root crops and other plants that need strong root development. Bulbs are supposed to be planted in a waning moon. Crops that grow on top of the ground, such as corn and pumpkins and tomatoes, are supposed to be planted during a full moon. I read an article once that claimed that paying attention to the phases of the moon when mowing grass would have an effect on the rate the grass grew. I don't remember now when one is supposed to mow in order to have to mow less.

Gardening by the phases of the moon is one of those things that is on the edge of modern science. There are some scientific explanations for some of the old traditions of lunar gardening. The tides are not the only things on earth that are affected by the moon. Groundwater tables are also influenced and it is possible that the movement of fluids within plants are also influenced, however slightly, by the phases of the moon.

Ed Hume's Garden Almanac is the most popular source of advice for gardening by the phases of the moon. It's one of those inexpensive publications that are on the racks at the checkout at nurseries and farm stores. I can't comment on the effectiveness of following the almanac's advice. I'm more tempted by the Old Farmer's Almanac, myself. But the Hume Almanac has been available for as long as I can remember paying attention to such things. In general, I find that one has to take the advice of an almanac with a grain of salt. At least the Farmer's Almanac was wrong about the last frost of the season this year. If you don't believe me, take a look at my tomato plants.

As a pastor, it seems that there seem to be more problems in human relationships during the full moon. Most bartenders, hospital emergency room workers and police officers would also attest that the moon has some effect upon human behavior.

But specific "cause and effect" evidence for paying attention to the moon in gardening or mowing the lawn is hard to find. There are successful gardeners who don't pay any attention to the phases of the moon. Other factors such as soil preparation, watering, compost and fertilizer seem to have a greater effect on plant vitality than the phases of the moon. I suspect that paying attention to the phases of the moon gives a way to measure the passage of time and predict events such as harvest.

So for me, the moon is more of a sense of wonder and beauty than it is a scheduler of my gardening activities. I am as likely to think of it as an exotic distant location as I am to see it as a calendar. I remember the first pictures of Neil Armstrong stepping onto the surface of the moon and thinking that soon we would have people visiting it on a regular basis. The simple fact that human visits have been very rare attests to its distance and the difficulty of getting there.

But this morning, after a few days of rain, the moon in the sky is simply a bit of beauty that is freely offered to anyone who would look up and enjoy. And the tomato plants look like I should give them a few more days before making a firm decision about planting any more. I think they are all going to make it despite that one chilly morning. Who knows, they may even be stronger for having withstood the stress.

But the lawn does need to be mowed and, for the life of me, I can't remember what I read about what phase of the moon allows one to mow less often. Chances are my schedule wouldn't allow for me to be governed by the phases of the moon anyway.

Perhaps I should make a little study of the phases of the moon and church attendance.

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## May 31, 2008 – Boats



The fascination with boats goes back a long time. Much of human history has some connection with boats. Coastal areas have been more populated than inland areas for most of human history. Those who lived along the shore allowed their fascination with water and their desire for better fishing to inspire them to fashion a variety of different boats. Those who lived along large rivers, came up with devices for crossing the rivers. Paddles and oars were developed to propel the small craft. It wasn't long before the power of wind was tapped with sails and people began to have the ability to travel long distances on the water.

The oldest remains of ancient ships date to 2900 BC, so people have traveled and transported goods by water for at least 5,000 years. From simple to sophisticated, the technology of sailing continues to evolve with the discovery of new materials and new information about the behavior of wind and water.

The Gospels assume that those who hear them will have a basic understanding of small boats. There are stories of using the boats for fishing, as a platform for addressing a large crowd, and as a way to travel. There are stories of boats being tossed about by storms and the fear that can come in such circumstances. There are stories of boats being nearly swamped by being overloaded with cargo. These stories are presented in the context of telling of the events of the life of Jesus and his disciples. The presence and utility of boats is assumed in the telling of the story.

It is also interesting to note the shortage of references to chariots, carts, wagons and other vehicles for transportation on land. The Romans used horses to transport goods over land as well as boats to transport by water. But Jesus and the other principal characters of the Gospels walked when they traveled on the land. There is a sense that the poorest people did not have access to wagons and the animals that pulled them but they did have some access to boats to travel across the water.

Traditions and history are highly honored among boatbuilders. There are basic designs and shapes that worked well in ancient times and continue to work well today. There are basic principles of hydrodynamics that are constant. The challenges of the builder of a simple fishing boat along the shores of Galilee in the time of Christ are similar to the challenges of a contemporary boat builder shaping a craft in his garage. If one is willing to invest labor, a worthy boat can be constructed from inexpensive materials.

Earning a living with a boat has always been a bit tenuous. Fishing and transporting goods and people are the most common forms of producing an income from a boat. The first of Jesus' disciples were fishermen. Their lives were subject to the fluctuations in the fishery. Some days were good. Some days few fish were caught. Weather is another variable that affects income from fishing. Even though people have developed ways of going out in harsher weather, there are real dangers and there was little in the way of weather prediction in Jesus' time.

Perhaps it wasn't very difficult for those first disciples to leave their nets and boats behind and follow Jesus in a new way of life. But as one who feels particular attachment to a few boats I have known, I prefer to think of the departure from the boats and the lifestyle of fishermen as a more dramatic and difficult choice. The life of boats is a tradition that is passed down from generation to generation. Saying goodbye to that way of life is creating a distance from elders and forebears that had not previously existed.

It is not as if Jesus lured them away from the life of fishing with the promise of a bigger paycheck. His only promise was that the mission was meaningful work and that walking together in faith is a worthy use of one's time.

I reflect upon those early disciples because the process of making new disciples in this time is a difficult undertaking. People are genuinely attached to their possessions and to their ways of life and setting those things aside to go in a totally new direction is a difficult process. We live in a society where people want to have it all. They want to have Christian faith without sacrificing anything else. Jesus says, "You cannot serve two masters. You have to choose between the pursuit of money and the love of God." Contemporary Christians respond, "We want both. How about lowering the demands of the Gospel so we can at least call ourselves Christians?"

There is no shortage of churches that offer worship that is entertainment and ways of participating that do not disrupt lifestyles of the participants. Contemporary technologies

are embraced with surround sound, projected images and each worship service is a show where participants are asked to sit back and relax. Jesus' approach was significantly different. The invitation to the first disciples wasn't based on entertainment or on the promise of an easy life. Disruption was built into discipleship from the very beginning.

And Jesus ended up with 12 disciples, not 12,000. Christianity as a mass movement came along centuries after Jesus.

The boats I love best are small. They can carry a couple of people or maybe three or four at the most. I prefer to share mission and ministry with a handful of dedicated and committed Christians to being a part of a huge crowd of folk whom I may never see again. Faith and genuine fellowship are often more easily shared in small groups.

But that attitude does not produce dramatic growth, huge budgets, or lots of notice by the newspaper. So we seek a balance: enough people to keep the institution strong and enough intimacy to keep the faith genuine.

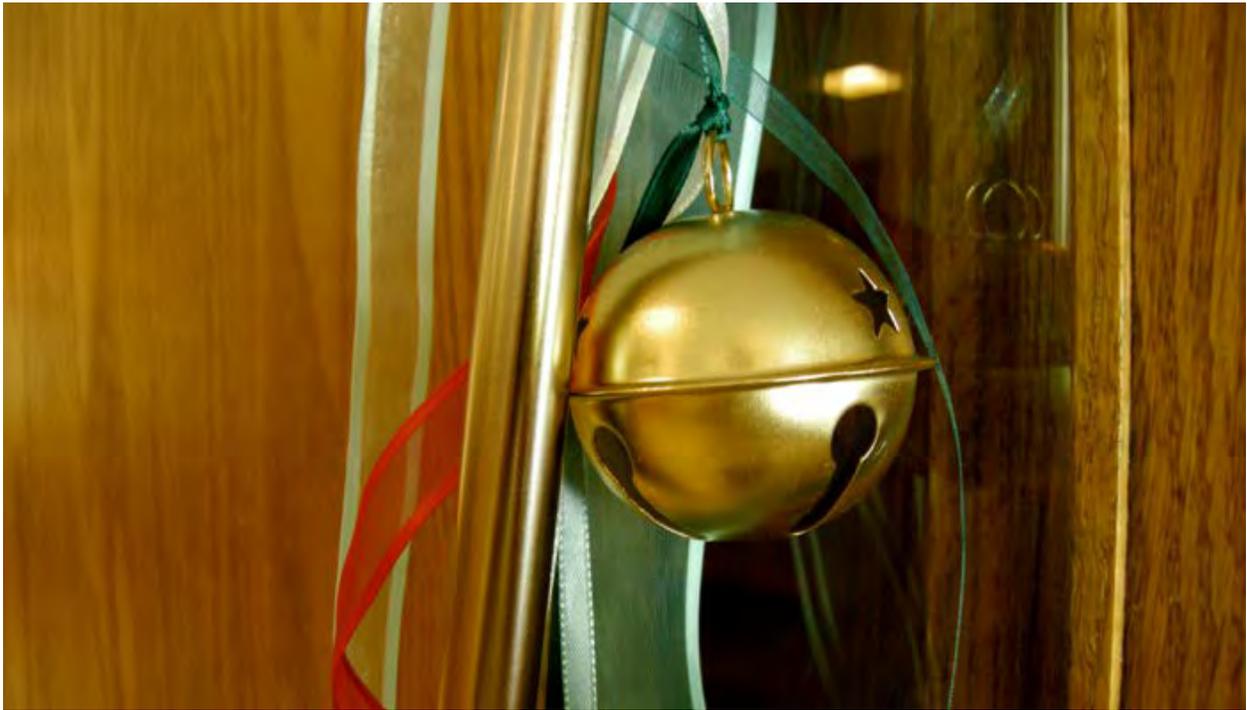
Keeping one's balance is not a foreign concept to someone who spends a lot of time in boats.

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## June 1, 2008 – Ribbons and Bells



Weddings often come in groups. It is not that the families design them that way, it happens because of the need to balance many factors in determining schedules. We average five or six weddings a year at our church and we had one last week, another yesterday and there is one two weeks from now. Weddings are joyous occasions and most clergy enjoy working with couples and planning weddings. It is a special honor and privilege to be able to officiate and witness the vows of couples who marry.

Mind you, we really believe in this marriage business. We will soon celebrate our 35th wedding anniversary.

Unbridled joy is not the only emotion that comes to celebrants of weddings. Increasingly we meet couples for whom the church is only a backdrop for their wedding pictures - a hall to rent. As we move into a generation of people who were not raised in the church and, in many cases, whose parents were not raised in the church, part of planning for a wedding is gentle education about the nature of the church. People literally do not know how to behave in a church.

These problems, however, have not been a part of this Spring's weddings. The couples are people who have been very active in the church and who know about the traditions and customs of our congregation. Their weddings were each unique and quite different from each other. This is how it should be. Each couple is unique and the celebration of their marriage should reflect their relationship.

Yesterday the church was decorated with ribbons and bells. The music was delightful. Flute, piano, trumpet and organ all well played with delightful choices of music from a variety of historical periods. The couple are old enough to be mature about their commitment and young enough to bring fresh excitement to the celebration of their wedding. The families were obviously delighted with the marriage and the opportunity to share their joy with others.

It was as it should have been.

Ours is not a time in history that is particularly marked by commitment to marriage. Although the divorce rate has been declining for the last twenty years, that may be due to the simple fact that the marriage rate is also declining. Nearly a quarter of the adult population of the United States is single. There are approximately 5.5 million unmarried couples who live together. And when those relationships end, the trauma is often as intense as a divorce. Only a third of married couples ever celebrate their 25th wedding anniversary.

But in the midst of this culture there are couples who come to the church ready to make a real commitment. Regardless of what the future may hold, I am convinced of the sincerity of the commitments that were made yesterday. One in twenty marriages makes it to the 50th wedding anniversary. This one feels like a one in twenty kind of marriage.

Of course, life has no guarantees. The promises the couple made yesterday include a promise to stay together in sickness as well as health. The best of intentions and the deepest of commitments do not make a guarantee of a long marriage. Accidents, illnesses, and other factors can enter into the lives of the most deeply committed couples. And longevity is not the only meaningful measurement of quality in a relationship. There are many things in life that are better to have been good and over than awful and gone on too long.

So our prayers for the couples who marry in this season include a prayer that they may discover the joys of growing old together. It is one of the sweetest things in the world. But it is not the only thing in this world. So we also pray that they may experience a depth of connection in whatever time they are granted together.

One of the catechisms of our people declares that the chief aim of all humans is to know, glorify and enjoy God in the days that are ours. And God is love. May each couple who marries know, glorify and enjoy love in the days that are theirs.

The ribbons and bells are optional.

But they are a nice touch.

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## June 2, 2008 – In the Neighborhood



This past May was the wettest May on record for our area. And it is raining as I write this morning. After more than eight years of drought, the hills are getting rain this year. And the grass is growing. The deer aren't having to work hard to find ample forage. There is a group of a dozen or so does and yearlings who make their way through our yard almost every evening. They are acclimated to the neighborhood and not overly startled by the cars going by on the road and if we sit still, they will mosey through the yard without giving us too much notice. As long as I keep a good fence around my garden, they make good neighbors.

The weather forecasters say that there is a threat of severe thunderstorms throughout the region. There were reports of baseball-sized hail to the southeast of our place and a thunderstorm dropped a couple of inches of rain on Battle Creek within a short time and there was flooding in Hermosa, where folks experienced flooding just last August. Flash floods are a part of the hills and the creeks are running full. But here on our hillside, things are quite comfortable and the rain just helps keep everything green. And between showers it is pleasant to sit on the deck and watch the deer. It isn't difficult to count our blessings.

There are plenty of flood stories in the hills and folk who lived in the area in 1972 remember the big flood. 238 people died in a few terrifying hours on the night of June 9-10. Over 1,200 homes were destroyed and nearly 3,000 additional homes were damaged by the flood. National Guardsmen, firemen, police, and airmen from Ellsworth were among the victims as they attempted rescue. Hopefully we have been wise in our

rebuilding and have left an ample floodplain to handle future flood events with less destruction and with more resources in place to save lives.

For now, after so many years of dry conditions and the threat of wildfire each summer, it feels good to start this summer with the hills green, the creeks full and the reservoirs rising.

And the grass is growing.

I spent several hours at the church mowing on Saturday. I'll have to get my own mowing done today. And everywhere that I have been mowing there will be more mowing to be done soon.

But neither me nor the deer are complaining. It is good to see nature producing so abundantly.

So today's prayer is a simple prayer of thanksgiving for the joys of life in such a beautiful place. We have a home that protects us from the weather and the smell of the green forest in the air. We have a garden that promises fresh produce before long and beautiful animals to share our world. We have a memory of hard times and harsh weather and the joy of gentle rains.

Life is good. And we are fortunate. And we did nothing to earn the blessings we have received. So we give thanks for the bounties of nature and enjoy the beautiful place we call home.

Sometimes "thank you" is the most eloquent prayer we know.

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## June 3, 2008 – Hail



Regular readers of this blog will wonder why it isn't called "Ted's Weather Blog," instead of "A Pastor's Blog." It seems as if there are as many entries that comment on the weather as any other topic. One of the problems is that I am witness to many stories that are not mine to tell. Confidences need to be respected, and much of my work would be compromised if people thought that their story would end up as the focus of a blog the next day. I guess it might seem even worse if they thought they might show up in a sermon. At any rate, I do think that it is important for me to remember that these rambling essays are read by others and that I need to exercise a bit of restraint in the topics of my musings.

Nonetheless, I have resolved, on several occasions to stay away from writing about the weather too much. I don't want my blogs to become boring to my readers, and I do want to continue a bit of theological reflection in my writings.

But the weather around here is far from boring - at least to those of us who live here. Our whole household was up at 2:30 a.m., watching the hail on the deck. The storm was noisy enough that sleep was impossible and pea to marble sized hail sounds like baseballs when it is bouncing off of the skylight. I doubt if we have much damage, other than the tiny plants in the garden, which will recover. The deck still has what appears at first glance to be a snowdrift a couple of hours later. The storm was accompanied by the brilliant flashes of lightning and the echoing of thunder off of the hills that we've grown to expect with our summer thundershowers.

The hills seem to be a good place for thundershowers to develop. When the wind has a westerly direction, there is an uplift on the western slopes that gets the clouds to boiling, especially in the late afternoon. When the winds aloft are just right, the clouds sit over a single area and continue to build until finally moving off to the east. The plains and badlands to the east of the hills get the worst of our storms, but wind, rain and hail are pretty common around here. The roofing companies do a good business with the insurance companies.

Biblical writers commented on the weather from time to time. Like any group of people we have our stories of catastrophic storms, the big flood being one of them. But we also have casual observations about the power of weather to act as an equalizer among people. The image of rain is used both as a sign of blessing and of curse. Rain is essential to life. In a desert climate, the lack of rains is seen as punishment. Generally, when the Bible speaks of hail, it is reported as something negative or undesirable.

But I don't believe that we were somehow singled out for some sort of punishment by last night's thundershower. While we treasure the words of our forebears, we acknowledge that our understanding of the world - and of the nature of God is a growing understanding and we do not see everything through the eyes of those who lived long ago. We do share with them the sense that the weather can bring both good and negative results.

My freshly-mown lawn looks pretty good this morning, and with the fertilizer I put on it, it will be growing rapidly this week. On the other hand, the precipitation should have been enough to wash the leaves of the dandelions so that they will escape the "weed" portion of the "weed and feed" fertilizer that I applied yesterday. They are a hardy lot and I've resolved myself to living with them rather than making them the object of constant battle. They, in turn, give me a subject for my blog and bright yellow blossoms on sunny days.

So this morning is a day to be grateful for shelter. Our home provides a safe place in the kind of storms that we receive and we are able to sit inside and observe the weather without discomfort. The steep-pitched roof doesn't often get damaged by the hail and when it does, repairs can be made. We are dry and comfortable on the morning after the storm. Last night's storm would have been frightening in a tent. And it would have kept us up much longer had we been in our camper where the sounds are much louder than in our home.

We know that more storms will come. We are not somehow immune from the weather patterns of our corner of the world. We try to be prepared and when our preparations are insufficient, we get to work on repairs.

In all of this we are not alone. We have the words and the faith of our forebears, who took time to write of their faith in words that continue to inspire us to this day. We have

the memories and the stories of our people who throughout many generations continue to expand our understanding of the nature of God.

We have a weather radio that we keep in our camper to warn us of severe weather. We used to keep it by our bed, but frequently it woke us with warnings that we might otherwise ignore. Not every thunderstorm warning is worth waking from sleep when one lives in a comfortable home. And the severe weather seems to have ways of waking us when we need to be awake. We might have a different attitude if we lived in a place where tornadoes came. Weather that is so severe that it destroys homes deserves our best efforts at prediction. Our neighborhood does have a loud siren that would be activated in the event of a tornado warning, though tornadoes are very rare in the hills.

So, in the unpredictable patterns of life, today is another blog about the weather. For those readers who don't live here it might be a bit of a surprise as well. Who knows? Weather is the great equalizer. It affects all of us.

And, if I hadn't gotten up to take pictures of hailstones, I don't know what picture - or what subject I would have found for this morning's blog. Perhaps even the hail is a blessing.

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## June 4, 2008 – Under the Cross



Our church has a dramatic and beautiful sanctuary with a large, wooden, free-standing cross. There is a large live plant that grows at the base of the cross and climbs nearly half way up the cross. The bare brick walls behind the cross have a variety of different colors and the mood of the room changes with the light. The room has excellent acoustics and is perhaps the best room for a musical concert with an audience of under 500 persons in our community. But the room is also rich with meaning when I am alone there. I have celebrated a lot of baptisms and funerals and weddings and confirmations in that room. I have preached sermons and read the scriptures in that room. I have also listened to other preachers and been inspired by the words of others.

But the symbolism of the room reaches far beyond my personal memories. The sacrifices of many generous people are literally built into the walls. The stories of those who founded the church and participated in its previous buildings are a part of the place. It is a very special room.

There have been days in my life when I wonder if I am doing the right thing, if I am right for the job that I have, or if I should be thinking of other ways to earn a living for my family. But those thoughts don't seem to stick with me. Being a pastor is nearly as deeply ingrained in my personality as being a Christian. I literally have lost my ability to imagine myself not being a Christian. And I think that I shall always be a pastor as well.

Not long ago, someone asked me, "What would it take for you to stop believing in God?" I know no answer to that question. I do not think it is possible for me to be me and to not believe in God.

The church is a slightly different matter, however. It is a human institution and it has its human qualities. There are days when members of Christian congregations behave in decidedly un-Christian ways. There are frustrations in the management and maintenance of an institution that make me wonder about our future. The decline in membership in mainline congregations is real. It is unlikely that the church will be as strong, as powerful, as rich, or as filled with members in this time as it was a few decades ago.

The day will come, I hope not in my lifetime, when this building will have served its purpose and the congregation will seek an entirely different place for its worship, mission and ministry. The day will come, I hope not in my lifetime, when the denominational affiliations that have been so meaningful to us will fade into new structures. The day will come, most likely in my lifetime, when this congregation will call a new pastor to lead it in new directions for a new time. Change is inevitable and it will come.

In the meantime, it is comforting and meaningful to encounter some things that seem constant - like my belief in God. Like the cross in our sanctuary. The symbol of a brutal and cruel form of human execution has become the sign of hope and new life for far more people than ever were struck with the terror of the Roman Empire. The cross simply is no longer a symbol of death and its presence no longer invokes fear.

Critics of religion will point out terrible things that have been done in the name of faith. Wars have been started, children have been abused, lies have been perpetrated and funds have been misappropriated. And they are right. Terrible things have been done in the name of religion and religious people have been guilty of heinous crimes. It is equally true that wonderful things have been done in the name of religion, hospitals have been founded, science has been funded, music has been composed and hungry children have been fed. Disasters have been met with compassion and self-sacrificing love, nutrition and education programs have transformed lives, power has been met with truth and the voice of justice has sounded in corrupt times. But such an argument, I think, misses something about religion that is far deeper.

Faith is more than a way of thinking. God is more than an idea, though the idea of God is fascinating enough and complex enough for a lifetime of study and reflection. Winning or losing an argument does not change who I am. I am a child of God, born in love and raised in love. And God is love.

So the cross is more than a symbol. My vocation is more than a job. Were the building to cease to exist and the cross to be destroyed, I would continue to be a Christian and a

pastor. But while it is here, I am fortunate to be able to go into the sanctuary on a regular basis and pray my prayers under a cross that is rich in meaning and symbolism for me and for a large group of people. We gather regularly in that room and we let our eyes focus on that cross as we share in the liturgy of God's word. Music and the hymns of our faith surround us and we are renewed for service in the world.

And there is room for others to join us.

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## June 5, 2008 – Seeing the Way



The rich gift of moisture this spring has meant that there are more foggy mornings in the hills. For the most part, I enjoy the fog. We don't have enough to really disrupt our lives in any significant way. And it lifts periodically so that our normal view of the world is restored. The fog lends an intimate quality to the day. It sort of makes me want to curl up with a good book and stay home.

The fog also offers a metaphor for the way I experience the church some times. We are in a bit of a fog, and having trouble at times seeing our way. We know who we are and what we do and yet we don't always have a clear picture of the future.

I had lunch with a small group of church leaders yesterday. These are people who are deeply committed to the church, who are generous with their time and their financial resources and who are talented and capable leaders with a significant amount of real-world experience. We met to talk about church growth, expanding the circle of those who attend worship, and telling the story of our church in the community. There were many good ideas shared, but the meeting was a bit foggy. It lacked focus. We did not emerge with a clear vision or a sense of excitement about what we want to do next.

A couple of things are becoming clear, despite our present fogginess. One is that there are a significant number of people who want a relationship with a church with a lower level of commitment than previous generations. They want to have meaningful worship every week, but they don't want the obligation to attend every week. They want to have significant hands-on mission in the community and they will participate in work days, but

they don't want to have on-going projects that require them to make a commitment that lasts over a period of months or years. They want a church with a lot of programs, but they don't want to have to take responsibility for planning and organizing. For many of these particular people, there is a desire for a church that is a part of their life, but not the center of their life.

One analogy that seems to fit is of a meal. There was a time when the church was a regular Sunday dinner. People knew what time to come, they invested significant energy preparing the meal and getting ready to participate. They arrived on time, they tried a bit of every dish that was offered and they asked for seconds of the things they enjoyed the most. They lingered at the table for conversation and they looked forward to the next meal together.

But now there are those who prefer a buffet that allows them to arrive when it is convenient, offers a wide selection of foods and allows them to pick and choose. Someone else takes responsibility for keeping the serving table full and clear dirty dishes from the table. Each trip to the buffet line starts with a fresh, clean plate and everything, from salads to desserts is offered at every meal.

And our church is having trouble making the switch from a sit down dinner to a buffet. Our trouble is due, in part, to having both kinds of members with very different expectations when they arrive to be fed. And we genuinely want to keep both groups of members happy. We treasure and value the participation of both groups, and they enjoy themselves when it does work for them to sit down together.

The group that met yesterday generated a good list of ideas. Brochures, post card mailings, brunches, concerts, flyers, new activities and many more ideas were discussed. But of the group that met yesterday, I am the only one who left the meeting with a clear assignment. There was too much fog in the room for us to get from "we should," to "I will."

I know that God will provide the vision in God's time. I know that God is not done with us as a congregation and that Jesus' gospel is filled with teachings about not being anxious about tomorrow. I also know that Jesus had the ability to engage deep commitment from his followers. He issued an invitation and "immediately they left everything and followed." In my case, it is more likely that I issue the invitation and people follow when it is convenient in ways that don't ask them to give up anything. Of course, it is obvious that I am not Jesus.

So i feel like our congregation is continuing to wander in the fog a bit. We are a vital and healthy church, but we haven't found the clear vision that energizes us about our future.

When one becomes lost in the fog in the woods, the first thing is to not lose one's head. Stay calm, don't panic, attend to the basics of life and health and be prepared to wait. Perhaps a similar mood is appropriate for this season of our church's life.

Stay calm. Don't panic. Be prepared to wait. The fog will lift.

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## June 6, 2008 – Ready to Hit the Road



One of the luxuries of our life is our camper. We have always enjoyed camping and for many years we stayed in make-shift shelters and later we got a good tent. For a number of years we had a “pop-up” trailer which gave us beds up off of the ground. Three years ago we bought a ten-year-old camper that fits in a pickup box. The camper is not an expensive item, but the pickup with which we haul it is the fanciest and most expensive vehicle we have ever owned. It is very nice.

And it gets very bad gas mileage. This is no surprise. Our mileage is almost exactly what we had estimated it would be when we were doing our research before we bought the pickup. It is just that three years ago, gas was hovering around \$2 per gallon instead of \$4.

But the camper is a wonderful luxury for us. It has a shower and bathroom and a bed that can be made up and left made up, so we don’t use sleeping bags in the camper. It has a furnace and a hot water heater and a stove. All the amenities of home with 3’ x 8’ of floor space.

And what it has most of all is a private space for us - a place that is just ours - a place where we can get away from some of the pressures of everyday life. It is wonderful.

For a church meeting, it is about a break-even with the price. The extra gas used by the truck can be invested in a motel room for about the same cost. But in a motel we don’t

have the same sense of getting away as we do in the camper. So, when possible, I prefer to use the camper.

Today I'm heading to Nebraska for the Annual Meeting of the Nebraska Conference of the United Church of Christ. I have pretty light duty at the meeting. I will be leading a workshop and making a presentation. The rest of the time, I will be visiting with folk and sharing in worship. The meeting is being held on a college campus, but instead of staying in a dorm room or at a motel, I'll take the camper and stay at a state park about 10 miles from the college. Thus I'll get a mini-retreat, even if it is mostly just sleeping in the camper one night. And it will allow me to check out all of the little things that need to be done to get the camper ready for summer adventures after a winter in storage.

A camper is a perfect object for one who likes lots of little repair jobs. Things shake and get loose as we travel. There are lots of systems - electrical, plumbing, etc. like a home and each is prone to problems. This winter, I had the camper in my garage for a couple of months to repair the lift system and the latches. I ended up putting in new batteries and changing the electrical system so that the inverter puts out the proper wattage for the computer I use. There is always something to repair with a camper. I enjoy the little jobs.

Sometimes I worry that I so relish opportunities to get away. I have a wonderful job and I love the people with whom I work, I don't know why I seem to need to get away. But sometimes the quiet is a wonderful treat.

It is part of my understanding of sabbath. None of us are indispensable. All of us need to get away from time to time in order to maintain our perspective. I am not the whole church. It does not rise or fall on my personality alone. The commandment that Moses received from God reminds us that in order to be free, one must learn to honor sabbath time. Time alone. Time for God. Every week. As the commandment states, "Even God rested on the seventh day."

We live in a culture that is not good about honoring sabbath time. We try to keep going 24/7. We apologize for taking a day off. We feel guilty when we head to the lake before work. At least I do. Even my vacation get-away is mounted on wheels for a quick change of location should the need arise.

So tonight I'm heading for the campground as soon as my afternoon obligations are finished. I'm going to sit outdoors if the weather permits or inside if it is raining. I'm going to read a book - nothing for work, just a book for recreation. I'm going to take a mini-sabbath. Of course, I have another presentation tomorrow and services on Sunday and a lot of other obligations bearing down on me next week. But for the freedom that God offers, a little down time is required.

Thanks be to God for a bit of sabbath in the midst of busy times.

p.s. for regular readers of this blog, I may post late tomorrow, or perhaps won't get tomorrow's blog posted until Sunday as I'll be staying in the campground where there is no Internet service.

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**June 7, 2008 – Green**



The sun came out yesterday and my short drive gave me an opportunity to look at the hills. With all of the moisture we have received everything is green. The grass is growing and the hills have a lush and wonderful look. One of the amazing things about looking at the hills is that there are so many different shades of green. The colors range from the light green of sage and Russian olive trees to the dark, dark green of the pine trees. A field of grass is not one color, but a blending of many different colors. If an artist were to paint it the way it looks, people would think that the colors weren't realistic. The camera tends to tone down with colors a bit and doesn't quite capture the experience of looking at the real world.

Green isn't the only color with thousands of hues. The ocean or a large lake can have thousands of blues on a sunny day. Travelers in polar regions see a world of white with many different colors that are close to white from gray to blue to hints of pink. An autumn day in a field of sunflowers can show a thousand variations of yellow.

The palate of colors of creation is truly amazing. The world would function, I suppose, with just a few basic colors. I am told that there are some reasons for different colors, including plants abilities' to attract insects for pollination, and animals' ability to hide from predators. Not all creatures have the complexity of the human eye and neurological system to perceive all of he colors that we see, but there are some creatures whose distance vision is more highly refined than ours. It is quite possible that not all creatures see the same thing when looking at a similar landscape. At least our attention is focused on different things as we look at the world.

I can't help but wonder about the function of beauty in the world. Do other creatures, often focused on the tasks of obtaining food and surviving, even experience beauty? Is theirs a world of functionality only? Humans seem to be predisposed to enjoy art for the sake of art. From ancient cave drawings to extravagant multi-media displays people have been about the process of creating art for as long as we have existed. Not content to merely survive, we create paintings and carvings and sculpt clay and other media. We decorate our furniture and our homes and the objects we use to earn our living. We personalize with color and shape and form.

There is a very deep connection between religion and art that goes way beyond the fact that the church has long been a patron and collector of the arts. One doesn't need a cathedral filled with sculpture and stained glass and murals and mosaics to sense the connection between beauty and faith. A walk in the woods, a moment to look at a sunrise or sunset, a glimpse of running water deep in the forest, a view of the mountains rising into the clouds - these all are experiences of beauty that call us beyond ourselves. We are awestruck and we gain a sense that the world is far beyond ourselves. The experience is essentially religious without the need for liturgy or ritual.

Several indigenous tribes of the plains and mountains believed that simply being alone outdoors surrounded by the elements had the power to produce a vision of the purpose and meaning of one's life. The stories of our people abound with images of the leaders of our faith encountering God in the natural world. Moses on the mountain, Elijah peering out of the cave, Jesus transfigured - these and a thousand other stories share the elements of mountains and exposure to the natural world offering deep revelations of meaning and purpose for our people.

For a lot of us green is the color of God's blessing this spring. After years and years of drought and disastrous fire seasons, the green produced by moist earth and falling rain is a welcome and refreshing sight. Replacing the yellows, browns and grays of sun-baked and drought-stricken land with the rich greens of spring and new growth renews our hope and reminds us of the beauty that first attracted us to this place. Even with a few anxieties about flooding and water in too many basements, the rains offer promise to the hills and to all of the creatures that live here. And they give us beauty - great beauty - extravagant beauty.

It is the extravagance that inspires. We are granted far more than we need to merely survive. We are granted beauty that surpasses our wildest expectations.

Indeed we live in a marvelous world. No wonder artists have created so many songs of praise and gratitude.

## June 8, 2008 – Pine Ridge



To the north and to the south of the Black hills lie other small collections of buttes and forested areas. Years ago, when we lived in North Dakota, we enjoyed opportunities to visit the Slim Buttes that lie on the border of the two states near Reva.

Pine Ridge, to the south and east of the hills on the Nebraska-South Dakota border is an arch shaped escarpment that stretches about 100 miles in length and is 20 miles wide. It is covered with stands of ponderosa pines and there are many creeks and streams that flow through the formation. The formation is primarily limestone and sandstone which were at one time under an inland sea. When the Rocky Mountains and the Black Hills rose during the Cenozoic Era, 65 million years ago, Pine Ridge was also lifted up. Over the millennia, water and wind have eroded the ridge and left buttes and outcroppings that are interesting in their shape and color. Hiking in the area is an adventure with many surprises and amazing views. Looking to the south and east from Pine Ridge one can see the great plains stretching to the horizon.

This year Pine Ridge is at its best. The recent rains have made all of the plants grow and given the ridge a lush, green color. The cooler temperatures make for great hiking during the early summer this year.

More people know Pine Ridge for the Lakota reservation than for the geological feature that lent its name to the region. The Pine Ridge reservation is the eighth largest in the nation, larger than Rhode Island and Delaware combined and Pine Ridge is just one of the natural features of the reservation. The reservation also encompasses plains, rolling

hills and badlands. Pine Ridge the geological feature extends beyond the borders of Pine Ridge the reservation to the southwest. The entire feature was a part of the original Great Sioux Reservation established by the Fort Laramie treaty of 1868. That treaty granted approximately 60 million acres in what is now South Dakota, Wyoming and Nebraska to the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota tribes. The size of the reservation was decreased in 1876, when 7.7 million acres of the original area, including the Black Hills was opened to settlement by outsiders. Although the courts have ruled that this was a violation of the treaty, the Lakota tribe has consistently refused financial compensation insisting that the land be returned.

On December 29, 1880, over 300 men, women and children were massacred by the 7th Cavalry at Wounded Knee. The survivors of the massacre walked over 100 miles from Pine Ridge to Takini on what is now the Cheyenne River reservation.

In 1889, the remaining land of the great Sioux reservation was divided into seven separate reservations: Cheyenne River, Crow Creek, Lower Brule, Rosebud, Sisseton, Yankton and Pine Ridge.

Today the name Pine Ridge brings to mind poverty. Pine Ridge reservation is the poorest of all Indian reservations in the United States with unemployment remaining high and around half of the families living below the poverty level. Many live without electricity, telephone, running water or sewer. Residents have the shortest life expectancy in the Western Hemisphere (47 for males, low 50's for females). Infant mortality is 5 times the national average and teen suicide remains at or above 4 times the national average.

But to speak only of poverty or of the very real injustices of history is to miss much of the reality of Pine Ridge. For it is a place where the human spirit is not crushed by some of the most oppressive conditions imaginable. Out of the communities and villages that dot Pine Ridge come some truly amazing people. Billy Mills, 1964 Olympic Gold Medalist is the only American to ever win an Olympic 10,000 meter run. Suzanne Big Crow, an outstanding basketball player who died in a car accident at age 17 left behind a legend that continues to inspire excellence and peaceful relations between people. Cecilia Fire Thunder has served her people as nurse and as tribal president. Her fiery personality continues to stir controversy, but her contributions and commitment to people shows a lasting legacy. Many, many others demonstrate with their lives that there is more to Pine Ridge than poverty and despair.

And there is the natural beauty of Pine Ridge itself. The buttes show the effects of much severe weather. What thunderstorms they have witnessed! They have been altered by fire and wind and rain and many other factors. Pine Ridge still stands as a place of incredible beauty and power. It is a place to connect with the natural world and to gain a sense of purpose.

It is impossible to separate the reservation from its geographical features and it is impossible to think of the place without thinking of the people and their history. And now, each time I walk on the trails along Pine Ridge or even view it from the distance of the Black Hills, my story intersects with the stories of the people who have been the historic land owners of Pine Ridge. The Lakota have a saying, "Mitakuye Oyasin." We are all related. When they use the phrase they do not limit the relationships to those of people, but include the animals and the plants and the land itself.

We are all related. And now that I have come to make the Black Hills my home, my story and the history of Pine Ridge can never be separated for good or for bad. May I learn to make that relationship one for good. Mitakuye Oyasin.

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## June 9, 2008 – Ponderosa Pine



The Ponderosa Pine is the state tree of my home state, Montana. I grew up knowing how to identify the long-needled tree with the distinctive clusters of three needles. I never lived in a pine forest in Montana, but our home now is on a hillside that once was covered with pine trees, and we have several mature trees in our yard. We have since planted some Black Hills Spruce, but our biggest trees are Ponderosa Pine.

I had thought that the heavy rains this spring would have washed the pollen from the trees, but I was wrong. The last couple of days have been pine pollen season in our neighborhood. The few days that the pollen really starts to come from the trees are dramatic. There is a film of yellow dust over cars, plants, driveways and anything else that stands still for more than a couple of minutes. A little breeze will start a dust storm and you can see the pollen hanging in the air. Fortunately the pollen is so heavy and large that it doesn't cause much sneezing or other allergy symptoms. But there is yellow dust everywhere! The cracks in our driveway are yellow. The cars have a faint yellowish tint. The shingles have rows of yellow on them. The top of the barbecue grill is covered with yellow dust. Turn on the washer on the car windshield and it makes yellow mud.

It is as if we live in a fairy tale world with pixie dust everywhere. In the air, on the ground, and all around. But unlike Tinkerbell's dust that enables Peter Pan and Wendy to shout, "I can fly! I can fly! I can fly!" About the only thing that is airborne around here is the dust itself. But there is enough of that to give the world a sort of magical quality, especially when the wind blows through the trees.

Pine trees do not need insects for the pollen to make it from tree to tree. Pollination takes place on the wind. Scientists have come up with an amusing term for this: anemophilous. A literal translation of the Latin is "wind-loving." This is opposed to Entomophilous (insect-loving) plants who require insects to transport their pollen. The two types of pollen are specialized for the way that they are distributed. Anemophilous plants produce pollen that is lightweight and easily blown with the slightest breeze. Entomophilous plants generally produce pollen that is sticky and often protein rich so that insects are drawn to the pollen to eat it and in the process transport some of it from flower to flower. Allergy sufferers are generally more bothered by entomophilous pollens because of their sticky nature that makes them adhere to the nose when inhaled. Even though anemophilous plants are prodigious with their pollen, the human body generally has less trouble getting rid of it. Anemophilous plants usually don't have visible flowers. They don't need to attract insects, they simply cast the cells that are needed for reproduction on the wind.

So love is on the wind in our neighborhood these days. A few days of yellow dust is a small price to pay for the beauty of life in the trees. And the yellow dust itself is pretty interesting.

We know from experience that it won't last long. But while it is here, there certainly is a lot of it. Nature is often extravagant. There is way more pollen than it needed in order to insure the propagation of ponderosa pine. God doesn't hold back and the world that God created often offers much more than the bare minimum needed for survival.

Again and again I am struck with the amazing diversity and wild exuberance of the ongoing process of creation. I know that it might be considered improper to attach human emotion to the processes of biology, but I know of no other words to describe the ways in which the natural world consistently goes beyond simple survival, producing beauty and diversity and surprise for those of us who have been given the eyes and ears and minds to observe and reflect on the processes of this world.

The world that we are able to observe is so amazing that it seems strange to me that there are people of faith who think that faith could be threatened by scientific discovery or explained away by scientific theory. The pursuit of science, it seems, continues to yield new discovery of a universe that is far more complex and far more wondrous than we initially understood. Instead of relegating God and faith to the gaps in our understanding - making God the explanation for the things we do not understand, it seems far more meaningful to me to see God's involvement in all of nature and to allow our understanding of God to expand with new knowledge and increased understanding of the ways of the world. Each new discovery is a deeper revelation of a God who is grander and more marvelous than the capacity of our minds to comprehend.

As our limited understanding allows us to fill in the gaps in our knowledge, we discover that God is not in the gaps, but rather in the connections that link all living things together.

How fortunate we are to live in a pine forest! Thought I must admit we would be fortunate to live in a different part of the world if that were where we found ourselves. There is enough fascination and beauty in the world for each climatic zone and each type of environment.

And, as the pollen blowing through the forest symbolizes, there is more than enough love for every creature. It blows on the wind, we breathe it into our bodies, it colors the world. And God is extravagant - there is way more than we could ever need. May love, like the pine pollen, seep into every corner of your life today.

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## June 10, 2008 – Going Home



Since I began this blog, I've written several essays on home. There is probably little more that I can add to the topic. But I woke this morning in the town of my birth - the place where I spent the first seventeen years of my life. It has some qualities of home for me. The sound of the river is very familiar. The look of the Crazy Mountains during a spring rain shower is as I remembered. But many things have changed. My father's business - Big Timber Farm Supply - "The Store with the Plow on the Roof" - doesn't look like a John Deere Dealership any more. There is a mural painted across the front of the building and there isn't a sign of green or yellow anywhere. The feed warehouse doesn't have any Purina signs on it. The gas pumps and fuel tanks are gone. There are weeds growing where none would have been allowed in the days I remember. And you have to look for people considerably older than me to find ones who remember the days when ranching was the mainstay of the economy around here. The mountains and the river are much the same - most other things have changed a great deal.

My visit is brief. I'm here to bring my mother for a visit with my brother who lives at the place where we spent all of our summers when we were growing up. Randy is the constant part of our family when it comes to this town. He has lived here for nearly five decades - longer than my parents did. They arrived after the war as young adults. My father died in his fifties and my mother moved away after having lived here for 45 years. This is very much his home. But my life has led me to other places and other adventures. And our current home is the only place where we have lived for more than a decade since we have become adults.

Our children have a different experience - and a different sense of home. We moved from the state of their birth when they were preschoolers and we moved from the home of their elementary school years when they were teenagers. By the time they moved from their parents' home, they had lived in three states.

As I have written before, home is much less of a physical place for me than a series of relationships with people. Home is where my family is.

A reasonable portion of my adult life has been invested in working with others to find home. Through Habitat for Humanity, I have had a small hand in enabling several families to move from substandard and often temporary housing into a home where many will stay for longer than I have ever lived in the same home. A year ago at this time we were in Costa Rica where we painted a home that our sister church purchased to be a home for church leaders. The people of our congregation in South Dakota dreamed of, invested in, and worked for that home. We rejoiced when the family who live there were able to move out of a squatter's shack on the side of a muddy hill into a real house with a roof and solid walls.

The concept of home is very important to me. And I believe in enabling others to become homeowners. Further, it is not as if we have ever been homeless. There have been a succession of apartments, followed by a house provided by the church we served and now two houses we have owned with mortgages from the bank. We have been able to live in very substantial, stable and comfortable homes. We have not lacked for a safe place to sleep and raise our family.

So I wonder why my mind continues to return to thoughts of home. I have lived away from Montana many more years than I lived here, but I still tell people that I am a Montanan. And, as I drove here yesterday, I was thinking that I will probably never again live in Montana. It is unlikely that this state will again be the place where I make my home. My family owns little property here and most, if not all of it will be sold in my lifetime. The day will come when I will be too old to hike in the mountains or paddle the river. A new generation has already moved to this place - one that does not remember the days of sheep ranching and wool shipping. The world has changed. It is the way of the world.

But there will always be a part of me that belongs to this place - the place of my birth. Like Abraham and Sarah telling the stories of the land of their fathers, my story will always contain a sense of the place from which I came. I, too, have left the land of my father - the difference I think is that my people have been mostly nomadic for many generations. There is no place where we settled for more than a couple of generations since we came to this continent.

My Psalm is the 90th. "Lord, thou has been our dwelling place in all generations." Whatever state, whatever continent, whatever place where we remain for a while - our

true home is not a physical place, but a relationship. The work of our hands is not established by the dwellings we build, but by the love we have known. Jesus commented on his sense of home from time to time, too. "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

It is true that you can never go home again.

It is also true that we will never be homeless when we dwell with God.

Welcome home!

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## June 11, 2008 – The Piano Bench



I am not one consumed with nostalgia. But I do have some good memories. The upright piano in our living room was played every day. Our mother played it, and often she would have a brief moment before our noon dinner while she waited for us to get home, so we would hear the piano as we entered the house. We always gathered around the piano on Christmas Eve for the reading of the Christmas story and singing carols.

We took piano lessons and that meant that we all had to practice. The kitchen timer was set and the metronome was wound and set to its steady “tick, tick, tick.” I wasn’t much for the scales and exercises of the graded books. I quickly bored and once I had played a scale, I was ready to go on, even though there is a big difference between getting through something and having learned it.

Sometimes I will pause to listen as a young pianist plays the large grand piano in our sanctuary and when the player is very good I think to myself, “I wish I had practiced more when I was younger.”

But the idea of a recital appealed to me. I liked having an audience. And preparing for a recital meant going through the piano bench and selecting a piece to work up for the recital. Mother would help us find a piece that we might learn to play, but it had to be approved by our piano teacher before we could proceed.

Yesterday, as I was preparing to leave my mother at her summer place, where my brother now lives, for some reason I opened up the piano bench and looked at the

music that was in there. There were a couple of hymnals and a few books from piano lessons long ago. And there was a small stack of sheet music. There, in that stack of music was a familiar piece: "Dolls of Many Lands: No. 30108, "Italian Doll - Tarantella." It was my fourth grade recital piece. I memorized that piece and still play it from memory from time to time. I placed the music on the piano and began to play. At the top of the second page was a phrase that I had forgotten. I've been playing the piece wrong for almost fifty years.

It is not a difficult passage and it is not marked with pencil by my piano teacher, so I know that at one time I had the music learned correctly, but later in my life I somehow forgot one section. The piece is designed to be easy to play, with no key changes and a series of eight-measure phrases. Leaving out eight measures didn't interrupt the continuity of the piece, but it left me with an incomplete memory.

Our memories are like that. I think I have a perfectly clear memory of a past event and then I encounter someone who remembers it differently. I can remember part of something, but there are other parts that I have forgotten.

I grew up in a culture of individual memorization. The things that we memorized were given to us to memorize ourselves and we would recite or play them and be evaluated on our own merits. Different children were given different Bible verses, or poems, or pieces of music to memorize. It was quite different from the way our people memorized things in ancient times.

The bulk of the content of the Bible is the product of a culture of group memorization. The treasured stories of our people were told over and over, often in the evening, in a time when there was no electricity, no television, no Internet, a few distractions. The stories would often be told by an elder, but everyone would gather around to hear. The group was always available to correct a mistake or to fill in a missing detail. With the group to check the details, stories could be passed down for many generations with absolute, word-for-word accuracy. There is evidence that group memorization has a higher degree of accuracy than hand-copied manuscripts.

There was a time in the story of our people when the spoken word was more reliable than the written word. And it was in this time that the stories that we now find in our Bible were passed from generation to generation as a part of a great oral tradition. Individual memories were probably not any more accomplished or accurate than our memories today - but the collective memory of the group was definitely more accurate.

It was enough to preserve the stories for our generation in a form that we can trust and upon which we can base our faith.

So I guess I will take the discovery of the sheet music in the piano bench as a form of gentle correction. I brought the music home. I'll play through it several times until I can

play the piece correctly from memory. It won't make any big difference in the quality of my life. It won't make me an accomplished pianist.

But someday, when I tell the story to my grandchildren of the day when I played the piano in the church for a small audience at a recital, I'd like to be able to play the piece accurately. And, who knows, I may even get out the music to show them, too.

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## June 12, 2008 – Woodchucks



We are fond of quoting the Swiss theologian and teacher Emil Brunner's famous phrase: "The Church exists by mission as fire exists by burning." The phrase seems to apply to our congregation. What makes us alive - what makes us a church - is the work we do in mission and outreach.

Last night was what has become an annual picnic for a group we call the Woodchuck Society. In 2001, energized by a successful mission trip to our sister church in Los Guido, Costa Rica, we were looking for local connections where we could serve. A couple in our congregation has been doing quite a bit of thinning on their property and had firewood cut and split. They thought it would be a good project for our congregation to deliver that wood to homes on the nearby Pine Ridge reservation that needed energy assistance. A few phone calls were made and we found some people near Sharps' Corner who would distribute the wood. About a cord of wood was loaded into a horse trailer and with a few folks in our church van we headed out to deliver the firewood. We simply unloaded it into a big pile, without stacking it, and headed home. It wasn't much of a start. Trips to Pine Ridge followed. We started stacking the wood as we delivered it to make it more usable to those who came to get it.

We added an annual delivery to Eagle Butte. Our partner there, Norman Blue Coat distributes wood to churches and to individuals. Because Eagle Butte is a lot farther, we started organizing caravans of pickup trucks and trailers to haul the wood. People heard about our project and began donating firewood. Others loaned and later donated a

wood splitter. We received a large tandem axle trailer as a donation. A connection was forged at Wanblee and our partners there devised a system for distributing firewood.

Last night at the picnic we heard that we now have 84 people involved in the project. Participants range from young children to a 90-year-old with folk in every decade of life. Without any intentional planning, we have a group that is intergenerational and open to anyone who wants to get involved. We are delivering 7 or 8 times as much wood as that original trip and making multiple deliveries each year. This year we will take firewood to Bridger Creek and may make a special delivery to Cherry Creek, where there was significant flooding this month.

Because we have an energy assistance program in place, we have been able to participate in brokering funds from national disaster ministries to provide additional energy assistance in times of especially severe weather. Our contacts through the Woodchuck Society have opened doors to an intercultural youth camp/exchange program that is being offered this summer and will continue for years to come. Our contacts on the reservation has enabled us to be the distribution point for a group of knitters in Florida who make hats. We are exploring adding mittens and baby blankets to deliver as well.

The theology of the project is simple: Disciples serve others in the name of Jesus Christ. We don't have a mission statement, an annual budget, a doctrine or a schedule of worship. We don't have fund-raising events. We pray together and we learn together in the context of sharing meals, traveling together and working side by side. Huge tasks become manageable when we have large crews.

And we laugh a lot. It is fun to participate in service together. "The Church exists by mission as fire exists by burning."

I have attended several meetings in our church lately where evangelism has been our topic. We have generated ideas about how our church might grow in membership and increase participation. There are a lot of good ideas out there including brochures, mailings, and special events. But the truth is that it may be that the best way for us to grow is to explore new avenues of service to others. It helps us from becoming too focused on ourselves. The problem with some evangelism programs is that they focus on what we need. We need more members to help meet the annual budget. We need more children in our programs to attract and keep families. We need more bodies to fill our pews. And when we focus on what we need, we are easily side tracked from the true meaning of our faith.

The truth is that it is not about us. It is about how we can serve others - how we can participate in the work that God is doing in this world.

Perhaps the question is not “How can we get more members?” but “How can we engage more people in lives of service in the name of Jesus?” To be a growing church, we need to make sure that we are a church. In the end, we will not be evaluated by the size of our sanctuary or the number of cars in our parking lot, but by our service to others.

The Woodchuck Society is a wonderful part of our life together and we are fortunate that resources and need have come together in such a powerful way.

Now, for our church to grow, the question is, “Where are the needs to which we can respond?” “The Church exists by mission as fire exists by burning.”

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## June 13, 2008 – Leadership



The last few months have been an incredible journey for the South Dakota Conference of the United Church of Christ. We received the resignation of our Conference Minister, who had served for more than twelve years in that position. We accepted short term, temporary leadership from outside our conference during a difficult period of transition, but that person had other commitments and moved on after a short period of service. A search for an Interim Conference Minister revealed an amazingly small pool of applicants. Our search committee identified a candidate for that position but negotiations with that candidate did not produce a call.

While all of this action was taking place, our conference foundered. Our Associate Conference Minister was left with all of the work load of conference leadership without the authority to make decisions and exercise full leadership of the conference. The chairperson of the Board of Directors is designated by our by-laws as the acting chief executive of the conference in the event of a leadership vacancy, but that is a voluntary position and there are limits to time and energy.

All of this is accompanied by a significant decrease in income and limited reserves to continue our ministry together.

Although the board of directors has had several special meetings and the committees of the conference have stepped up to address some of the issues, the general mood of the conference has been characterized by fear and no small amount of distrust. Tensions and conflicts have arisen. Good, capable volunteers have felt unappreciated and, even

worse, that their opinions and leadership have not been taken seriously. There are more than enough bruised feelings to go around.

And we are tired. We have worked long hours, driven many extra miles, and endured too many meetings.

Our basic faith remains unshaken. We believe that God will provide the leadership for each generation of the church's life. We are confident that our situation is temporary and that new leadership will emerge. But God's timing is not our own. And things may not happen the way that we want.

We aren't sure what kind of leaders we seek. The stories of our people are filled with occasions when it seemed as if the wrong leader had been chosen, yet God was able to bring great things through the leaders that we had. Moses was not a good public speaker. His voice did not command respect. He had a mixed past and was known to let his anger get the best of him. There was a history of violence. He was reluctant to become involved, let alone lead our people from slavery to freedom. But he is remembered as one of the great leaders of our people.

David was the youngest son and had hardly been groomed for leadership by his father. When the time came to anoint a new king, all of his older brothers seemed like more likely candidates. When he became king, he allowed his desires to overcome what was best for the people. His moral failings became public and known and he became incapable of leading by moral authority. From the perspective of our time, we cannot imagine our people without him.

Jeremiah, quite frankly, was too young and too inexperienced to assume the role of prophet of God's people. After more than three centuries of patient waiting, it seemed injudicious to select a youth to be spokesman to confront the powers of corrupt government and the abusers of political power. Jeremiah may be the greatest prophet our people have ever known.

Jesus failed to garner the endorsement of his home community. His interpretation of the words of the prophet Isaiah in his home town made people so mad they were ready to toss him over a cliff. What right does the son of a carpenter have to tell the elders what the scriptures mean? In the eyes of the world, Jesus' leadership was short-lived, maybe three years, and filled with conflict with authorities - conflict that eventually escalated into his death on a cross, charged with treason.

But God has a way of turning the failures of this world into the path to a new realm. The judgements of this world are not the final judgments. Without resurrection, we have no faith. Without death there is no resurrection.

So, last night, the board of directors named our Associate Conference Minister as our Acting Conference Minister. Having failed to identify someone from outside the conference who would be the right Interim Conference Minister, we acknowledged that the work of the people of God is too important to be put “on hold.” We are called to be the church right now, not at some point in the future yet to be named. We may have a vision, in our minds, of a “perfect” leader, but we are honest enough to admit that we do not even all agree on what qualities such a leader would possess.

We have chosen to place trust and authority in a person we know well and whose limits and failings we also know. The people we have are all people whom God has given us.

The next couple of years will be momentous times for our conference. As we move forward seeking a called Conference Minister, we know that this process may take years. In the meantime we will continue to be the church. Our actions will be judged by history and by God. In the final analysis our faithfulness, loyalty, support and honest engaging of the leaders we have may be as important as our openness to new leadership from new places.

God will provide the leaders that the church needs.

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## June 14, 2008 – Graduation



Yankton United Church of Christ, Congregational, is 140 years old this year. A century of service is a significant milestone in the story of a church. It demonstrates not just a passion to the gospel, but passion that has been translated into long term commitment. The story of Yankton United Church of Christ, Congregational, has a unique chapter because when the congregation was only 20 years old it started a college. Yankton college grew into a residential four-year academic institution with a graduate program in theology. It continued its service, educating generations of church and community leaders until a series of difficult financial circumstances forced the closing of the college at the end of the 1970's.

The commitment to education that Yankton undertook, however, was not something that could be squelched, however. Not even the closing of the institutional college could bring an end to the passionate commitment to education that was made by people who came to the Dakota Territory in the 19th century - a commitment that has been taken up by each subsequent generation.

The church and its people believe in the quality of education. We believe that the lessons of the past are worth learning and teaching in a new generation. We believe that the pursuit of the ministry of the church demands the highest and best that we can bring. We believe that leaders in the body of Christ must be equipped for the service to which they have been called.

When the doors of the buildings were closed and the buildings sold for other uses, the commitment to educated laity and clergy in the church was not dimmed.

And we have never measured that commitment in numbers or in volume. The commitment has always been to quality. The original graduating class of Yankton college had only one student who had completed the requirements for a degree. One student, however, was cause for celebration.

Last night Yankton College had another graduation with only one student. Becky Fleming was awarded the Associate of Theology degree after completing the requirements of that course of study in two years' time - a year ahead of the typical pace.

Compared to the massive graduation exercises held in major universities across the nation this spring, it was an inauspicious event. A couple hundred people gathered in the sanctuary of Yankton United Church of Christ, Congregational for worship and celebration. A few college officials donned robes and hoods that are used very infrequently. With the traditional words and a small dose of pomp and ceremony the chair of the board of trustees and the president of the college presented the degree to Becky and fulfilled the requirements of academic tradition.

Our commitment to and educated laity and clergy for the work of the church has never been measured by numbers. Quality, not quantity, is our measure one hundred and twenty years after the founding of Yankton college.

Our graduate, like many graduates, does not yet fully know the directions God will lead her now that she has earned her degree. There will be additional education in her future. There will be additional paths of service that will emerge for her. There is yet more to be revealed.

But last night was a night of joyous celebration for Becky and her family and for the entire church of Jesus Christ. We lie in gratitude for the commitment to education that reaches beyond the walls of institutions and into the lives of God's people.

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## June 15, 2008 – Meeting



It is a bit of a struggle to get myself going this morning. I'm tired. It makes sense that I would be tired. I have been staying up late and pushing hard for several days. The Annual Meeting of the South Dakota Conference of the United Church of Christ concludes with worship this morning after two long days of meetings for the conference plus another long day of meetings for the board and others who were involved in planning the event.

It is not an unfamiliar feeling. I've attended a lot of conference annual meetings over the years. Most of them have involved long days of meetings with social events and other gatherings on the side. When we get together we feel like our time is precious and we don't want to waste any of it, so we often neglect sleep, exercise, and other parts of our lives that are necessary for long-term endurance.

Our meetings are usually events that demand bursts of energy followed by a day or so of rest. And sometimes I try to get by without that day of rest. After all, the meeting also means that I have left home and at home left chores that need to be accomplished.

Over the years, I have most often attended Conference meetings as a regular member of the conference and there is a bit of a sense of vacation about the meeting. It is not that our lives assume a vacation pace, but we stay in a motel and others prepare meals for us and we leave behind many of the day to day responsibilities of our lives. But this year I was in a leadership position and there were a lot of extra duties and chores that had to be accomplished. This morning I will be serving during the worship service

instead of joining the congregation in the pews. I will still experience the wonderful music and hear the words of God proclaimed, but my role as a leader will mean that I will also need to be attentive to the process of worship and the needs of those who participate.

Still, I'm glad we have gathered.

I am sure that in the days and weeks to come there will be moments of wondering what we have done. There are actions that we have taken during the meeting that will have unintended consequences. There are significant gaps in leadership and decisions that remain regarding structure, staffing, personnel, budget and mission. We didn't get all of the work accomplished that we might have done. We are finite and limited human beings and we have done what we could in the time that is ours.

It is a terribly inefficient process and it is the best process we know. Participative democracy means distributing authority and responsibility and results in overlaps and confusion at times. It has been our experience that the Spirit of God moves through our sometimes awkward processes and continues to call us to significant mission and ministry.

Around noon today we will be on the road, heading for home. Many of us will require more than one tank of high-priced gasoline to make it to our homes. The costs of travel are high.

But it is good to be together. And I am genuinely looking forward to worship today. We will hear the words of scripture and share in the sacrament of communion and we will once again be reminded that we are not in charge of this world. It isn't about us. We belong to a long line of people who have given their lives in service to others and to the work of the church.

Ours may not be the most momentous generation in the story of our people, but it is the time that is ours and the chapter of the story we know most intimately. And our generation is the bridge between the past and the future. We are responsible for telling the stories and doing the work that enables future generations to know the service and sacrifices as well as the joys and deep meanings of the past.

But I'm glad this meeting is nearing its conclusion.

I'm glad it will be a year before our next annual meeting.

And I'm sure that the year to come will be a time of challenge, opportunity, risk and reward for the South Dakota Conference of the United Church of Christ.

**June 16, 2008 – Monday**



The gift of rain in the hills this spring has become the gift of lawn mowing. The combination of adequate soil moisture with the little bit of fertilizer that I put on my lawn and a few warmer days has resulted in an impressive growth of grass. Most of my neighbors have Saturday off and Friday evening and Saturday are favorite mowing days. I usually mow on Monday, which means that my lawn looks longest and most raggedy on Sunday, the day that the neighbors' lawns are at their best. It is a minor distinction and it hasn't been a problem for me or for the neighbors.

The gift of lawn mowing for a preacher with a normally sedate lifestyle, is the gift of exercise. I've never measured the distance, but a half an acre with a 21" lawn mower is a significant amount of walking. It takes a couple of hours. The task is relatively simple from a mental or intellectual point of view. Walk back and forth, or if you'd prefer, walk around and around. I like to mix it up, mowing east to west one week, north to south the next. Then I'll toss in both diagonals before mowing round and round and returning to east to west. But for the most part, there is no heavy thinking required to get the lawn mowed. That means that I am free to let my mind wander as I mow.

Sometimes there are problems that need to be solved and I can work on possible solutions as I follow the mower around the lawn. Most often, however, there is time for a bit of creative thinking. Creative thinking - "what if?" - thinking is sometimes in short supply when we are busy and over burdened and engaged in just getting the work done. Time and space and mental focus need to be allowed in order for us to think of new ways of doing things and new directions for mission and ministry. Another business

meeting crammed into an already busy schedule can produce solutions to a business problem, but rarely produces an entirely new way of doing things. That kind of “out of the box” thinking requires a retreat.

Lawn mowing isn't exactly a retreat. But it is definitely a change of pace from a weekend that was filled with dawn to dark meetings and consultations and problems to solve. We crammed our weekend as full as we could with budgets and workshops and keynote speakers and events. Today has been set aside for some rest, for visiting with family and for household chores. It definitely has a different pace. Tomorrow will be soon enough to tackle the unread mail, unsorted workshop boxes I brought home from the meeting, and undone tasks in our local church.

Perhaps there will be a new idea today. Maybe there is a creative project that would be worthy of my attention and time. On the other hand, creativity cannot be forced. It isn't something that I can make happen, only allow space for it to emerge. It is entirely possible that the only thing I get accomplished today is to mow the lawn. Odds of finishing that chore seem pretty high at the moment.

The garden is at an easy-care phase. There aren't too many weeds. A quick few moments will address them and the plants are all up. The tomatoes are gaining confidence, having endured snow and hail and they are starting to add some height. The peas are twining around the little fence we put there to hold them up. The radishes are about a week from pulling the first ones and we could probably have lettuce later this week. We're probably five or six weeks away from the height of the corn season.

The work load is light. There will be time for a picnic at the lake or another outing if we decide we want to go on an adventure. And last night's thundershower has left the lawn damp enough that I'm probably a couple of hours away from starting the mowing. Time to read a book, stop and think a little bit, enjoy the absolutely gorgeous sunrise with a cup of coffee on the deck.

Life is good.

There are wars and rumors of wars. There are problems with the economy. There are gaps in leadership in the church. There are vacant pulpits and congregations in need of resources. There are parishioners who need a call and planning in need of completion. The season of campaigns is gearing up and there will be the usual nastiness. People in Iowa and other states are experiencing devastating flooding. There is an energy crisis and global warming and other environmental dangers threaten to permanently alter the world as we know it. There are enough unsolved problems that one could be overwhelmed.

None of this changes the simple fact that life is good.

And today is a day to take a breath, slow the pace, and appreciate the goodness.

Regardless of the pace or demands of your day, may you find - and very soon - a day to slow down and appreciate the goodness.

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**June 17, 2008 – A New Day**



We are being treated to a gorgeous sunrise this morning. Beautiful sunrises are a part of our home on the hill with a clear view to the East over the badlands and plains. A few clouds can add to the drama and splendor of this daily gift. Some days seem just right for new beginnings. Perhaps today has that feel because it is my first day back in the office after the annual meeting of the Conference. I have completed my term as moderator. New officers have been elected. My role in the conference has shifted, and that seems appropriate and very good. There may even be a few more minutes for me to focus more attention on my local church.

I have been full of ideas for our church the last couple of days. I've decided to make a list of new initiatives and share them with church leaders so that some can be chosen, modified, and put into action. Summer is a good time to generate new ideas, some of which become new programs in the fall.

I can imagine our church adding a new mission project this year. Our Habitat House will be dedicated in a week. We will have time and energy to look at new things. Perhaps this is the year we become involved in Love, Inc. Perhaps we can become more involved at Cornerstone apartments. Perhaps there is a new need that we will discover.

I can imagine our church launching a coffee shop project. We have been talking for several years about selling fair trade coffee to our members. We have also been talking about getting a new coffee system that works more quickly and allows us to serve different types of coffee. I can imagine having coffee and a few refreshments available

throughout the morning on Sunday, so that those who want coffee before choir or between choir and worship and those who want coffee after worship all will have an opportunity for the refreshments and fellowship. Perhaps we could become servers for some of the other events, such as concerts, that occur in our building.

I can imagine our church shifting the responsibilities of some of our staff. We might place more emphasis on pastoral care and shift emphasis from some other areas. We really need a volunteer coordinator. Perhaps that position could be combined with other functions. We have a member who is eligible for licensed ministry and several retired pastors. Perhaps we could start with a part-time stipend, free up some more time for stewardship and fund development and grow a new position. Our church would be such a good training ground for an internship or mentorship program. I can imagine us offering such training as well as hands on experience to pastors just getting started in the ministry.

I can imagine expanding our outreach and partnerships with those living on South Dakota Reservations. Our Woodchuck society has given us some good connections and relationships are growing. The knitted hats have extended those connections. There are other areas of need where we might become partners. Perhaps we could work with Re-member on their home construction projects or help them develop their own truss plant for the house project. Maybe we could offer some help with flood clean up in Cherry Creek.

I can imagine our congregation having a mission trip within the United States to respond to some natural disaster each year. The flooding in Iowa might be a good place to start. It is relatively close at hand and there is a real and immediate need. We have people with skills and tools and a heart for service. All that is need is getting those things together.

I can imagine us expanding our music programs to include a variety of artistic expressions. The worship arts program is so effective, why not expand it to reach other children and youth? What if we started with the simple fact that there are private music lessons offered in the church on Wednesdays, expand that to include some ensemble and other music programs. Perhaps we might one day offer a small music school to our community.

I can imagine us offering services with different character and flavors of music. We have an awesome jazz pianist. We have an incredibly talented fiddler. Their gifts of music could be used more often and more effectively in worship and their style might appeal to a wider community of people seeking and exploring faith.

I can imagine our congregation providing a wide range of services to the smaller and more isolate congregations in western South Dakota. Our medical system is a "hub and spoke" system. Many people from outlying areas come to Rapid City for hospital care.

We could be providing more pastoral services to them. We also could take our Vacation Bible School “on the road” and offer it to other congregations. We have specialized expertise in many areas of church life and there are congregations that are desperately short of leadership. Some congregations are close enough that we could assist with Sunday worship, weddings and funerals. Perhaps there is a model of ministry that reaches across the barriers between individual congregations. Our retired pastors are already the main source of interim pastoral leadership in our Association. What if we provided additional support to called pastors so that they were inclined to stay longer in small and isolated congregations?

The list of my ideas keeps growing. And I know that there are others with good ideas as well. My ideas are far from perfect and they will need refinement. Not everything that I imagine would work out.

But today is a new day. And it is a good day for exercising imagination.

The letter to the Ephesians says, “Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine, . . .”

God’s power is already at work in our midst. God always has power beyond our ability to imagine. There is yet more that can be accomplished by God in our congregation, and today is a good day to begin the work. The work will be challenging and it will be glorious.

“ . . . to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

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**June 18, 2008 – Church Home**



Vacation Bible School is in full swing at our church. The number of kids is a bit smaller than last year, but the enthusiasm is high and some kids brought friends so attendance was up on the second night. Like many other programs and projects at the church, numbers are only one way of evaluating what is going on. Vacation Bible School is, in part, about the process of layering memories. It takes a series of experiences in the church for any person before the church becomes familiar and one develops a sense of belonging and being at home in church.

The kids gather for supper and after sharing a brief meal, are engaged in a variety of experiences around a common theme. There are arts and crafts, Bible stories, games, and a mission center. Fun and friendship are important to the process. Safe and caring adults help to provide positive experiences for the children.

Much of the week is about the children discovering church as a home where they are always welcome. In the journey of life, there will come points where these children are in need of support and nurture. We pray that we can provide them with experiences that will help them to know, deep inside of themselves that the church is the place where they will always find that support and nurture. Our educational programs are designed to enable them to feel at home in our church, but also in the wider family of churches so that wherever they travel, they will know where to turn for love, acceptance, words of faith and encouragement.

In order for them to feel at home, they need to make the church into their home. This means that there is impact on our whole community when we design programs for children. Their presence is evident to anyone who takes a moment to look around the building. There are posters and visuals for this week. Puppets and craft supplies are out and available. There are a few extra groceries in the refrigerator and other signs that the children have an impact on our community. This is all a part of the church becoming their home and not just a place for adults.

Every new member changes the entire community. Growing our church is not just about getting others to go along with our programs and projects. It is often about embracing new programs and projects as new members bring their ideas and enthusiasm to the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ. Unlike our private homes, our church home is always changing and the cast of characters is filled with faces that come and go. When we gather as the body of Christ, there are always new faces and always the memories of those who are present in our hearts and minds even when they are not physically present.

Because it is a midweek program, there are many adult members of the congregation who never really witness Vacation Bible School. Their experience is mostly one of the signs that are left behind rather than the people who are gathered. It is too bad that others don't see the process while it is occurring. Because the agenda of the week is, in many ways, building a future. And in the future new people will be taking over the church and operating it in new ways. New music will sound from our halls and new faces will take their place in the leadership and decision-making arenas. The church of the future will be strongly connected to the past and the present, but it will not be the same. It is a living and growing community.

There are, occasionally, changes in the church that make some of the faithful squirm. That which is familiar and comfortable sometimes is changed by new ideas and new programs. New members don't always do things the way we have done them in the past. When the church is full and busy it can get a bit messy around the edges and it sometimes needs a little extra maintenance. But, as an old-timer in many ways, I have begun to recognize the "squirm" as a sign of growth - evidence that I don't always have to be in charge. My church home is not mine exclusively. Although I will always be at home in the church, it is also the home for a new generation.

It is good to see the children feeling at home in the church. I'm glad I've been around to see a bit of their Vacation Bible School. I will miss more of the program than usual this week, because of the demands of meetings and projects in other places, but I am confident that when I return on Friday I will see ample evidence that the children have been making the church their home.

## June 19, 2008 – The Edge of the Water



The stories of our people seem to be full of stories of almost unimaginable cruelty, usually caused by the jealousies and power drives of men who aspire to be leaders. And for each story of cruelty there is a story of incredible suffering - the undeserved suffering of innocents, usually women and children. But our stories are also filled with tales of the incredible ingenuity of mothers to save their children and to make life not only bearable, but also meaningful.

The tale of our incredible march to freedom and our discovery of God's role in our freedom begins with the brutal and frightening story of Pharaoh's use of infanticide as a means of population control and a tool for the consolidation of power in the face of a restless labor pool yearning for a better life. "Kill all the baby boys," was the order. It was, as we later learned, not the last time that cruelty beyond belief would be manifested in the destruction of the most innocent of victims.

The mother had to think quickly and she had to think clearly. There is more than one way to lose a son. Since the crime that was coming was not only infanticide, but also ethnic cleansing, she wondered if it might be possible to hide his origins. If only she could disguise her son as an Egyptian. He is a baby, after all, and to many adults, all babies look alike. But there was an unmistakable sign. Presented on the eighth day, her son bore the mark of his Jewish identity. Her only hope was to get him into a household of a very wealthy Egyptian - one who never changed the diapers of a baby - one who hired Jewish girls to care for their babies and Jewish mothers to nurse them. But how

would she gain access to such a center of power and wealth? How could she convince such a person to pretend that the baby was a member of the household?

Desperate times bring out desperate actions. The only chance for the baby to survive would be for the daughter of the great Pharaoh himself to take the baby. She would not be refused anything by her father. Fathers are that way with their daughters. She knew the place where the daughter of Pharaoh bathed herself. It was at the edge of the river, in the midst of the rushes and reeds. Perhaps that would be the place for the transaction to occur.

But she could not approach Pharaoh's daughter directly. To do so would be suicide. Such boldness - to interrupt a bath. One order from the daughter and the sorrows of slavery would be mild by comparison. The only chance was to have the young woman meet her son first. He was a cute baby. And babies know how to win the hearts of women, regardless of language or religion or nationality or wealth. If she could just get the woman to hold her baby, she knew that he would survive.

He would have to approach Pharaoh's daughter on his own, as it were. Too young to crawl, he would be placed in a basket and the gentle current of the edge of the Nile would take him to Pharaoh's daughter.

It was a crazy risk. Placing a baby in a basket floating on the water. Leaving him unattended. Planning the current just right to take him to the right place. Hoping that he wouldn't struggle. Hoping that he wouldn't drown. Hoping that he would stay awake and look directly into the eyes of Pharaoh's daughter - it was a look no woman could resist. But she could see no alternative to the risk. She hid her own daughter in the reeds to watch and provide the possibility of rescue, knowing full well that her role would not be free of risk. But it was her son's only chance at life.

You know our story. You know that the baby survived. You know that he grew up in the halls of power and wealth and this his mother and sister were hired to serve Pharaoh's daughter and her newfound adopted son. He lived the rest of his life with a new name - not a Jewish name of his father's fathers. His name was Moses - an Egyptian name: "Brought up from the water." And he grew to make his name among the greatest of Hebrew names so that to this day Jewish boys are often given that ancient Egyptian name that now rolls off of the tongue of Hebrew speakers like it has always been a part of our language.

I love to paddle a kayak or canoe along the edge of the water, where the reeds grow and the grasses dance with the current. And I always remember our story - the story of our Grandfather Moses - whenever I paddle in such a place. Yesterday I paddled along the edge of the Missouri River near the capitol of our state, mud-swollen and rich with the smells of spring. There was no seeing the bottom with the soils of spring runoff choking the water. They don't call it "the big muddy" for nothing. I've never seen the

Nile, but I am told that the delta is choked with mud and smells of the runoff in the way that only a river that drains an entire continent can. It fertilizes the desert with the richness of the rainforest and the fish that lurk in the dark depths aren't the only protein in the diets of the crocodiles that lurk along its banks.

We have no crocodiles. A beaver may occasionally splash the water with its tail and surprise a paddler, but the risks are small and a feeling of safety surrounds. The biggest risk of our river is the wind and hail of a sudden thundershower and in most cases it is easy to get to shelter. And I am no baby. I could wade or swim to shore if I were to upset my boat.

So I do not know fully the fear that gripped our grandmother so long ago. I don't understand how far she waded into the waters of risk. I don't comprehend the depth of her trust in God. But I am grateful for her actions. Without her would our people ever have tasted freedom? Without her, could our people have ever begun to understand that the keys to the land of freedom lie in the depth of our commitment?

When we tell the story, we are accustomed to telling it as if Moses is the great hero. But, if the truth be known, the story of our people is totally dependent upon the actions and the faith of his mother. Like mothers everywhere, she knew intimately the price of the future and with a strength that transcends the depths of our imagination, she was more than willing to pay that price.

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**June 20, 2008 – AGEHR**



There are all sorts of conventions that are held in our state and in other locations. People get together to share common interests, whether those interests be related to their jobs or their hobbies. The larger cities and towns all have large convention centers that are ready to host a variety of events and activities. Huge overhead doors open to allow trucks and trailers to unload a wide variety of items for display and sale. Vendors set up booths and convention goers register and attend workshops, educational events, and view the variety of items that have been brought to the convention center.

One of the main features of a convention is the opportunity to get together with others who share a common interest. When the focus of the convention is something about which an individual has a lot of passion or energy, it is good to discover that one is not alone.

The Sioux Falls Civic Center and Arena is filled this weekend with convention-goers. There is nothing unique or unusual about that. The large and expensive building needs to be booked as much as possible in order for it to produce enough income to justify the large and well-maintained space.

But my-oh-my, there are a lot of handbell ringers together in one place this weekend. I've never seen so many handbells. Cases and cases and table after table of gleaming, bright, polished brass are waiting to be rung. It is the meeting of region VII of the American Guild of English Handbell Ringers. Ringers from North and South Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin and Manitoba have gathered for their annual convention.

Bells of the Hills, our community handbell choir presented the opening showcase concert last night. The bell choir is made up of sixteen ringers from around our community and they borrow handbells from area churches as well as ring bells and hand chimes that they have purchased for their own use. The usual venue in our community is a church. The ensemble is very good, but there is a limited market for that kind of music. An audience of 500 people is a big concert for Bells of the Hills.

Last night they took to the stage in front of over 800 people. And the audience was all other handbell ringers. Who could have imagined there were so many people who cared enough about that particular form of music to travel from four states and one Canadian province to be together? The four day event is crammed full of classes and workshops and opportunities to ring and to hear handbells.

The sound at the arena last night was distinctly different from other events, say a monster truck rally or a gathering of the South Dakota Association of General Contractors. I'm sure that the waiters and other center staff who were serving the meal and clearing the tables last night see a wide variety of interests and hear a wide variety of sounds.

In the center there is an other large room with row upon row of tables set up for all of the different handbell choirs to lay out their bells and ring together. On Sunday afternoon there will be a public concert of the combined handbell choirs of all of the participants. It will be a glorious sound.

Handbells are an outgrowth of church bells. Many churches have a single bell that is rung or tolled on special occasions to call the faithful to worship or to note a significant event such as a wedding or funeral. The larger cathedrals began to commission multiple bells and some even were able to afford a simple twelve-tone scale that allowed for simple melodies to be rung. The process of ringing church bells is difficult and physical. Ropes have to be pulled and the exact timing of the ringing of the bell is difficult to control precisely. And each bell emits a sound that is not a single tone, but a series of overtones. The ring lingers so the addition of another bell can make a sound that is a pleasant combination or a discord that lingers.

Change ringing societies developed throughout Europe as more cathedrals installed more bells. Using mathematical formulas they devised different schemes for ringing the bells to create sounds that reverberated off of other buildings and nearby hills. When a change ringing society was practicing, the entire area knew what they were doing.

Contemporary English Handbells were devised to create a more portable and more precise way to ring bells than pulling the ropes in a cathedral tower. The bells are manufactured to very precise specifications and the primary tone of each is carefully tuned to a specific note on the scale. Typically a beginning choir can ring two or three

octaves of bells. More advanced choirs add octaves within a six octave range. Hand chimes are a different instrument with a distinct sound and come in the same range as the bells.

Handbell ringing remains a distinctively social event. It takes a choir of a dozen or more people whose movements are carefully choreographed and synchronized to create music. Hours and hours of practice are required to get all of the sounds to occur in precise timing to produce a hymn or other song. Like any musical instrument, handbells require commitment for mastery. A concert requires the commitment of many ringers not only to the instruments, but to the process of playing together.

It all came together last night in Sioux Falls. Practiced and dedicated ringers and a receptive audience. The standing ovation at the end of the concert was enthusiastic and impressive. Who would have thought that handbells could generate so much passion?

I'm not a handbell ringer. I enjoy listening to them. I serve on the board of directors of Bells of the Hills and I have become the regular emcee of their concerts. But last night I felt privileged to share the space with so many handbell ringers who were so passionate about their art.

Unlike the real handbell ringers, however, I didn't purchase a stack of CD recordings of handbell choirs to listen to on the drive home. Once you've heard a live choir, a recording will never do justice to an art that is both aural and visual.

All I can say is, "You had to be there to really understand what occurred."

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June 21, 2008 – Summer



Yesterday was the longest day of the year. I assume that it follows that last night was the shortest night of the year. Summer has officially arrived. But we are used to our seasons lagging a bit behind the calendar. We will have enough summer weather in September to make up for the vestiges of spring that are lingering in our neighborhood this June. And we are so unaccustomed to all the rain that it is still a bit of a novelty. Yesterday brought scattered thundershowers, but there were parts of town where the water was running down the streets and the puddles were getting deep in places.

It appears that we are, for the most part, waterproof. There is the occasional wet basement, and there are springs cropping up in places where either they hadn't been before or we had forgotten them. The grass is high and growing and it is difficult to find a break between rain showers for the grass to dry enough to mow.

We don't have it bad. There is a lot of farmland under water in Iowa and neighboring states. It looks like the price of corn and soybeans will continue to soar for the folks who happen to have any to harvest this fall. The cost of diesel is keeping pace with the cost of wheat, so those folks will probably about break even again this year. Up on the Cheyenne River Reservation there are places where the gumbo is so thick that folks don't dare drive in to see how much flood damage there is.

It promises to be a banner year for mosquitoes. Fortunately we are far from any malaria, but West Nile Virus strikes more folk in South Dakota than any other place.

Welcome to summer.

I can remember the way I used to long for summer when I was in elementary school. Three months of unstructured time to play in the river, build tree houses, read any books I wanted. Our library had a limit of ten books per person and I went every week. There is nothing better than an old inner tube and a river on a hot August day. The last few days of school before summer vacation seemed like torture. The clock at the front of the classroom seemed to slow to a standstill, if not go backwards at time. Summer was better than Christmas. I had a birthday near the beginning of summer so there were presents to anticipate and summer didn't get over so soon.

I can remember the anticipation. But I seem to have lost it somewhere. There is a change of pace to my summers these days to be sure. I don't mow the lawn in the winter. I get outside more in the summer. I take a canoe or kayak to the lake whenever I can. There are hikes and picnics and a few less meetings. Summer is a good change of pace around here. But the change seems less dramatic than when I was a child.

I suppose that it started to change with summer jobs. But the jobs I had as a teen weren't all that miserable. Only on a farm or ranch will they trust a 14-year-old with that much horsepower. I worked summer fallow and I drove truck for harvest. The days were long, but I enjoyed driving and when you work outdoors all day long, you don't need air conditioning. A water jug and some shade provide as much comfort as one can stand. I'm pretty pale skinned and sunburn before I show any signs of tan, but the combination of being outside everyday at least brought the freckles closer together.

And on the farm all of one's expenses are taken care of. There is plenty of food and the days are filled. Payday doesn't come until after the harvest is in, so you don't spend any money at all until State Fair time. I even managed to save a few dollars some summers. There was room for a big purchase in the fall.

The days seem to pass more quickly now and there are many more concerns and worries to occupy my summers. I've gotten to the point in my life where some years sort of fade into others in my memory. We have a kind of two-year cycle to our summers, with trips to Costa Rica and General Synod in the odd numbered years. That should mean that this year is a time when we will stay at home more than some summers. At least that is our plan. It makes sense with the price of gasoline hovering in the \$4 range.

Our church traditions are based in a northern-hemisphere agrarian calendar. We don't have any major religious holidays in the summer. It is simply the season of Pentecost. We even call it ordinary time. For many centuries the focus was on summer work and there weren't too many special days. Celebrations were saved for other times of the year. And we follow the traditions with a decrease in programs during the summer.

But we will have fresh garden lettuce for our salads tomorrow and peas and radishes are only a little behind. The tomatoes are growing slowly with the frequent showers and cooler days, but warm days are not far behind and they show promise. The corn is up and the zucchini is producing leaves. Life is good and we are fortunate people.

So welcome to summer. May it bring a bit of a change of pace to your life. After all, for half of the globe yesterday was the start of winter. It's all a matter of perspective.

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## June 22, 2008 – Anniversary



Yesterday I had the distinct honor to stand before a couple as they renewed their marriage vows on the occasion of their 60th Wedding Anniversary. It was an amazingly emotional event. You might think that after so many years, a couple might take it for granted that they would be married and that they would remain married. But the truth is that the way people make it to sixty years is that they never take their marriage for granted but nurture it and make fresh commitments continually.

Of course a sixtieth anniversary is not only the product of commitment. There are many couples who have deep commitment whose lives do not grant them as many years of marriage. It takes good health and perhaps even a bit of luck to remain alive and healthy for so many years. Life is distinctly short of guarantees and when a couple marries there are many factors that lie ahead which are not evident on the day of their wedding.

So it is a rare and delightful occasion to gather with a couple on their anniversary and listen to them once again repeat their vows and once again mean it with all that is in them.

Perhaps I am especially touched because of the timing. Today is the thirty-fifth anniversary of our wedding. There was a time when such a number was almost unimaginable to me and so distant that I didn't give it much thought. After all, I hadn't lived thirty-five years when I got married. I had no personal experience of what thirty-five years meant. It was merely something that old folks talked about.

Now I'm one of the old folks who talk about such things. And a fiftieth anniversary seems well within our grasp. Fifteen years doesn't seem like a long time at all to me anymore.

And today we will celebrate our wedding anniversary by attending another anniversary. We will drive up to Reeder, North Dakota a town that is celebrating its centennial this year, to celebrate the centennial of the 1st Congregational United Church of Christ in Reeder, a congregation that we served as pastors from 1978 to 1985. Yes this summer is the thirtieth anniversary of the year we started serving the congregation.

There are many anniversaries.

I've never been one for reunions. I didn't graduate from high school, so I'm never sure that I really belong to any specific class there. In college I had friends from many different classes and I don't think that my bonds with those who graduated the same year as I did were somehow deeper or more significant than my connections with those who graduated before or after my graduation. Seminary reunions are, for the most part, rather sedate affairs and most of my seminary classmates are far too busy planning church events and activities to serve on yet another committee to plan a reunion. My school spirit is expressed primarily through a check during the annual alumni fund raiser.

The relationships that mean a lot to me from my school experience are on-going and constant and we don't need a reunion or official event in order to stay in touch. I have many life-long friends, but we haven't felt much need to get together with all of the members of our class.

But today seems to me to be a significant day. It seems momentous. The promises that we made thirty-five years ago are as meaningful as they were on the day we made them. In some ways they are more meaningful to us today than they were when we first married.

Ours is not a time that is marked by long-term commitments. The statistics on marriage tell us that for many marriage is not a life-long commitment, but rather something that one does for a particular phase of one's life. I wonder if we have failed to communicate the real joys of marriage.

A life long monogamous marriage really is one of the best things in the world. One of the true paradoxes of this life is that freedom comes through commitment. Real freedom comes not from variety, nor from detachment. Real freedom comes from a life lived in trust. And trust is born of promises that are kept. Knowing one person - really knowing that person requires more than a lifetime. After decades there are still new things to discover and new joys that unfold.

And it is appropriate for us to celebrate our anniversary by attending a church anniversary. I have no more interest in the “church of what’s happening now” than I do in a short term fling. A church that knows the history of the larger church and understands its place in that history is far more valuable to me than the latest rock rhythms. A church that is continually investing in the future of faith appeals to me more than one that wants to be the center of attention in the here and now.

The little town of Reeder is dying. Like many other small towns on the prairies of the Dakotas, the economic reasons for the town have passed. There are no new jobs and few reasons for a family to live there. Those who remain are, for the most part, old timers who will live out their retirement in the old home town knowing that each year will see fewer businesses and fewer services. And, when the time comes, they will probably move to a larger town for health care before returning to the small cemetery to be buried. The church will one day die with the town. But that will only happen in the due course of history. 1st Congregational Church was there for the founding of the community and it will remain until the end. It is a lifetime commitment - one that extends beyond the span of the lives of individual members.

None of us go on forever. Lifetime commitments, as meaningful as they are, do not go on forever. We all have only the span of a single lifetime for the commitments of this world. But for the span of the one lifetime that I have, there is nothing more meaningful than the lifetime commitments that I have made. And the promise of the future rests securely on promises that I made years ago.

Indeed it is a happy anniversary.

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## June 23, 2008 – Grasslands



There is an old sodbuster saying that goes something like, “Anybody can love the mountains, but it takes soul to love the prairies.” I don’t know how true this saying is, but I grew up near the mountains in Montana and it wasn’t until I was in my mid-twenties and moved to North Dakota that I had any experience with the prairies. When we learned that we were going to move to North Dakota I anticipated that I would have trouble adjusting to life on the open prairie. In fact, I loved living there and there was little or no difficult adjustment.

Now I find myself in a different phase of life, living in a different place, but from time to time I enjoy the opportunity to drive across the open spaces and experience the prairie again. Yesterday afforded such an opportunity. We drove up to Reeder, North Dakota, to attend the centennial celebration of Reeder Congregational United Church of Christ. Reeder is about 175 miles from Rapid City, mostly north, and our favorite route is highway 79. Leaving home at 5 a.m., we headed up through Sturgis to Newell and then on up through Hoover and Reva.

Bear Butte was stunning in the early morning light and looking at it reminded us once again how it has been sacred to generations of prairie dwellers. Once we got through Newell, we only passed two cars before making the North Dakota line up at the Grand River - a distance of about 75 miles. Counting ourselves, that makes about one car per 25 miles of road - less traffic density than most church-goers encountered yesterday.

The land in the area where North Dakota, South Dakota and Montana meet is a mosaic of public and private land, once home to gigantic herds of buffalo. It is the land of Sitting Bull and semi-nomadic tribes who followed the buffalo. Permanent settlers didn't arrive until the 20th century and the complex processes of shrinking reservations, railroad land grants and homesteading resulted in a large area of land owned by the federal government with areas of privately owned land in the midst of all of it.

The national grasslands are federal lands administered by the Forest Service and maintained as multiple-use areas. Grazing leases on the area involve ranchers in the management and stewardship of the land. Locally known as "government pasture," the grasslands are not parks maintained for tourists, but large open areas with opportunities for public access for those who want to get away from crowds and have the equipment and skills to take care of themselves.

Yesterday the prairies were as green and lush as I have ever seen them. The stock dams and low areas were all full of water and the grass was tall and green. The constant prairie wind made the grass dance and there were lots of antelope and deer as well as countless birds. We saw a pair of golden eagles sitting on a fence near the road and the song of meadowlarks greeted us when we stopped the car for a second to look around. It was immediately evident that even if we had found the time, yesterday wasn't a good day for off road travel. There is enough mud on the prairie right now to allow one to really get stuck. And stuck vehicles or equipment in that neck of the world are often community events - opportunities for spectators and advice-givers.

Our road was high and dry and the drive - both ways - was delightful.

I was aware that the experience of being on the open prairie is one that many people never get. In our increasingly urbanized world, most folks live all of their lives in cities and their visits outside of the cities are reserved for developed locations such as ski and beach resorts. There are no resorts in the slim buttes. There is a ranch that has erected an outhouse along the highway about 15 or 20 miles north of Hoover but that is about it for tourist amenities. One day I'd like to take the guy from the Verizon television advertisement for a little drive on the prairie. The answer to "Can you hear me now?" is "no" for stretches of 50 and more miles. And I find myself increasingly grateful to know that there are places where one cannot talk on the telephone.

So I don't know if it takes soul to appreciate the prairies, but getting out to the open prairies certainly renews and refreshes one's soul. Facing the prairie wind and breathing fresh air, being in a place where the animals far outnumber the humans, getting space away from crowds and the rush of daily living - all of these qualities are gifts of the prairie. And these gifts are valuable beyond measure for me. In the middle of the prairie it is easy to feel small and to get a sense of the vastness of God's creation.

I am immensely grateful for open spaces. Some days, when I am not able to go out into the prairie, when my work lands me behind a desk or at a meeting in Cleveland, it is good just to know that there are open spaces - to remember the prairies and Dakota grasslands and know that they remain empty of too much human encroachment.

Our experience of the prairie was all too brief. We traveled by car, not by horse or walking. We returned to our home to sleep instead of bedding down on the ground. We avoided getting bogged down in the mud and didn't linger enough to experience the fury of a real thunderstorm. I can remember driving through the area in a blizzard wondering if I would be able to find the road all of the way. I know that feeling of getting caught out in the open by a thunderstorm with no trees to shelter one from the rain and hail. I've felt 104 degree heat and winds that feel like opening an oven door. But those were distant memories yesterday as we delighted in the gorgeous early summer day.

I hope I never get too attached to the urban lifestyle. I hope there will always be days in my life to experience the prairie. And when my time comes for the world to grow dim and the silence to envelop me, I hope I will remember the song of the meadowlark.

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**June 24, 2008 – Alone Time**



There is a riot of birdsong, but it is too dark to see individual birds. I can make out a few individual voices, but mostly it is just a lot of birds in the trees. Off to the east there is a pink glow that promises the sunrise before too long, but the neighborhood is dark and most of its residents are still sleeping. The day ahead is busy, there is a long list of things to accomplish and the promise of a celebration to end the day when we dedicate a duplex that we have been building in partnership with Black Hills Area Habitat for Humanity. Two new homeowners will be receiving their keys. It is the culmination of over a year's worth of effort.

I know it is going to be a good day with many meaningful activities.

But right now there is a moment of quiet. Right now I can step out onto the porch and breathe the cool outside air. The cats get up when I do and they've been rubbing against my leg for attention. For the most part, however, I have the time to myself. Early in the morning seems to be the best time for me to take time to be alone.

I love working with people. My job is all about relationships. Very few things that we do as a church are things that an individual can do alone. We are constantly about the business of accomplishing things that require groups of people. The Habitat for Humanity duplex is a great example. An average Habitat home requires about 2,500 hours of labor. The duplex isn't quite double that number because there are some efficiencies in the construction of a duplex. But this construction project started with the tearing down of a structure, so there were a couple of hundred hours invested before

the new construction began. I suspect that we've got more than 4,000 hours in this project. That's two years for an individual - if that individual were doing nothing else in the time. Beyond that, there are many jobs, such as placing the floor beams, lifting the walls, raising trusses and putting on the siding that cannot be done by a single individual working alone.

It takes a lot of people to build a home.

Most of the jobs in the church are like that. We are engaged in doing things that are far too big for any one individual. Our business is working together to accomplish things that would be impossible were we working alone.

I love working with others. It is equally true, however, that I love the moments I have to be alone. Life works best for me when there is a balance of alone time and time with others. My private devotions and study of the scriptures informs our public worship and Bible study. My individual vision and dreams can, on occasion, inspire others. And I am inspired by others time and time again. I don't ascribe to the theory that I can worship God alone in the hills as ably as I can worship in a church. I do worship God when I am alone, but I need the continual contact with others and sharing in worship together in order to maintain spiritual balance. But I also need times of reveling in the beauty of creation: hiking through the hills, paddling across the reservoirs, sitting still under the trees and listening.

It takes a lot of people to build a life of faith.

The sun is rising. Soon the neighborhood will be waking. Coffee pots will be turned on. Newspapers will be carried into homes. Televisions and radios will blare with the news of the day. Folk will get ready for work, hop in their cars and be off to their activities. We will encounter each other in the bank, in the grocery store, and in a thousand different places throughout the day. We are a community and we live and work together.

So this morning, in my pre-dawn alone time, I say a little prayer for my neighbors. May we learn to slow our pace just a little and appreciate each other a bit more. May we open our eyes to the sorrows and sufferings of those around us and demonstrate compassion in ways we have not before done. May we treasure and value each other and the times we have together. May we be a little more hospitable to strangers and visitors. May we learn to be more generous and less selfish. And may God bless us and keep us this day and every day.

The day will bring surprises. There are unforeseen challenges and new problems to be solved. Joy and sorrow remain close in the human drama and both are experienced almost every day. Memories are both sweet and bittersweet.

The sunrise is showing its full beauty as I come to the end of today's reflection. It is a free gift that does not judge worthiness in those who watch it. There is the promise of a beautiful sunset this evening. In the time in between, I hope that I'll be able to reflect a bit of beauty into the lives of those I meet.

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**June 25, 2008 – Home**



Photo by Chuck Rounds

There is a simple statement that we often make when talking about the houses that Habitat for Humanity builds: "Habitat builds houses. It takes a family to make a house into a home." The truth is that there is no reason to build the houses if not for the partner families. Part of the simple genius of the Habitat for Humanity concept is that the houses are built in partnership with families who need homes. Working side-by-side is a way to develop connections that go far beyond the simple building of a structure - they help us to build a community together.

Last night was a joyous celebration as we dedicated the first twin home that Black Hills Area Habitat for Humanity has constructed. Two families received their homes with the blessings of volunteers, family and friends. There are several gifts that are always given at the dedication of the home. There is a small tool kit that reminds the families that they are now home owners, not renters. Maintenance is their responsibility. But they also have the freedom to make changes and improvements as they see fit. There are a few gardening tools, as the home does not yet have a lawn and there is much yard work that must be invested in the months to come. There are quilts to symbolize the warmth of the community and a basket of items that symbolize home.

And every homeowner receives the gift of a Bible. Habitat for Humanity is unapologetic about its Christian origins and the Christian motivation for our work. We build homes for all families, regardless of their faith. We do not seek to convert others to our way of thinking or believing. But we do offer the gift of the Bible as a way of demonstrating the

faith that motivates our involvement. If nothing else, it may help someone who is of another faith tradition to understand us better. It continues our conviction that every home needs faith.

Last night was a bittersweet event for one of our homeowners. We have known Terry from the beginning of our project. The land on which the homes were built belonged to his father. Terry inherited the land, but did not have the means to build a home on his own. He donated the land to Habitat for Humanity and it provided a home not only for him, but also for another family. Terry worked with our volunteers from the beginning, helping us on the first day when we were constructing the beams for the floor system. He has been patient and involved throughout the process.

The day of the dedication turned out also to be the day of the death of Terry's uncle. His extended family, who have supported him throughout the process of construction and waiting, were not able to attend the dedication. They didn't get to listen as the priest gave his blessing to the home. They weren't there to watch the giving of symbolic gifts. They will have to learn of the evening's events by the telling of stories instead of being eye witnesses to the celebration.

But Terry and his son are already a long way towards making the house their home. A home is a place of sorrow as well as joy, challenge as well as celebration. When life's struggles threaten to overwhelm, a home is the place where you can go and know that you are loved, know that you are not alone, and know that the community surrounds you. A home is a place where you always belong. All of our homes contain memories of those who have died and they are places where the presence of the long legacy of love is felt.

In a way the blessing of the homes last night was even more meaningful than some other similar occasions. Tears of sorrow can become holy water for blessing. One of the stories in the Bibles that were presented tells of a woman who came to Jesus and washed his feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. In the culture of that day, it was traditional for grieving women to carry a small vial around their necks and collect their tears in that vial. As she poured out the tears from her vial, she was literally pouring out her grief on Jesus. Jesus received her grief as a blessing. Tears of grief became the waters of blessing.

Habitat for Humanity can build houses. It cannot shelter families from grief or hard times or difficult challenges. That is why we acknowledge that transferring the title to the home and handing over the keys is only one step in the larger process of building communities. That is why we acknowledge the role of God in every home that is built. The job is far bigger than we can accomplish on our own.

The houses that we built are already well on the way to becoming homes for the families of our community. Surely God was present in our actions last night. And the lot at the corner of N. Seventh and Nowlin in Rapid City, South Dakota, is holy ground.

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## June 26, 2008 – Dramatic Skies



I think we are all keeping an eye on the sky in a little different way this year. With all of the rain that we have had, we are a little bit more aware of the weather. As spring slides into summer we are seeing fewer days when it is cloudy all day long. Our pattern in the last few days is for warm sunny weather during the day with late afternoon thundershowers. Around 4 or 5 in the afternoon the skies start to boil and darken. The showers are scattered, but a few carry high winds and hail as well as rain.

The last few days, it has been mostly bluster. We've gotten a little rain, but the most dramatic storms have passed to the south. Even watching the doppler radar, we will see a line of thunderstorms heading our way that will leave a gap or weaken as it travels over the hills.

I've noticed that I'm not the only one who studies the skies these days. My neighbors will often linger for a few moments on their way in or out of their houses. Those who want to mow their lawns after work have a little race with the thundershowers. Sometimes they finish in time, sometimes the job is put off for another day before it is completed.

None of us are ready to complain. The memory of drought is too fresh in our minds and there are still many signs of the dry years in the forest. It is a real treat to walk through lush, knee-high grass where last year there was just a dry stubble that crackled with every step. We can, however, remember the years of dry lightning when the evening

thunderstorms seemed to only hint of the possibility of rain, and delivered instead fire after fire after fire.

Summer is upon us. The days are warming up. Temperatures in the high seventies and low eighties are the norm and the forecast says we'll see some nineties in the next week. Things will begin to dry out. The warm temperatures combined with even a light breeze will draw moisture out of the surface of the ground and dry the morning dews faster. This lovely spring will not liberate us from garden hoses and lawn watering in July and August. The corn and tomatoes in the garden need the warm days. The cooler spring is already treating us to abundant harvests of lettuce and radishes and we'll have peas soon.

It is the sky, however, that has commanded my attention this week. The boiling clouds are constantly changing and the range of color in the sky is great. The clouds appear every color of white, gray, blue, purple and green before the sunset reveals twinges of gold, yellow, red, pink and violet. The view is constantly changing not only in color, but also in texture. Our childhood game of naming the shapes we see in the clouds returns to my mind as I see various sizes and shapes of clouds. I am grateful for digital photography, because my attempts to photograph the clouds result in more failures than images that show the view that I can see with my eyes.

The technologies of our times have led us to focus our attention away from the sky. When weather is threatening, I will check the radar with the computer and when I am away from home, I often carry a portable weather radio that will alert me of dangerous storms heading my way. The forecasters are getting good at predicting the track and timing of storms and are usually accurate when thunderstorm warnings are broadcast. All of these modern conveniences are nice, but they allow us to shift the responsibility for our behavior away from ourselves. Instead of learning to read the clouds and seek shelter at appropriate times, we rely on the technologies to give us warning and when we are caught by surprise, we tend to blame the technologies or the weather forecasters. Maybe we aren't too different from ancients who would blame the weather gods for violent storms and weather that was not supportive of their crops.

The truth is that we can learn a lot about the weather just by observing the skies. This pursuit takes time and concentration, and the weather is always capable of surprising us, but it isn't difficult to hike safely in this part of the world without a weather radio. This time of the year all it takes is making sure that you hike early enough in the day to be off the mountain before the afternoon thundershowers.

I am not a farmer. And in many ways my job is almost independent of the weather. We worship and offer the programs and services of the church in good weather and in bad. There is the occasional storm that might scatter a picnic or change attendance at an event, but, for the most part our lives are rarely disrupted by the weather. I could go through my daily routine without reading the forecast or even paying attention to the

weather most days. But there is something within me that is fascinated by the weather. There is some internal invitation to spend time outdoors and to garden and think about the seasons and the skies.

So I keep my eyes on the clouds and I enjoy their beauty and power. And I am grateful to live in a world with such dramatic changes and amazing beauty. I wish for rain instead of hail and I am delighted when my crops and my roof escape yet another storm. And I give thanks that life has not led me to a totally urban existence. To be able to wander in the country and visit the lonely places on a regular basis nourishes my spirit and keeps me in tune with the power and wonder of God.

Keep looking up.

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**June 27, 2008 – One Day**



There are days that when they start, you can't predict where they will go. Or at least you can't predict what will happen along the way. Yesterday was one of those days. I guess the beginning and ending were pretty much as we expected. We went to work almost as usual, with our routine a little disrupted because my father-in-law was in the hospital. His doctors had discovered and cauterized a duodenal ulcer the day before. Since most ulcers in the first part of the intestine have chronic stress or irregular mealtimes as part of the cause, the discovery of the ulcer didn't surprise us. Irregular mealtimes sure fit his routine - or lack of routine. The last three years have seen stress, too, with the death of his wife, the sale of his home, moving to a new town, giving up driving, and more. He had a few other symptoms, but we had come up with ways of thinking that perhaps that addressing the ulcer was all that might be needed for his treatment plan.

Since we had made previous plans to attend a play in the evening, we had hoped that his care would be such that his evening would be one of calm and rest and he wouldn't miss our being away for a few hours. That much of the day went according to our plan. We did attend the play.

But along the way a lot happened for one day.

When I began my day, I didn't know what an electrophysiologist was.

In the morning we were informed that they had monitored an arrhythmia in his heart beat, and that it was of concern and a cardiologist was contacted to review the data

recorded by the heart monitor. Our work day progressed with phone calls and an extra trip to the hospital. By late morning we knew that the physicians were recommending that a pacemaker be implanted. We also learned that this procedure was performed under local anesthesia and though risks existed, it was a routine procedure in the hospital.

Release forms were signed in the early afternoon and by 4 p.m. the procedure was completed, we had met the electrophysiologist, and Keith was resting comfortably in his room. By the time we took our seats for the play, family members had been contacted and reports had been made about his condition.

Along the way I made it to the meetings I had planned, made phone calls and worked through most of the work load of a normal day. While the procedure is routine for the hospital's medical staff, it is far from routine for our family. And yet, in retrospect, it surprises me how little it disrupted my routine.

It hasn't been that long since the vast majority of procedures involving the heart included a trip to the intensive care unit, a lengthy recovery, and a major disruption of life for the patient and the family.

By the time we went to bed for the night, we were aware of the major decisions that had been made in one day. But we were also aware of the relative ease with which we had made the decisions. The hospital is skilled at patient and family education and the Internet assists in providing information that is needed to understand options for treatment and assess risks, potential side effects, and make informed decisions.

And we had been treated to a wonderful evening with dear friends. It is more than a sense that life goes on. Life goes on with a high degree of quality, varied experiences, and the love of family and friends.

Had the day gone differently, I might have been blogging about the play this morning. I doubt if it would have been my best review of a play. The actors were talented and performed well. But I usually go away from a musical with at least one tune in my head. This morning what is sticking in my head is the athleticism of one of the actresses and an obscure reference to Thomas Malthus' principals of political economy.

It's possible that I was more tired than I thought when we attended the play. I know it wasn't the only thing on my mind during the evening. On the other hand, it is possible that Urinetown just isn't going to make it up there with The Sound of Music, Miss Sigon, Jesus Christ Superstar, Annie, Oklahoma, Auntie Mame and Amadeus and the other musicals in my top ten . . . or even my top hundred, come to think of it. Actually, I'm kind of glad I don't have my mind full of songs about the role of capitalism in public accommodations.

It was just another day around here. But one that I am not likely to forget.

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## June 28, 2008 – Gardening



We were married in the early 1970's. It was an era of consciousness-raising about women's and men's roles and we were careful not to get too trapped into traditional roles. We both came from families with an enlightened view of the roles of women and men. Both sets of our parents were good partners who shared business as well as family and we had fathers who were actively engaged in home and family and mothers who were competent and engaged in business.

Still we were careful as we forged our new marriage. I made sure that I did the dishes and helped with house cleaning. I went grocery shopping. We both were students for the first five years of our marriage, and after that we were colleagues, so it made sense for us to divide our household chores equally and to share fully our quest for education and professional careers.

But there are some gender roles to which we have adhered. We both share in lawn care and gardening. But there are distinctions. I like to run the roto-tiller. She pulls weeds by hand. I grow vegetables. She grows flowers. I use stakes and strings to plant straight and even rows. She makes artistic arrangements of plants with lots of curves and fancy layouts. I built a seven-foot fence around my garden. She is constantly trying to figure out what flowers the deer won't eat. (For the record, there may be flowers that the deer don't like to eat, but I don't think that there are any that they won't sample from time to time.) She knows the people at the nursery. I know the guys at the feed store. I grow for the way things taste. She grows for the way things look.

I once read that good landscaping adds 10% to 15% to the value of a home. That is the kind of gardening that Susan does. I mow the lawn. I have a very nice lawn mower. She has an old hand trowel. We have no problem sharing the same hoses, but I like to set out sprinklers. She prefers to water by hand. I like leather gloves. She wears cotton gloves, when she wears gloves at all. I can't imagine working in the garden bare footed. She does it all the time.

These aren't really gender roles, although there are some similarities with other men and women. We are just two different people. Which is a very good thing. I would get bored if I spent my time with someone who was exactly like me. And I don't want to live in a house without a few flowers around. I like to sit on the porch and look at the flowers. And I have quite a collection of pictures of the flowers she has grown.

There are other distinctions, some traditional, others not so traditional.

I like woodworking tools and have a collection of power tools. She likes her sewing machine and has used the same one for our entire married life. I still have to ask her advice when doing the laundry from time to time and she simply does more of it than I do. She almost always consults me with any auto maintenance item and I take charge with most car repairs.

We shared our delight in caring for our children when they were younger and we race to the phone when one of them calls. We both have become caregivers for our parents and both enjoy that role. We both love to travel. She often will take charge of planning a trip, I frequently will do more driving.

She enjoys going to the farmers' market. I like the hardware store. We both avoid the mall whenever possible. She does all of our tax preparation. I balance the checkbook. She's always been better at math and at remembering names. I am better at page design and computer work.

It is a very good thing that we are two different people. And knowing how different we are is one of the reasons that we continue to find as much delight and excitement in our marriage as we did 35 years ago. We never wanted to be the same. Although there are many things on which we agree, we never wanted to agree on everything. We enjoy the give and take of disagreement from time to time.

A harmonious life does not require that one is surrounded by people who always agree or who see things in same way. But it does require respect for the other. Disagreement we can accept. We even expect disagreement. But when others believe they are always right and we are always wrong disagreement becomes intolerable.

Neither of us are master gardeners. We have more than our share of sick plants and garden failures. And both of us freely admit that we make mistakes and have deficits in

understanding plants and how to garden. We are experimenters and are willing to learn from our mistakes and from each other.

A healthy dose of confession goes a long way in our life together. I am not perfect. I don't have all of the answers. I make mistakes and I occasionally have regrets. And I live in a community of people who make mistakes and who are able to admit it when they do. We try to learn from our failings and shortcomings. We make genuine efforts at changing and becoming better.

Shortly before we were married, Thomas Harris published a self-help book called "I'm OK - You're OK." It was quite popular at the time. The simplistic philosophy of acceptance of others has value. But my experience has been much closer to "I'm not perfect, you're not perfect, but that's OK." The ability to understand that I am not always right and that my way is not always the right way is essential to living in community with others. Learning not to impose my will on others can open me to discover better ways to live.

We're not the same. And that is a good thing. This way we get vegetables to feed our bodies and beautiful flowers to feed our spirits.

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## June 29, 2008 – Heading for the Lake



Summer has definitely arrived in the hills. It sort of slid in this year, with much of May and June offering rain and cooler temperatures. All of a sudden, it seems, June is over and we're headed for July this week. It feels like summer when we step out of the house and we've got the ceiling fans going most of the time now.

A slight change in plans left space in my schedule for a brief paddle yesterday and I was able to be on the lake ahead of all but the most dedicated fishermen. With my recent experience at the lake, I left my camera at home, but snapped a photo of the kayak on the roof of the car just before I departed.

It was a great day to be at the lake. There was a stiff breeze that made a very light texture on the water, but it was no problem in the kayak. I launched at the marina and paddled toward the inlet, one of my favorite areas to explore. Hugging the shore for a little protection from the wind as I paddled upwind, I flushed a great blue heron from her nest. These birds always seem a bit awkward on the ground, but once they get flying they are graceful and fun to watch. Around a couple of corners, I noticed a pair of Golden Eagles fishing over the main part of the lake. They are such effortless flyers. They circle and turn with the slightest flexing of the tips of their wings. They seemed to be working together, often with one circling and the other sitting in a tree. Then they'd switch roles. I allowed my kayak to drift as I sat and watched for several minutes.

The water has been high in the inlet, so I was expecting changes. As I began to paddle up the stream, I entered an area that is full of cattails. There seemed to be a red-winged

blackbird for every other cattail. I'm sure that there weren't that many, but their distinctive calls surrounded me and they allowed me to come within 15 or 20 feet of them before flying off.

The high water had changed the stream quite a bit. The first beaver dam is washed out completely. There is just a couple of logs pushed off to the edge to show where it had been. At the second beaver dam, the water has made a new course off to the east side of the dam. It was too rocky to paddle with my wooden boat, but had I wanted to portage that short section, I could have continued up the inlet farther than I've ever gone before. But my mood was lazy, so I turned around and allowed the boat to drift back towards the lake.

Paddling downwind is always fun. It doesn't feel like you are going fast, because the wind continues to rush by, but the actual speed is much greater than going upwind. The boat I took yesterday weathervanes a bit, so it prefers to go straight into or straight away from the wind. I can paddle cross wind, but it requires that I apply more effort on the upwind side to keep it from turning back into the wind. Because the bow sticks higher out of the water than the stern, left to itself, the boat will always turn into the wind. My body makes a bit of a sail, and it will drift gently backward until I start paddling again. This gave me a good vantage point to watch the eagles again. They certainly have the wind all figured out and can fly a precise pattern in the air despite the fact that the wind is moving at a pretty good pace above the trees.

The warmth of the sun and the cool breeze over the water made the temperature perfect. Time passed quickly as I paddled and soon it was time to head for shore. The wind had stirred up enough chop to encourage the water skiers to linger over their breakfasts and the fishermen were huddled near the shoreline, so I pretty much had the lake to myself.

Sometimes these days when I paddle for a couple of hours, my feet fall asleep and I had to step out of the kayak carefully for the first few steps before I regained my land legs. The boat is light enough to pick up with one hand and it was soon loaded on the car and I was headed for home and the chores that awaited me there.

What a privilege to be granted a morning paddle on such a beautiful lake, surrounded by such beautiful hills filled with such beautiful creatures! It is a luxury that so many of the world's people rarely, if ever, experience. And it is available to me any day that I want to get up a little early or carve out a bit of time from my schedule. Sadly, I do not take advantage of the privilege as often as I could. But each time I do, I am filled with gratitude.

Most of the world's population live in cities, where access to open country takes considerable effort and time. We live with open country around us all the time. Although the hills have no natural lakes, there are several reservoirs that offer opportunities for

paddling and the materials for making boats is readily at hand. Mostly, however, I have the luxury of hiking and paddling because I am freed from having to invest every waking hour in survival. I have a job that allows, and even encourages, time for reading and contemplation. I have time to reflect on the beauty and the meaning of this life. I have the luxury to pause and enjoy the natural world - even to write about what I have experienced.

I am indeed a fortunate person.

The memory of yesterday's paddle is fresh as I begin a new day today. There will be the usual Sunday activities with worship and a fellowship hour to follow. I'll make visits in the afternoon and have the evening for my family. The work load doubles up a bit in the next week as I prepare to spend the following week in a new camping experience with reservation and off reservation youth. But my mind is already going through my schedule looking for another opportunity to sneak up the lake for another paddle.

Until then, I can close my eyes and remember. And the memory is a delight indeed.

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## June 30, 2008 – Smoke



There has been smoke in the hills this weekend. It was thick enough that local forest officials received calls asking where the fire was. But there are no major fires burning in the hills. The smoke has drifted into the hills from fires in California. There are about 1,400 fires burning across the state of California, with no relief in sight. The weather is forecast to remain hot and dry throughout the summer, and the next two months are predicted to be the worst. Lower than average levels of precipitation has left acres and acres of dry fuel across the state. Some officials predict that it could take weeks, or even months to control the fires that are currently burning, and virtually no one expects these to be the last of the summer's fires in California.

A little smoke in the air around the hills is a minor inconvenience compared to what people in California are experiencing.

All this comes on top of a devastating fire season in California last year. For three weeks last fall fires burned out of control in various parts of the state. More than half a million people were evacuated. Over 2,000 homes were destroyed. Near Lake Arrowhead, 178 homes burned in less than two hours.

Enormous resources are brought to bear in fighting fires. Over 3 billion dollars were spent last year on wildfire suppression. That figure has tripled in the past decade of drought across the west.

We humans like to think that we are in control. But the truth is that there are forces in nature that we cannot control. The truth is that no amount of money and no measure of heroism on the part of firefighters will stop some of the fires. Fire becomes unstoppable. Weather, terrain and fuel become the only factors that slow and finally halt the advance of fire. Fire is a force beyond our control.

It is not the only force beyond human control.

After weeks of flooding in Iowa, Illinois, Missouri, Indiana and Wisconsin, billions of dollars in damage are adding up across the midwest from dozens of flooded towns and cities. The costs of repairing bridges, utilities, homes and businesses may exceed the costs of damages from fires this year. The floods are a force beyond our control.

Politicians will make speeches. Legislators will enact laws. Governments will provide funding, even to the point of huge deficits. We will try to retain at least the illusion that we are in control. We want to believe that there are government and technical solutions to the tragedies of natural disaster. But regardless of our reluctance to admit it, no matter how much money the government provides, no matter how brilliant the technical solutions that are offered, we are not capable of halting natural processes. We cannot control the power of nature to affect human lives.

We are not in control.

It might be easy, for the moment, to make the mistake of thinking, "It won't happen to us." But such thinking is a mistake. In just a week it will be the one year anniversary of the Alabaugh fire, perhaps the most intense in the history of South Dakota. In less than a day a single lightning strike grew to nine square miles. One home owner was killed, several firefighters were injured. When the fire was finally contained, 27 homes and 50 other buildings had been destroyed, nearly \$3 million had been spent on firefighting efforts.

No one who survived the June, 1972 flood in Rapid City ever thinks, "It won't happen to us."

We are no more immune to the forces of nature than those who live in the places that are currently threatened. Water and flames will return. They will threaten the places where we live, too. The illusion that we are in control is only illusion.

Perhaps the smoke that lingers in the air and gives us the brilliant sunrises and sunsets is a reminder that there are forces in this world which are more powerful than a government that is able to bring billions of dollars and great technical resources to bear. Maybe the smoke is a reminder that we are not in control.

It is the basic confession of religion: There are forces in the world that are greater than I. There is a power in the universe that is beyond my control and even beyond my understanding. This confession does not stop us from trying to understand, it doesn't even stop us from exerting control in the areas where we have some power. It merely reminds us that our understanding and our areas of influence are limited.

Recognizing limits is as important for institutions as it is for individuals. We do not "own" the truth. There is more truth to be revealed beyond the walls of our church, beyond our system of government, beyond our ethnic heritage, beyond our way of life. Those who claim to know all of the truth are always proven wrong, sometimes in most tragic circumstances. The failure to acknowledge limitations does not remove limitation.

So we live this precarious existence in the midst of forces that are beyond our control. But we are not victims only. In the midst of this world, we are able to create some beauty, discover some meaning, write a few meaningful words, share some love, and engage in a relationship with God.

May the smoke in the air remind us of who we are and whose we are. In fire, in flood, and in all of the moments in between, we belong to God who created a world with many forces that are beyond our control.

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**July 1, 2008 – Variety**



Many of my days have a wide variety of activities. It is one of the things about my job that I enjoy. The last day of June was no exception. I participated in two interviews as a part of a human rights investigation at a local agency that provides services to persons with disabilities. At the agency, any allegation of improper service is thoroughly investigated. The goal is the prevention of any form of abuse or neglect. By aggressively investigating all incidents and reports the agency maintains an atmosphere where people are empowered to stand up for their own rights and know how to get assistance if they feel that their rights have been unfairly abridged. But that process takes the time of volunteers. People outside the agency need to be involved in order to maintain fairness.

I am taking a class through the University of Wyoming this summer. I have decided that part of the process of aging and gaining a certain level of experience is the obligation to pass on some of the benefits of that experience through teaching, so I am pursuing a masters in adult and post-secondary education. Since I work full time, I have been taking one class at a time as I follow a somewhat less-than-direct path toward my degree. There is a lot of reading involved and I need to work ahead to make up for the fact that I won't have access to the Internet next week when I am camping in a remote corner of the reservation.

In preparation for the camp, I met with a young man who will be participating in the camp to teach and learn songs and choose which ones we would include in a simple songbook for the camp. We have a license that allows for some reprints, but we have to

research each song to be sure that our copies are legal. In addition as amateur guitar players, we have to choose songs that we are able to sing and lead with confidence. And since this camp is a cross-cultural experience, we need to be sensitive to the perspectives and tastes of Lakota youth.

In the afternoon I met with a family to plan the funeral for a 36 year-old woman who died suddenly of pneumonia, leaving behind a husband and daughter as well as grieving parents, in-laws, sisters and brothers. It was just nine years ago that I officiated at her wedding. Her husband, fighting back tears, commented that he had enjoyed planning the wedding far more than our meeting yesterday. His life has been forever altered by the premature death. The grief and loneliness that are becoming his daily companions have no easy solutions. There is nothing I can say or do that will make this experience painless. It hurts. That is the pure and simple truth. But the planning of the funeral and the words I say on Wednesday are critical and must be chosen with care and compassion.

Around the edges of the meetings, I was consulting with my wife by phone. Yesterday was supposed to be the day we transferred her father from the hospital to a care center for additional therapy and recovery before returning to his apartment. However, his doctor made a mistake in the orders when he stopped by early in the morning and our best efforts at making contact with him failed and the end of the day came without having the proper paperwork in place. Another night in the hospital for Keith and a frustrating day for Susan with another day of dealing with forms, paperwork, and bureaucracies ahead.

And there were phone calls to make, mail that needed responses, and the typical end-of-the month business that needed attention. I could almost say that it was a typical day, except that I don't really have "typical" days. What is typical about my days is that each one is unlike the others.

And often my days don't go as I had planned. I had planned on working with members of the Woodchuck Society on our firewood project. They got a lot of work done, but all of it without my help.

We were lucky to be treated to a wonderful sunset at the end of our varied day. It was probably a gift, in part, of the smoke from the fires in California, though the smoke wasn't as intense as it had been a couple of days ago. At the end of the day I had a few moments outdoors to catch my breath and think about all that had happened - and all that had not happened in the day. The work load this week is especially heavy and I am nervous about forgetting essential tasks or dropping the ball with plans and activities. There used to be a sense of slowing of the pace during summer, but I don't really experience such a change these days. Life can be a bit hectic at times.

So the gift of a sunset is a gift indeed. The world reminds us that sleep is necessary and not far away. But it isn't the matter of simply turning out the lights. We are given the gift of beauty and awe as we slow our pace and admit that we have done the work we are able in this day and now rest is needed before tomorrow.

And today promises - well, variety! Many different and new activities to fill my hours with meaning and relationship.

Indeed life is good.

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## July 2, 2008 – Early Harvest



The garden is producing plenty of radishes and lettuce. Our garden is small, but when the crops start to come on, there is always enough to share with others. The abundance of nature is always impressive. Half a packet of tiny radish seeds produces a row of lush greens and there is a bright red taste treat beneath each cluster. It is a short season for the radishes, but by the time we have harvested all of them, we will have moved on to other crops.

And we have plenty of lettuce to give away. We enjoy summer salads, but we won't keep up with the product of a single packet of seeds.

This world really is abundant beyond our expectations. We continually have more than we need. There is an exuberance to nature that is truly amazing. So many things in the natural world are produced beyond the minimum required. A single radish plant will produce enough seed for the entire garden. A single pine tree will produce enough pollen for an acre of forest. Nature is always giving us more than is required. And it is never stingy with its gifts.

I've never bothered to harvest seeds for next year's garden. We always get a few packets of seeds from commercial growers each spring. There are details of plant biology that are beyond my knowledge and we grow plants that are the product of hybridization and specialization for home gardens. There has been plenty of work that has gone into the tiny garden that we grow.

And we have been lucky with weather this year. It was a little touchy, with one snowstorm and a couple of hailstorms when the garden was young, but the plants have survived well and it is only in the last week or so that I have had to water the garden from the tap. Prior to that, we were receiving plenty of rain. There have been plenty of years when the garden has not looked as good as it does this year.

There are thousands of metaphors for life in the garden. Poets and philosophers have already written volumes about them and there is little that I could add. But there is a sense in which growing a garden and living with the cycles of the seasons is a good discipline for one who would work with people. Because our lives have seasons.

The lectionary is a tool for serious students of the Bible that enables us to travel through our sacred texts in a pattern of seasons. It is a three-year cycle of readings that inform and guide our worship. Each year we travel through the life of Jesus, from anticipation to birth to growth, to ministry to signs and warnings of his death, to death and finally resurrection. That journey, which takes place from Advent through Easter, leaves about half of the year for focusing more intently on a single gospel and learning more about the teachings of Jesus and the meanings of discipleship.

This year our attention is focused on the gospel of Matthew. Matthew's gospel is infused with a sense of the power of oppressive rulers and the tragedy suffered by common people in the face of power. The story of the slaughter of the innocents at the beginning of the text seems to color all of Matthew's story. There is always the sense that life and death are in the hands of the rulers of this world and that common people live in spite of the rules and powers of government. Jesus and his disciples never shake the threat of coming violence at the hands of the rulers. Matthew has a strong sense that there is a power beyond what initially appears. Things are not always the way that they seem.

We live in different times. For the most part our lives are separated by miles and cultural barriers from those who suffer unjustly in our world. But our distance does not change the fact that innocents continue to be the victims of the powers and rulers of this world. One does not have to go far in the newspaper to read of tragedy. Matthew reminds us that we cannot ignore these realities and that we are connected to the victims of injustice wherever they live.

The harvest from a life of studying scripture is vastly different from the harvest of the garden, but both are exuberant in their generosity. We are given more than the minimum required to sustain life. We are given abundance and rich meaning that continues to surprise us. New insights and new understandings continue to emerge. There is enough in one gospel to last a lifetime. And we are given four gospels and a host of other sacred writings. The traditions of our people teach us that a lifetime is all too short to explore all of the meanings of our faith.

Yet there are meanings that emerge and become as clear and as fresh and as real as the harvest of the garden. And every day is harvest day for students of the Bible. There are crisp, fresh gems of understanding available each time we open the book.

May you experience the bounty of harvest today.

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## July 3, 2008 – Gray Day



We had a gray day yesterday. Clouds hung in the sky for most of the day and the smoke from the California fires was heavy beneath the clouds. My mood was a bit gray as well. It was a busy day, with meetings and a funeral and nursing home communion. Funerals are often emotional roller coasters for me. It is important that I find appropriate times and places to express my emotions, but I do not help grieving families and communities by getting caught up in my emotions during the service, so I'm always a bit out of step with the people I serve.

And yesterday's funeral was one of the hard ones. Not that there are any easy ones. We never fully know others' stories, but the basic information is that the woman for whom we held the funeral was only thirty-six years old, a mother and daughter and wife. And it throws our sense of the order of the world a bit when a young one dies. In our sense of the way things should work, mothers should live to see their children grow to adulthood, parents shouldn't have to arrange the funerals of their children, eight years is too short of a good marriage and thirty-six years is all too short for a lifetime.

But there we were. Our sense of things had come face to face with the realities of the world. She had died. And she had died of a disease that thousands survive each year. And a grieving family had come to me with the simple request that I craft a service that would honor their daughter and wife's life and that as a pastor I would bring some good news of resurrection into lives that were hurting and sorely in need of the news that death is not the end. I had officiated at the wedding and had known the couple in that context and the groom's father is an active member of the church. Their family didn't

have too many other church connections, so they came to me - and to our church - for the service they needed.

And at the beginning of July, in the midst of summer, we all shared a gray day.

But the clouds parted for a glimpse of the sun just before sunset in the evening. The smoke was lingering, so the colors were more vibrant and the sun appeared more red than usual. The photograph with today's blog was my attempt to capture something that was far more beautiful.

The Gospels report several conversations between Jesus and his disciples when Jesus tried to explain to them about his own death. Often confusion reigned. The disciples couldn't grasp the meaning of the words. It was not that they didn't know about death. They lived in brutal times and death surrounded them. The power and the brutality of the Roman regime was swift and deadly. Innocents were often killed in gory fashion just to demonstrate the power of Rome. It wasn't death that confused the disciples. It was Jesus' consistent message that death is not the end. "I my father's house are many rooms . . ." I go to prepare a place and I will come back . . ."

The message was so different from the culture of "lived, died, gone, buried, forgotten." And the response was often confusion. When Jesus' teachings did not bring understanding, he urged the disciples to reach beyond understanding. And he gave them the gift of peace. "My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives, do I give you my peace." That "peace that passes understanding," is a gift that continues to comfort and sustain us even on gray days.

We are not required to understand in order to receive peace. Christ's peace is more than an intellectual exercise only. God's gift of life is more powerful than death.

So it was good to be reminded at day's end yesterday that the sun is always brightly shining. It's just the smoke and the clouds that get between us and the sun that makes us think a day is gray. Above the smoke, above the clouds it is bright and sunny as usual. We always allow our experience to color our world. And our perspective is not the only perspective available. There is a truth that lies beyond our comprehension.

A brief rain shower passed through our neighborhood early this morning. I don't think we got much moisture, but the grass is wet and there are drops hanging from the trees. The world smells fresh and clean and ready for a new day. Life goes on. But it is more than that. Life triumphs. And even on a gray day there is an entire spectrum of color that greets us.

I am told that photographers like cloudy days. The diffusion of light through the clouds makes it easier to capture vibrant colors on film. I don't know much of the technical side of photography, but I do know that sad days and the times that we come face to face

with grief are essential for us to develop compassion and appreciation for the many gifts of this life. Sometimes we see the world a bit more clearly when we have experienced the full range of human emotions.

Regardless of the clouds in the sky, today is a green day - a day full of growth and new opportunity and a day to learn the lessons of yesterday as we anticipate the promise of tomorrow.

It is a day to live in peace.

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## July 4, 2008 – Independence Day



There was a big bash at Mount Rushmore last night. We have often gone out for the celebration, but did not go yesterday. The crowd was supposed to be in the neighborhood of 20,000. Those who arrive 12 hours before the fireworks begin might get a parking place at the monument. Those who arrive closer to the event park farther away. Some walk as much as three miles. The fireworks are spectacular every year. Though we weren't there, we could hear them from home.

This morning it seems appropriate to reflect a bit on our national holiday. There is so much that is a part of the United States today that could not have been imagined by the founders who invested their lives in the creation of this new nation. As nations go, we're still relatively young. 232 years isn't much in the vast sweep of history. But we have risen to prominence as a world power and exercise authority in world affairs in a way that is likely far beyond the imaginations of even the amazing people who participated in the forging of the United States.

Incredible times bring out incredible leadership in people. It is amazing to reflect on the genius present in a single generation and the ability of the new nation to engage the genius of so many in the enterprise of separating from England and becoming an independent nation. The documents that they wrote and the style of government they forged are models for similar movements of independence from foreign rule around the world.

The second face on Mount Rushmore is one of the geniuses of the founding of this nation. Thomas Jefferson was a man of broad interests and achieved distinction in many fields. In 1962, President John F. Kennedy welcomed 49 Nobel Prize laureates to the White house and said in his welcome to them, "I think this is the most extraordinary collection of talent and human knowledge that has ever been gathered together at the White House - with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone."

Jefferson was distinguished as a horticulturist, statesman, architect, archaeologist, paleontologist, author, and inventor. He founded the University of Virginia. And he was a consummate statesman. There are many critical aspects of American democracy that are directly related to the ideas, words and actions of Thomas Jefferson. He was truly amazing.

And he was a human being. There were limits to his abilities. There were mistakes in his thinking at times. His treatment of others was less than honorable at times. The man who signed and participated in writing the words, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal," was a slave holder. He was not able to fully live up to the ideals he imparted to the new nation. Near the end of the first century of our country's history a bloody civil war was fought, in part, over the issue of slavery. And even now we struggle with issues of injustice and discrimination. The words are more noble than our ability to live them out.

The controversy surrounding Jefferson's relationship with one of his slaves, Sally Hemings is not new. In 1802 a Richmond newspaper editor accused Jefferson of keeping one of his slaves as a concubine. It was not an uncommon practice. His father-in-law had quite a reputation for his relationships with his slaves. Sally Hemings was likely the half sister of his wife Martha Wayles Jefferson.

Recent DNA evidence has not eliminated the controversy, but the report issued by nine distinguished scholars in 1998 concluded that Jefferson was likely the father of Sally Hemings six children. It presents a side of Thomas Jefferson that we weren't taught in school. And it is a side of his personality that we are reluctant to admit. We want our leaders and founders to be perfect people without flaws. The truth is that humans are not perfect. And that great contributions come from people who are not always kind to those who are closest to them. As David Steele wrote, "Men with healthy power drives are seldom heroes to their wives."

We do not know for sure if Jefferson carried on this affair with one of his slaves. And if he did, we do not know how he treated Sally. But the relationship between master and slave was in itself an immoral relationship. People are not property to be owned. They are not commodities to be bought and sold. Regardless of the truth of the controversy over Sally Hemmings, the simple fact that Thomas Jefferson owned slaves illustrates that his behavior fell short of the ideals he so eloquently espoused.

So we continue to work towards those ideals as we admit that we have fallen short. There are still people in our country who are, through no fault of their own, denied the equality that our Declaration of Independence espouses. The God-given rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are not equally distributed even in the country that was founded on those rights. The vision of a government that treats all people equally is not yet fully realized.

We are imperfect people, living in an imperfect world.

Our founders, in throwing off the oppression of British colonial rule did not abolish all oppression. But they did make some great strides. They did move us closer to their ideals. And they produced words that continue to inspire us. Their vision is truly noble. Government by consent of the governed is a masterpiece of human thought.

It is good to set aside a day to remind ourselves of those ideals; to express our gratitude for leaders who, though imperfect, greatly advanced our progress toward those ideals; and to commit ourselves once again to living out those ideals in our own lives.

Happy Independence Day!

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## July 5, 2008 – Fireworks



Fireworks lit up the sky as we celebrated our national holiday last night. A small group gathered in the church yard to watch the display from Rapid City's Heritage Festival. It is interesting to note that the tradition of fireworks in celebration is, like many other aspects of our culture, an import. We're not the only country that uses fireworks to celebrate, but it is something that we've done for our entire history as a country.

Fireworks were used to celebrate the signing of the Declaration of Independence on the first July 4 celebration of our country-even before it was known whether or not the country would prevail in the Revolution and a new nation would emerge. Fireworks were ignited to celebrate the inauguration of George Washington as the nation's first president.

There has been a relationship between fireworks that are used for artistic and celebratory purposes and rockets that are used in war. There is some evidence that the Chinese inventors of gunpowder and aerial fireworks developed them for peaceful purposes and later adapted them for use in battle. The development of mortars to fire projectiles in war led to the development of the shells that are fired into the air and then explode into brilliant bursts of color.

The advance of computers have led to precise ignition of fireworks and displays that are carefully timed and set to music are becoming common. The Disney corporation has pioneered the use of compressed air to shoot the fireworks into the air, allowing for

even more accurate timing and location of the bursts and a decrease in surface fumes that result from using gunpowder to blast the shells into the air.

Last night we didn't worry too much about the technical advances, but we were treated to a display that exceeded what was common a few decades ago.

Fireworks have long been associated with China, the country of their origin. Many of the fireworks that are used in the United States are imported from China. Our celebrations contained a reminder of the devastating earthquake that rocked China in May and resulted in the deaths of 69,000 and left 15 million people without homes. The disruption of business in the aftermath of the earthquake decreased production of fireworks and created a small shortage, driving prices up. Some local municipalities, already faced with budget problems, chose to scale back on fireworks displays this year. The full effect will probably be more evident next year when the full effects of the shortage will be more evident.

Even the celebration of our nation's birthday reminds us of our connections to others who are far away. The events that affect the lives of others have an impact on our lives as well. On this planet, we are all connected to one another.

The sense of connection to the rest of the world has been a part of the traditions of the United States. Our experiment in self governance has long been seen as an example for others. And we have long taken responsibility to stand for freedom and act to end conflict in distant places. Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous line referring to the revolutionary battle at Old North Bridge in Concord, Massachusetts: "Here once the embattled farmers stood and fired the shot heard round the world." Emerson's analogy has long served to remind us that certain actions by common folk can rise in importance and have a dramatic effect on the future for all people. The actions of a few become a symbol for the efforts of people everywhere to throw off tyranny and stand for freedom.

The shot to which Emerson referred was more than just the blast of a musket. It was a "long shot," a risk taken by a few brave persons, that turned out to yield great freedoms and hope to many people in many different places. Emerson's hyperbole is obvious. The battle itself was not loud enough to be heard around the world. The results of the battle did provide a breath of fresh air in the struggles of people in many distant places to throw off the oppressions of foreign rule and to rise to the challenge of self governance. The actions of the Concord farmers continue to inspire others to rise and act for freedom.

With our traditions of beginning our celebrations the night before July 4 and the fact that this year July 4 landed on a Friday, the celebrations of our nation's birthday will continue throughout the weekend. The hills are full of families and individuals who are taking a holiday weekend and getting a bit of vacation. We've all slowed our pace a little.

It is important that we pause from time to time to celebrate and to remember. George Santayana's famous saying, "Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it." rings true in every generation.

May we, who live in the most powerful nation on earth, never forget that our greatness lies not in our ability to purchase the most sophisticated weapons, but in the character of our people and our commitment to the principles of self-governance and equality for all people. May we resist the temptation to become colonizers and exporters of our power and instead share with others the lessons of our history and the freedom that has been bought at the price of the sacrifice of so many.

Independence is never a day only - it is a way of life.

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## July 6, 2008 – A New Adventure



Today I will head out with two youth from our congregation for a new adventure. After church we will head up to the Cheyenne River Reservation for a week of camping and cross cultural experience with other youth from South Dakota. The purpose of the camp is to make connections and build relationships between youth who live on South Dakota Reservations and South Dakota youth who live off reservation. Our theory is that we adults have not done the best job of living out healthy relationships and that it is important for the coming generations to have more opportunity to know one another as individuals and to grow into just relationships that are honest about our history, honor differences in culture, and express our unity.

Our days will focus on traditional Lakota values of respect, humility, honor, truth and love. Each of these values will be viewed through Lakota stories told by elders and through Bible study. We will sleep in tipis and spend our days outdoors. Activities include horseback riding, archery, traditional Lakota crafts, hand games, music and swimming. The youth will be encouraged to keep journals of private reflections, sketches, and reactions to their experiences. Our plan includes follow up activities in the fall as well as additional summer camps in years to come.

The place we will meet is significant in the story of the relationships between native and immigrant people in South Dakota. Bridger, South Dakota is a small community located at the southwestern boundary of the Cheyenne River Reservation. It is home to the descendants of what was called by the 7th Cavalry the Battle of Wounded Knee, but was described by the survivors as a massacre of unarmed men, women and children.

Those who fled the massacre walked over three hundred miles through the winter of 1890 to return to Bridger, their gathering point. In Lakota, the area is known as Takini, which means “survivors” or “barely surviving.”

Many of the current residents of Bridger can still recall their grandparents and great-grandparents, the last survivors of the massacre. Despite the painful genesis of this community and its continuous struggle for survival, residents have fought since the Wounded Knee Massacre to maintain their links to the past in what some have called “the forgotten corner” of the Cheyenne River Reservation.

It is a good place for us to begin our conversations. We acknowledge that there is much pain in our past. At the same time we also choose not to be defined by our past only. We gather our youth together as a declaration that we believe that we are capable of living together with mutual respect. We are calling our camp Wawoohola, which in Lakota means “respect.”

It has taken a long time to build enough trust to take this first step. The adults who are leading this camp had to have many meetings and share our stories before we could learn to work together. Repentance, forgiveness and resurrection are at the core of our faith. We are committed to bringing that faith alive not only for ourselves but also for the youth of our communities.

The seeds of this camp were planted in a mission project. Members of our congregation were clearing excess trees from their property and did not want the fuel to go to waste. They made inquiries about energy assistance programs on the Pine Ridge reservation that might need the firewood. Deliveries of firewood to a couple of locations on the Pine Ridge reservation began. Inquiries were made with our sister congregations on the Cheyenne River reservation and an annual trip to Eagle Butte was instituted. Through the leadership of pastor Norman Blue Coat we developed additional connections. Norman’s son, Louie, is one of the principal leaders in this week’s camp.

The mission project, now known as The Woodchuck Society, has grown to involve over eighty members of our congregation, from 10 to 90 years of age. We have become known in our community and donations of excess trees come to us on a regular basis. Wood splitting parties help to share the work and partnerships are growing in Wanblee on the Pine Ridge Reservation and Eagle Butte on the Cheyenne Reservation.

Healthy relationships are never one-way. We have received as well as given. We have been warmly hosted and welcomed into the homes and the stories of others. And we have shared our faith. The Christian congregations planted by other missionaries in the early twentieth century have become points of connection between our congregation and our sisters and brothers who live on the reservation. Our common faith gives us a point of connection from which hope continues to flow.

It will be an interesting week. I'll probably connect with some stiff joints aches and pains that I have forgotten by sleeping on the ground. We'll all step out of our comfort zones from time to time. And we will grow together in Christ.

For regular readers of this blog, there will be no postings for the week. Tipis in a remote corner of the reservation do not have Internet access. The computer will be out of place in that setting. I will keep a daily journal and post them to this blog as quickly as possible upon my return.

Cante wasteya nape ciyuzapelo - I take your hand in friendship. May friendships blossom this week.

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## July 7, 2008 – Wawoohola Journal, Day 1



We have said from the beginning that part of the experience for our youth will be stepping out of their comfort zones. I had been a bit more confident of my own abilities to participate in the camp. The truth is that as soon as we arrived, I was out of my comfort zone. I am used to working with established schedules and plans that have taken into consideration many different variables. We could see when we arrived that the tipis weren't set up and that there was going to be a lot less structure about this week than we are used to having.

But we were warmly greeted by good friends and soon we got engaged in the process of erecting the tipis. It was hard to tell who was in charge and we didn't know how to erect the tipis. The man who had agreed to supervise the setting up of the tipis had not shown up the day before and did not arrive until after dark last night. So we struggled with the tipis, hauling poles and trying our best.

People drifted in and out throughout the afternoon and evening. There were folks who just came to see what we were doing. I was glad to have Kenny and Jorgen along because they do not need much prompting to pitch in and they are not in need of constant entertainment. They were willing to go with the flow and experience what the camp had to offer.

Toni prepared a really nice supper of spaghetti with meat sauce, a big salad and watermelon. There was a good spirit at supper, but the kids kept their distance, being a

bit tentative about new relationships. Before long there was a healthy chatter with laughter rising from the tables. We lingered at table with good conversation.

After supper, Byron set up archery targets and the youth began to shoot arrows at the targets. They seemed to be having fun. The cars from Ponca Creek arrived, with three more youth, and they were fed and came out to join the fun. Byron and I dug a fire pit, we unloaded the firewood, and the adults stood around and talked as they youth shot arrows and visited.

We went inside for hand games. It took a while for the instructions to become clear, but once we got going, we were all engaged for quite a while. Ted knife told us about social events that they used to hold where the whole community would get involved in hand games, sometimes men vs. women, sometimes dividing up in other ways. They tried to get him to sing, but he said that his throat wasn't up to it. There was a nice flavor to the evening, with the youth engaged, elders sitting around and a few younger children participating from time to time.

The decision was made for the youth to sleep in the buildings, boys in the fellowship hall, girls in the church. It turned out to be a good decision. The lightning started to flash and the thunder rolled and a pretty good storm came across the prairie. We rushed to pick up a few things outside and began to roll out our sleeping bags inside. I was surprised how hard it was raining and how much the wind was blowing as we couldn't hear the storm from inside. There was an air conditioner that blew through the night and its mechanical hum seemed to cover the sounds from outside. The building must be well insulated to keep the sound down so much.

This morning the meadowlarks and other birds are singing and the prairie is fresh with a few clouds in the sky. There are large puddles around the church yard and two of the three tipis that were erected yesterday are flat on the ground. I hope that the canvas has not been torn. Our plan, I think, was to erect six tipis around the fire circle. We will see what happens when Byron returns this morning. Hopefully the man who knows how to properly erect the tipis will come to provide direction. We'll need to get them right if we are going to have the kids sleep in them.

There is no rigid schedule for today. Breakfast will be ready when the youth are ready for it and I have plenty of activities available if we need them.

I need to relax a bit more and allow myself to live outside of my routine and a bit out of my comfort zone. It will be an interesting week.

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## July 8, 2008 – Wawoohola Journal, Day 2



You see more people walking longer distances on the reservation. It is partly a result of poverty. When your car won't work, or you don't have a car, you walk. Sometimes you get a ride. The result is that people do something that is generally good for their health and their lives. They walk.

We walked yesterday. It was our afternoon adventure. The sun was hot and the road was dusty, but there was a breeze and we wanted to know how far it was down to the place where the tipis would be set. In other years, the tipis have been by the river and had things worked the way we had originally planned, we would have slept in the tipis and walked up to the church to use the showers.

Relationships build slowly at times, but they are being built. Maybe humor is one of or better tools for building relationships. Jorgen commented to me yesterday that it was a new discovery for him to find that the Lakota sense of humor was so similar to his. The things that make us laugh are similar.

I'm still having trouble shifting gears and slowing down to a walking pace. I go through so much of my life at high speed, darting from one assignment to another, from one appointment to another, from one function to another. Here things move more slowly. There was no work on the tipis yesterday. I think that the problem is that we lack expertise. The person who knows how to set up the tipis was not available. It is possible that the person who knows how to set up the tipis didn't know to come. Or perhaps the

fact that we have a place to sleep, safe and secure inside the church and the fellowship hall, results in tipis not being a priority.

The youth have been full participants in the talking circles and they have been good about sharing their feelings and experiences. The camp is a bit dominated by adults for my taste, but I think that it is part of the elder culture. Elders are expected to speak more and they are expected to be respected. Because we have worked hard to develop a culture of respect for everyone in the circle, all have had opportunities to talk. I am learning to say a few less words and think more carefully about what I say.

Morning is a good time for me to get a few minutes to myself. I rise, shower and go outside before the others and find some quiet to reflect on my day and the things that are to come.

Today I have been thinking that I would like to see some breakthrough - some advance in understanding and reconciliation. But the process is much slower and one cannot force or create breakthrough. We are walking down the road together - and I need to be content and understand that for now it is enough. One step at a time is the pace that we need to go.

Last night we learned a bit about the Fool Soldier Society. It is made up of the descendants of the so-called "fool soldiers," who staged a daring rescue of white captives at great personal cost. Fool soldiers commit themselves to helping others without considering the cost. They help whoever is in need. Sometimes they are called fools by natives and Europeans alike. We were taught of the importance of societies in Lakota culture. They are groups of people who are bound together by honor and common purpose. It struck me that it is interesting that we call our Woodchuck Society a society. It was a light-hearted name that may carry more meaning in Lakota culture than it does in ours. But the woodchuck society is a group of people who believe in serving others and who are committed to taking action to help others and to make the church be more than a place that we maintain for ourselves only.

Perhaps our societies are bridges between our culture.

Today we will walk again and once again begin to understand that life is in the journey and not the destination. May we walk in peace together.

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### July 9, 2008 – Wawoohola Journal, Day 3



One day can make a big difference. We are beginning to get into the rhythm of the camp, now. Our tipi builder came yesterday morning and we were able to get up five tipis and the kids were able to sleep in the tipis last night. The day was cooler, which helped with outdoor activities and there was a good spirit about the day. Having the tipis seemed to add a good spirit and enthusiasm for other activities was higher.

In the afternoon a couple of the local people began to teach us some songs. They taught us some things about the drum itself and then told us some stories about the songs. We sang rabbit songs and prayer songs and began to learn a prayer song so that we would be able to sing it for others some day. There was supposed to be a drum group come at 8 in the evening to sing for us, but they did not arrive. This was no problem for our group, however, because we had teachers who were patient with us. The campers really enjoy the drumming and learning more about the drum and beginning to learn an actual song helped to hold their interest.

A few people from the church joined us in the evening and there was a warm, laughter-filled mood around the campfire. Tony had brought marshmallows.

It was interesting listening to Ted Knife as he taught us about the drum and some of his values and religious beliefs. He was slow to begin talking, but once he sat at the drum, with a stick in his hand, he began to tell us stories that he had learned from his grandfather and other elders. There is a deep hunger in some Lakota elders to teach culture and language - at least some of the basic concepts of the language.

Generations of poverty, prejudice and minority status have produced a sense of uncertainty about the future. Too many young people have succumbed to pressures and fallen into drug abuse. Too many young people have died in automobile accidents and by suicide. Too many young people have not seen the reason to learn or respect the ways of their elders.

There is a fear that the culture will be lost entirely. Youth who are interested in learning bring a bright ray of hope to the elders.

But we confess that our trust is fragile. They are still checking us out to see if we will be true to our word - if the promise they sense will not disappoint them. We do what we can in one week, but we acknowledge that this relationship will take many weeks - many years - to come to fruition.

I am so proud of the youth who have come from our church. They have been respectful of the elders, patient with sometimes slow pace of our days, eager to try new experiences, and open in sharing their gifts and talents. They have gotten out the guitars and played for others. They have been quick to share and continue to demonstrate an openness to learning more about Lakota culture, values and ways.

Today is Wednesday. In other camping experiences, Wednesday has been a day of challenge. The campers begin to get a little tired and perhaps the counselors are tiring as well. We know we have about the same number of days behind us as lie ahead. Irritations can become more challenging and tempers can flare. I don't know if that pattern will be a part of this camp. There are so many things that are different, including the pace. So I am open to whatever Wednesday brings. I am perhaps a bit short of sleep, but not as deeply exhausted as I have been at some camps. And the schedule allows for naps and other opportunities to catch up a bit.

I think the campers will sleep in a bit this morning. They didn't sleep quiet as well in the tipis, I heard them up and walking around from time to time and suspect that the warm morning sun will make them feel good and they will linger in their beds.

Prayers of gratitude are important parts of our day. We pray at meals. We pray each time we come to the drum. We pray at other times. There is no question that Lakota culture has a deep reverence and respect for God that goes back before the coming of Christianity to this part of the world. The Lakota people with whom we are working are, of course, leaders in the church so they have an integrated faith that respects their tradition, but is unapologetically Christian.

A new day and new adventures lie ahead. So I begin my day with a prayer of thanksgiving to God for the beauty of this earth, the abundance of its resources, the song of the bird and the dampness of the dew. Most of all, I thank God for the rich

diversity of people and for the opportunity to learn more of the neighbors with whom I share this journey.

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## July 10, 2008 – Wawoohola Journal, Day 4



One of the realities of our partners in this venture is that their lives are unpredictable. That is probably true of all of us, but somehow there seems to be less control in the day to day flow for some of our partners than we experience. We put the days on our calendar, make arrangements, and, for the most part, are able to participate in a camp or event without interruption. But this week has been a week of interruption.

Marc felt the call of administrative responsibilities with his new job responsibilities and so he was here for the beginning and plans to come back for the last day. Louie's father had to have out-patient surgery in Rapid City. Louie had to leave to give him a ride to Rapid and return. He plans to come back tomorrow. Libby's mother had surgery and her sister had an accident and cut her foot. Libby's step father picked her up yesterday evening and she won't be returning. Last night, Judith announced that she and Judy need to leave after breakfast this morning. Judy's daughter received a cancer diagnosis and she needs to be with her. When they leave, they will take three of our campers. That leaves us with only six youth and one full time adult. Toni and Byron spend as much time as they can, but they have to drive back and forth from Eagle Butte, so they arrive mid-morning and leave after the evening program.

Byron was frustrated last night because he thought that they didn't have a tight enough schedule. He was wanting to provide more activity for the youth. Toni was mostly tired, but a little disappointed that we are losing our campers. We were at a loss as to whether or not to continue with the camp. Byron suggested that perhaps we need to call the

camp to a close today so that we can end on a high note. He offered us smudge and prayed with us all as we ended our day last night.

The boys from our church want to see how it goes today. We could drive back to Rapid City, but are not feeling an urge to leave too quickly. We don't know if Ben will return today. He had offered that we might participate in Inipi this evening we are interested in doing so if the offer remains. I am uncertain about arrangements for the two youth from Scotland. I thought that they would be returning with Libby's family, but now that Libby has left early, I am not sure what arrangements have been made. Byron has offered to drive them back home, or perhaps to meet their parents somewhere, but we have not called their parents. Our two boys have said that they would be willing to go the extra miles to take them home. We could do so if we decided, but it would mean contacting their parents to inform them of what we are doing and a lot of extra miles. It probably doesn't make sense for us to be the transportation.

I am more concerned with having periods of time when I am the only adult. It is possible that tonight I could be the only adult in camp and that I would have three campers who are not from my church and one of them is a girl. I am not completely comfortable with out another adult, preferably a woman, to participate in providing leadership and support.

It is another day to relax, go with the flow, and see what needs to be done.

I have been surprised by this camp before. I will be surprised again.

Judith and Judy are up early this morning, showering and getting ready to head back home. This is the first time I have had others up when I am doing my early morning routine. I feel a bit shy about having the computer out where it can be seen, but I need to charge the battery, so am working inside instead of in the pickup.

For the most part, I believe that we have had a good camp and that we have begun to forge some new connections and relationships. The youth are reporting that it has been a good experience and that they have enjoyed it. In some ways the camp has exceeded my expectations. I am apprehensive, however. We've strayed away from the plan in our grant proposal. The fall reunion seems tentative, but might happen if we really scramble with our plans. Judith and Judy want to come to the hills and climb Bear Butte. I don't think Byron and Toni would leave their home to do that, though. I have to ask Winnifred for her wisdom about the next steps to take.

Today is a day to live in the present, to walk gently and to listen carefully to the movement of the Holy Spirit.

## July 11, 2008 – Wawoohola Journal, Day 5



Last night we participated in an Inipi, sometimes called “sweat lodge.” Our leaders here prefer the term “purification ceremony,” and I think it is a much more appropriate name, as the focus is not on the sweat and the ceremony and prayers do focus on confession, repentance, and rebirth. I have known about the ceremony and read about it, but I had never before been invited to participate. The week of activities had prepared our youth for the experience and they were thoughtful and careful about their decisions whether or not to participate.

After the ceremony, as we were driving back to our campsite, Kenny said to me, “Well, Ted, that’s two cultures you’ve introduced to me.” Kenny traveled to Costa Rica with us in 2007 and we enjoyed that experience together. It struck me that the way I relate to other people is being closely observed by the youth in our church. I know this in my head, but I am often not conscious of the impact that I am having just by being the person that I am.

Our youth were excited after the ceremony, and it took a couple of hours to talk about it and wind down before we were ready to head for bed. Our camp had dwindled to five youth by late yesterday, but we seem to be picking up participants from the community as we go along. We were averaging about twenty persons at each meal. The leaders of the Inipi had all come by at some point during the day to say a few words, sing a song, and in other ways talk to the youth about the ceremony.

I think that I am clear in my identity. I know who I am. I am a middle-aged Christian pastor of European descent, whose family has lived in the United States for many generations. I am not Lakota. My religious practices are not Lakota traditional practices. But I am influenced by the people who are my neighbors and I am absolutely committed to helping our youth understand the cultures of our neighbors and working in whatever ways I am able to promote understanding and mutual cooperation between people.

The Inipi focuses on personal prayers. With the exception of one round of the ceremony, where people are encouraged to pray out loud, most of the prayers are personal and individual. My prayers throughout the ceremony were Christian, as that is my practice and that is the way I know how to pray. I tried to focus my attention on prayers for the coming generations - for our children and grandchildren - that they may find avenues of reconciliation and ways of living together with humility, mutual respect, justice and peace.

We do not control our history. But we do have the ability to learn as much about our history as possible and to understand that there is more to our shared story than is often told. We have an obligation to reach for the truth that is beyond the textbooks and the stories told by the dominant culture. We have the ability to meet other people and other cultures with respect and to learn of their ways.

In the time after the battle between the American Indian Movement and federal authorities in the early 1970's, I met several non-native persons who were seeking to understand the wisdom of native ways. I suspect that their quest was genuine, but I had little respect for some of their behavior. I and others dubbed them members of the "Wannabe" tribe - non Indians who want to be Indians. I have little patience for such play acting. I think that we bring the best to our relationships when we are honest about who we are, faithful to our own heritage and traditions, and yet remain open to learning about others.

That is a delicate balance for education. I am grateful that the youth from our church who are participating in this experience are ones with whom I have traveled through the journey of confirmation. I am confident in their understanding and acceptance of their own personal faith and the love, care and support of the church. In the context of the church, then, with partners who are leaders in our church at Bridger Creek and other locations throughout the reservations of South Dakota, we are able to come together strong in our own identity and open to learning the culture of the other.

Today we turn our sights toward home. We will be helping Toni and Byron to clean up the camp and get ready for a work group that is arriving tomorrow. Two of our campers' parents will not arrive until about supper time, so we will probably wait until then to head for home, but we'll be home to sleep in our own beds tonight. There will be more people from the community who will stop by and the focus of our times with others will probably be the meal times. We'll have time for another story and Bible study as well as a talking

circle to process the events of the week. I am sad that almost half of the youth missed participating in the entire week, but we live in a complex world with many demands pulling on our youth.

The week has been a success. There are many things I would change, and I will have opportunities to share in changes as we go forward. But I think we have made a good beginning and identified a way to go forward . Part of the the experience, I believe, is for all of us to continue to focus our attention on the youth and the generations to come. May they learn to live in peace and to go beyond the limits of our generation.

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## July 12, 2008 – Wawoohola Conclusion



The final day of our camp was a strange day for us. Tony and Byron were pursuing business in Pierre. Byron stopped by very briefly on his way to Pierre, but we didn't have any program elements while he was there. Most of the day I was the only adult and we were just waiting because arrangements had been made for parents to pick up youth in the evening. It was as if our camp was over, but it took all day for us to be ready to leave. The bows and arrows had been taken the evening before, so that activity wasn't available.

We had some cleaning up to do, but we organized for that in the morning and were finished before noon. We fixed our own breakfast and lunch. Tony's daughter walked over with her four children and made fry bread and left the fixings for Indian tacos and wojape. She told us that she had never made wojape before and the end result was thin and watery, but full of flavor.

The youth entertained her children while she worked preparing our food. Around dinner time, a couple from the church stopped by and shared the meal with us. They remained after we left, so we didn't have to wonder about locking up or other building issues.

The ending was anti-climatic after the inipi the night before. The day didn't have enough structure or activity for the youth. And only one of the reservation youth remained, so it wasn't even a good setting for relationship building. I tried to do a bit of wrap-up and evaluation with the youth and they shared some good ideas. We listened to the last of the Joseph Marshall stories and a little music by Brule.

It is hard, if not impossible, to separate the culture of the Lakota from the culture of poverty. Part of the lack of schedule and the inability of people to make the commitment to a full week of camp is the product of poverty. In a world where broken down vehicles or the lack of finances affect one's ability to get to any place on time, it is hard to maintain a regular schedule. In a world where employment is sporadic when it occurs at all, it becomes normal to come and go from events without concern for the time of day.

We were the ones whose behavior seemed abnormal in the setting. We arrived at the beginning and stayed until the end. And we were the only ones who did so. As we evaluate our activities and plan for the next steps, we will want to consider all of these things. Perhaps the length of the event wasn't quite right. More likely, we have to develop a higher degree of flexibility about our participation. It is also possible that we will need to require that youth travel with adults who are able to stay for the event, rather than be dropped off. There will be time to consider different options for arranging the event.

I finally arrived at my home around 9:30 p.m. I was tired even though the day had not been filled with activities. The uncertainty and waiting were energy-consuming, and the cumulative effects of a week away from home and family were beginning to show. It took me a while of reporting on the week to be ready to settle down for a night's sleep and I'm moving more slowly than normal this morning. A day of catching up around the house and getting ready for tomorrow will help a lot.

I enjoyed watching the youth interact with the younger children. I know that these children are an important part of why we are doing what we do. They will need to learn better ways of living together than we have forged. Perhaps our camp is the beginning of opening a few new doors and offering new ways of living together for a new generation. It is for the children that we do these things, not for ourselves.

Wawoohola means respect. I have grown in my respect for our partners at the Bridger Church. And I hope I have offered to them something that is worthy of respect as well. Respect is required before we can forge a more complete partnership. But it is a good first step.

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## July 13, 2008 – Open Space



In this world we are often aware of limits. We have a limited amount of time. We have to make decisions about how we use our time because there is not enough time for everything. We choose to invest our time in one thing to the exclusion of others. We have a limited amount of money. We cannot just buy anything we want because to spend our money on one thing means that we do not have that money for another thing. We occupy a limited amount of space. Even though we travel and experience the vastness of God's creation, most of our lives are lived in a specific place. Our homes have limits and we need to make room for the things that are most important to us.

Limits are important for humans. Without them, we are unable to discern our own identity. Children who are raised with too few limits do not develop the capacity to focus their attention and provide self-discipline to complete projects and tasks. Limits enable us to develop priorities and to choose the things that are most important.

But every once in a while, our spirits are renewed by coming into contact with the expansiveness of God's generosity. I am privileged to experience this in terms of space. The open prairie is a good place to go to experience life without borders. Of course, I know that there are borders. Humans have defined spaces and built fences. There are distinctions between one state and another, between one nation and another. But there are still places in the prairie where those borders are not visible. I know a few places where one can stand and look out over the prairie and not see signs of human habitation. No fences, no power or telephone poles, no houses - the vastness of the prairie just stretches out ahead.

It is as it appeared to people before this country became settled and started to fill up with people.

I choose not to live in such a place. Our home is surrounded by other homes. We see our neighbors in all directions when we look around. There are many advantages to living in community and having connections to others. But, from time to time, I like to go to the open spaces and experience the vastness of the prairie.

Most of the people of the earth live near sea coasts. The centers of the continents have less population than the edges. Standing on the beach and looking out at the ocean one can get a great sense of the vastness of the world and the reality that there are open places on this planet. That sensation of standing on the beach and looking out over the ocean is similar to the way I feel when I look over the open prairie. There is a sense of invitation - I want to go into the prairie and explore - to hike, and climb the ridge and see what lies beyond. That same sense of invitation has called people to build boats and to sail across the oceans. It also drew people to venture across the prairies in search of the places that lie beyond them.

There have always been a few people who choose to live on the prairies. Many of them have been wanderers, following the herds of buffalo, moving from place to place. A few have selected a place to stay and developed ranches and communities and ways to sustain life in an environment that can, at times, be harsh. But the folks who live in the open spaces have always been a minority. Even with the growth in the world's population, the population is declining in the rural counties of the Dakotas. In many places the peak of population was in the early days of settlement. The vision of a family being able to support themselves with 160 acres of land just didn't work out. With each successive drought, more families moved away. Now there are places on the plains where a ranch needs 5,000 acres to be a viable production unit. The farms and ranches are getting larger and the population is getting smaller.

But I know why those who stay choose to do so.

The open space renews one's spirit. Sometimes we need to get away from the sense of being crowded and hemmed in. Sometimes we need to be reminded that we are very small in the vastness of the universe. Sometimes we need to get away from the lights of the city so that we can see the stars in the night sky. Sometimes we need to be alone in order to be reminded of how connected we are to other people.

But for me that is a "sometimes" experience. I do not live in the open space. I choose to live and work with other people in a community. There are limits to my space and limits to my ability to be alone. I thrive within the limits.

And I know that my space will one day shrink. As we age, our ability to travel diminishes. And the amount of space that we occupy gets smaller. There will come a day when my lawn is too big for me to mow and my house too big for me to maintain. We have watched family members move from homes to apartments and from apartments to care centers. Others have given up their own homes to live with us. The amount of personal and private space can shrink to a single room. Space, like time, has its limits.

We are not given forever - in time or in space.

So we live in the time and in the space that we have.

And, from time to time, it is good to stand on the edge of the prairie or the ocean and be reminded of the boundless enormity of both time and space - to look out at the vastness of eternity.

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## July 14, 2008 – Summer Evenings



“This is my favorite time of the day,” commented a friend as we sat on their deck as the sun set and the moon rose last evening. The temperature was comfortable and the hills were quiet. We were full of good food and enjoying the conversation of friends who have known each other enough to be comfortable together.

I don't know if I have a favorite time of the day. The mornings around here this time of year are pretty wonderful too. Even though the temperatures are rising with summer going full swing, mid days are not that uncomfortable. It is a good idea to avoid the heaviest of outdoor chores right at the middle of the day, but we haven't had any heat that is unbearable yet this year.

We are lucky to live in a wonderful climate. It is a place that seems just right for human habitation. We need shelter. We do get storms and our spring blizzards can be pretty severe. But most of the time our weather encourages outdoor activity and our deck is another room of our house.

What is especially nice about summer at this latitude is that our days lengthen and there is time for outdoor activity at the beginning and end of each day. For people who aren't too enamored with television, working in the garden or sitting on the deck with friends is far more entertaining than indoor activities.

When we visit Costa Rica we notice that the days are all the same length. Being close to the equator, there is much less variation in the length of days. About 12 hours of dark

and 12 hours of light occur summer or winter. People who live farther north, say in Alaska, get even longer days than we during the summer, but the cost is a winter full of very short days and very long nights. Being about half way between seems to be a good place for my temperament. We experience the change of seasons, but the swings are not too severe and the variation is not too great.

For much of human history, evenings have been the prime times for education and the sharing of culture. In the generations before television, people gathered at the end of the day to tell stories, share wisdom, and talk about the day that had just passed. Daytimes were for doing and evenings were for reflecting. Occasionally ceremonies or celebrations lasted late into the evening, but the majority of evenings were times for families to gather and tell their stories.

In our area of the world, the longer days of summer meant that there was less “down time” in the evening. Winter evenings were the time of sitting and teaching. But even on the busiest days of hunting or other summer activities, people paused at the end of the day to recount their activities, to share their experiences, and to learn from the events of the day.

We often allow the pace of life to overwhelm us and we fill up our evenings with meetings and work-related activities. Portable computers invite us to stretch our work days. Even our recreations can become a bit overwhelming with sports activities that have demanding schedules, cultural events that are also meeting places for business, and events that strain budgets and create worries.

Unfortunately, the gift of just sitting with friends and telling stories is a bit too rare in our fast-paced society. But it is a wonderful gift. And it is critical to the growth of our culture and the advancement of civil society. Informal conversation is a great way to try out new ideas without having to become defensive. It is a place to teach and learn values and demonstrate to children and elders alike the way to maintain friendships that endure over the years and transcend the distances that sometimes divide us. Our life-long friendships all involve opportunities to just sit and talk.

We are tempted to keep the pace of life going very fast year round these days. We have convinced ourselves that we need more and more material possessions and so we work longer and longer in an effort to acquire things that do not last and that need to be replaced frequently. There are pressures for institutions like the church to be centers of nearly constant activity and programs and projects fill our days and nights.

Sometimes we just need to slow down. Summer or winter. Sometimes we need to decrease the level of activity to make room for conversation and the enjoyment of life. Around here summer evenings are an invitation for us to slow down, relax, and sit with friends.

May we never become too busy for summer evenings.

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## July 15, 2008 – A Different Year



I rose this morning thinking of last year for some reason. We had a little rain shower yesterday. It didn't amount to much, but it left the yard smelling sweet for a few minutes and it took the edge off of the heat on a day when the temperatures reached into the high eighties. Our summer has been like that. We've had some warm days, a few into the nineties, but we've also had a steady supply of rain and our cool nights mean that the hills are looking pretty good. Things are green and growing all around.

Last year was different. The hills had dried out by mid July and the grass in our lawn had gone dormant. We took a couple of weeks vacation after a meeting on the East Coast and when we returned in July the fields all had the golden color of late summer and the woods were so dry that they crackled underfoot as you walked. By late July, we kept our heads turned toward the hills and were sniffing for smoke. The Box Elder fire had forced evacuations and closed roads and there was plenty of watching and worrying as we looked to the hills.

There can still be fires, but conditions are far different this year.

We all know that there will be some more hot days this summer, and we suspect that the hills will dry out, but the summer doesn't seem to be so long and the prospects of summer seem to be much more inviting when things are green and growing.

We are indeed fortunate. There are plenty of fires burning across the west. California is experiencing the worst wildfire season in the state's history. And that is saying a lot because 2007 was a disastrous year for the state. The fires in Eastern Washington and northern Idaho have eased somewhat, but homes have been lost in the Spokane valley.

Scanning the news about natural disasters, it seems that our little corner of the world is being very fortunate this year. We know the power that nature holds. We have seen devastating floods and fires, but for this year we are feeling a bit more secure and able to enjoy our summer.

We know this blessing is unearned. We are no better than those who live in other places. It is good to express our gratitude for the blessings of rain and cool breezes. And we can marvel at the swift pace of recovery. A summer of ample rainfall improves the overall health of the forest immensely. The trees are putting on a lot of new growth. The plants growing on the ground are green and lush. Even the poison ivy is thriving.

There is a theological challenge in a year like this one. It would be easy to sit back and relax and give ourselves credit for the good life we have. After all, some of us make choices that resulted in our living in this place instead of another. We might have ended up in California, for example. If we fall into a simplistic merit-based theology we can end up thinking that we are somehow better than those who are suffering the power of natural disasters. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

We only need one year's memory to know that our weather is not the product of our actions and choices.

The true test of our character and of our faith is how we live in the midst of this world. Can we turn the blessings of this year into acts of kindness and generosity for those who are less fortunate? Can we learn to share in good times and in bad? Can we find paths of service that lead us to get to know others whose circumstances are different from our own? How we answer these questions says more about us than where we live and the weather we are experiencing this year.

Another beautiful sunrise is greeting us today. Soon the day will warm and we will be busy with our activities. Hopefully we will find time to pause and to count our blessings. Hopefully we will pause and remember those who are experiencing difficulties. Hopefully we will find ways to reach out and help those whose fortunes are different from our own.

Looking for God in the disaster or the blessing can be a challenge. Finding God in our human responses to these events reminds us of the spirit that is within us and the power we hold to express God's love to other persons.

May we live in such a way that others can find God's love in our actions regardless of the weather.

## July 16, 2008 – Technology



Regular readers of this blog have noticed that it has been hard to access for a couple of days. I am sorry for the inconvenience. The problem has been multi-faceted. Part of the problem has to do with the initiation of new services from our servers. Part of the problem is simple growing pains. The good news is that we have more visitors to our web site. The bad news is that we have so many visitors that we require more bandwidth to serve them. It isn't just a matter of people having to wait in line, we have to pay for the bandwidth, so the more traffic, the more our costs increase.

We have worked, from the beginning of our web project, to keep access to our site a free service, and we will continue with that into the foreseeable future. But if growth continues, we may have to give some careful thought to ways to compress files and decrease bandwidth. The problem has very little to do with the daily blog, although it remains the most-visited part of our site. The problem has to do with the sermon downloads. The sermon files are big and when there are lots of downloads of our sermons, it takes a lot of bandwidth.

Ten years ago I could not have imagined that we would have a web site like the one we have, and I could not have imagined that working with the web would be as large a slice of my ministry as it has become. It certainly isn't the main thing that I do as a pastor, but it consumes more time and energy than I had imagined.

Like so many other things in life, our use of technology is a balancing act. Technology enables us to accomplish more which can, in theory, give more time for other activities.

The problem is that the technology also tempts us to do more. Now instead of a simple letter, we send pictures and color. Now instead of a monthly newsletter, we send news updates weekly and even more often over the Internet. A pastor used to have a typewriter, and sometimes there was only one typewriter for all of the employees of a church. Now computers and printers consume significant portions of church budgets.

Too much time sitting in front of the screen takes me away from relationships with people. As a result, I tend to work in front of the computer at times of the day when it is not convenient to visit with other people. And I have stretched my work day, beginning earlier than I used to. The challenge is to take advantage of available technology without having it consume the ministry. It is a balancing act.

The church has faced other revolutions in technology. It was totally re-defined by the innovation of the printing press. Within a short period of time, Bibles ceased to be the sole possessions of clergy and academic theologians. Printing meant that masses of people had access to the Bible and to commentaries and other books that aided in Biblical research. No longer content to have the Bible filtered and interpreted by clergy only, our sacred texts became the possession of all of the people.

Printing was a technology that drove the rise of modern democracies. Information could be circulated accurately to large numbers of people. Tracts and newspapers allowed people to have consistent information. When our forebears came to this continent, they brought printing technology with them. The Pilgrim Press, the oldest press in the United States, was started by early congregationalists. The first book published in America, The Bay Psalm Book, was an aid for worship. Additional texts followed and before long printing was a major enterprise of the church.

Of course secular presses followed and the church's press soon was a minor player in an ever-increasing field. Writing for a wider audience became not only possible, but one of the marks of a career in the ministry. Pastors who were widely published were noticed by more congregations and had more options for the unfolding of their careers than those who did not write for publication.

It is inaccurate to say that the technology drove the church, but there has been a long partnership between the church and printing technology. Our particular expression of Christianity did not take leadership in broadcast technology, though there certainly were radio and television evangelists who used those media effectively. Radio and television have had a large impact on the distribution of financial resources within the family of churches and the shift in popularity away from the so called "mainline" denominations.

The impact of the Internet on church life remains to be seen. But it is clear that there will be impact. It has already changed the way that churches conduct fund-raising and promote special mission projects. Our United Church of Christ has used the Internet successfully in promoting special offerings and campaigns as well as distributing critical

information to congregations and church leaders. Local congregations like ours are increasing our use of technology to distribute information to our congregations and beyond.

We'll still be working on our monthly print newsletter in the next week, and about 400 copies of that newsletter will be distributed by mail. We still print a weekly worship bulletin. In many ways our explorations on the Internet are in addition to the work that we were already doing.

We are in the communications business. Telling the good news of God's love and of the power of love to overcome even death is what we do. The technologies we employ are only the tools, never the content of our message. Keeping our attention on the core of our message will guide us as we employ new technologies to tell our story.

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**July 17, 2008 – Red Lily**



We have a small, triangular place between our sidewalk and our house that we have never figured out how to use. It doesn't get very much sun and is an awkward place for a flower bed. Our sidewalk is a bit narrow and we don't like to have plants that hang over onto the walk. But there were red lily bulbs in the bed. A few years ago, I dug up the bed. We transplanted the lily bulbs and decided to just put down weed barrier and wood chips until we figured out what to do with the space. We didn't get all of the lily bulbs. They grew up through the weed barrier and produced beautiful blooms. Since then, we have continued to transplant bulbs, but we have never gotten all of them. They are persistent and prolific.

We call them tiger lilies, but I am not sure whether they are true tiger lilies or the red lilies that are common in North Dakota. They grow profusely in low lying areas of open prairie that are not regularly mowed for hay. The flowers are bold and beautiful. The bulbs are edible. They are somehow related to wild onions, garlic and asparagus.

True tiger lilies must be related. The bulbs are sold for decorative plants in the United States, but they are also cultivated as a food crop in the Orient. When grown for the edible bulbs, gardeners break off the flowers to stimulate bulb production. It is that little detail that contributes to the prolific growth of the red lilies in our yard. We have deer who from time to time bite off the flowers. If that stimulates bulb production, then we will continue to have plenty of bulbs.

We associate lilies with Easter, although it is common to display white lilies for that holiday. The bulbs don't give much of a clue as to the bold and beautiful nature of the flowers that grow. They produce a long stem with narrow leaves and it isn't until the blossoms burst forth that true glory of the plant is revealed. The symbolism of burying the bulbs in order to produce new growth is seen as a metaphor for resurrection.

We're not very good at keeping the white lilies producing, but the red lilies grow without much encouragement from us. And they keep showing up in the bed where we think we don't want them. I admire their defiance and persistence. I enjoy a bit of "wild" in our yard and like the idea that we have some prairie flowers that grow naturally, without much action on our part.

When we lived in North Dakota, we would often see flowers growing out on the prairies. Sometimes we attributed them to former homesteads. Flowers were planted around prairie homes and the flowers continue to produce long after the home has fallen or been torn down. But there are areas in the prairie where lily, iris and other bulbs bloom naturally. The prairie produces color whether or not humans come by to take a look.

Nature is extravagant in the use of color. Often, when I photograph flowers and other natural objects the colors are so vibrant and bright that they surprise me. I guess this world wouldn't have to be so beautiful, but I am grateful that it is. And if I were hungry and wandering about the prairie in search of food to survive, I might appreciate a bright red flag indicating the presence of an edible bulb beneath. It seems unlikely that I will ever be in that position and I haven't a clue what the bulbs taste like, but similar bulbs are baked like potatoes in other countries.

I've got some ideas about other places to transplant the bulbs, and I'll probably be moving a few of them this fall. For now there are bursts of bright red in a place where we didn't intend them to grow. And in a few weeks I'll have to tie them back so they don't flop over onto the sidewalk. But I intend to let them grow through the season. After all they're a free gift and a beautiful one at that.

And you have to admire their persistence.

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## July 18, 2008 – Generations



One of the joys of having our parents choose to live close to us is that our home has become a gathering place for family. We used to be the ones who traveled to be with our brothers and sisters. Now it is more frequent that they come to see us. Susan's sister and nephews came to visit this week. We got the whole gang together at the care center for dinner last night. It is a genuine treasure to have moments when our "twenty-somethings" get together with our "eighty-somethings." Watching and listening as our children and our parents visited last night was a treat.

Our society has a real tendency to segregate by age. Schools are divided into classrooms by age. Although most educators know of the advantages of the old one room schoolhouse and multi-age education, no practical models for multi-age teaching and learning have been developed for larger schools. Sports and recreational programs also are divided by age. Sandlot baseball with the whole neighborhood has been replaced by a carefully graded program with different teams and different games for each age of player.

At the other end of the age spectrum, specialized housing for older adults has resulted in many elders living in facilities that cater to their specific age grouping and needs for care. It is not at all uncommon for seniors to go through several different places of living in the last years of their lives, moving from house to townhouse to apartment to assisted living to care center. Each move keeps a senior surrounded by others with similar needs and circumstances.

Our judgements about whether this is good or bad don't change the reality. We live in a society where people are often segregated by age.

So the moments when the generations of our family are together are precious. Watching and listening as our children and parents visited last night was a delight.

It isn't always easy for them to converse. They don't always know what to say to one another. Sometimes their worlds and concerns are far apart. The schedules of our parents are dominated by medical appointments and health care concerns. The schedules of our children are marked by work and social events. But they have more in common than they know at times. Both generations are concerned about housing and where they will live. Both are concerned about finances and how to make ends meet. They may not watch the same movies or television programs and their choice in music may be very different, but they do have stories to tell to one another.

Being in the middle generation makes us aware of how quickly time passes. It isn't hard for us to remember when the children were babies and our parents' homes were the places we gathered. We have witnessed the entire lives of our children and we have watched as our parents grew from younger than we are today to their present ages. We know how quickly a few decades will pass. Just as we are now the age that our parents were when we were launching our family, we know that we will soon be the age that they are today.

I sometimes joke that I was the smartest I ever got when I was 25 years old. It is true that my memory and my ability to process information from reading and listening to lectures was near its height at that point. I could organize and retrieve information with great clarity and I was filled with confidence. Watching our children, I am aware of the brilliance of youth. Quick minds and energetic spirits are out exploring the world and doing amazing things. They travel more, experience more and they exude a confidence and ease in the world that is impressive.

But there is a wisdom that comes with age and experience that is also impressive. There are many lessons in this life that take more than a few decades to learn. There are perspectives that can't be developed in two or three decades. And the experiences of our elders are unique. The world was different in their youth. They faced challenges that we can only imagine. The current recession pales in the face of the Great Depression, for example. But the skills that guided our parents' survival in those years are valuable for our children as they face the current economic realities.

We all have much to gain from the times we gather across generational lines. Our family is fortunate to have multiple generations living close enough to gather. There are families where distances prevent much interchange between generations.

It occurs to me that the church is one of the few social institutions that offers true intergenerational experiences. We are based on the belief that it is good when all ages gather together. There are some church marketing experts who say that churches should choose an age “niche” and customize their programs to attract members of a particular age cohort. I think they are wrong. The goal of every church ought to be to draw together the great age diversity of our community. The great ideas of religion are far beyond the span of any one generation. We experience more of God’s nature when we gather with a wide spectrum of ages.

Someone coined the term “sandwich generation” for those of us who are in the middle. Sometimes the term is used as a complaint, citing pressures and stresses from giving care to those who are younger and older at the same time. I am convinced that we are fortunate to be in the middle. Furthermore we are all richer for the simple fact that we live in a community with more than one or two generations.

Younger, middler, or elder - may we all continue to listen to and learn from each other.

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## July 19, 2008 – The Power of Place



One of the themes of the stories of our people is the theme of space. Among the most ancient of our sacred texts is the story of Abram and Sarai, who left the land of their ancestors because God was calling them to a new place. They did not know where they were going and their lives were filled with adventures as they wandered. Along the way they had their names changed to Abraham and Sarah and they developed a vision of God's promise. The promise was, largely, one that would be fulfilled in succeeding generations, not in their lifetime. In fact, the only piece of land that they ever owned was Sarah's burial plot.

It seems simple to us today, but at the time, their notion of God was revolutionary. They lived in the midst of people who believed that gods were regional and attached to specific places. They had experienced the beauty and power of creation in specific locations and made the assumption that a different god must reside in each place. Abraham and Sarah made the startling discovery that the God who called them out of the home of their ancestors traveled with them. As they journeyed as far away as Egypt, they experienced the simple truth that God is God of all of creation and is present in every place.

Our people began to distinguish themselves from their neighbors in terms of theology. Our God is not revealed primarily in a specific place, but is primarily revealed in history. When we tell the stories of our people, we see the actions of God in their lives.

But we have always struggled with our sense of place. In the time of the united monarchy, when King David brought the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem, we established a sense that Jerusalem was somehow more holy than other places. Even though God did not allow David to build a permanent temple, the idea was cast in the minds of the people that Jerusalem was somehow more holy than other places. It took the building and the destruction of two temples in Jerusalem for our people to begin to get that notion out of our heads. We still refer to the country of Israel as "The Holy Land," and hold to our notions of the sacredness of that place.

But we have been quick to say that what makes the place holy is the history that occurred in that place. The holy land is holy because it is the place where Jesus walked, the place where he lived and taught and died and was resurrected.

The place where we now live has long been considered sacred by a variety of plains tribes. To the Lakota these hills are more than Paha Sapa - the hills that are black. They are the heart of everything that is - the place of creation. The creation stories of the Lakota speak of Wind Cave as the location where humans emerged from the earth to be what we now are. But the hills are sacred for more than the legends of creation. They are sacred as a place of clarity and obtaining a vision of the future and of what should be. They are sacred because of the closeness to the Creator which is felt when one walks along the paths and views the vista from the tops of the hills.

There is much debate about how long the Lakota have lived near the hills. What we know is that they have been here longer than we. My family does not have a run of ten or more generations in the same general place. We have moved from time to time. On my father's side it is hard to find more than two generations that lived in any one place since they left Europe. We are wanderers.

I suspect that the Lakota are wanderers, too. Even though they lived in this general area before the arrival of European settlers, their life was based on the movement of the buffalo and their stories tell of movement from place to place. Their lodges and traditional belongings were designed to be portable and to be moved.

It is our nature to wander. Jesus had no permanent home. He experienced rejection and threat in the place of his upbringing. Our people have long told the stories of Moses and the people of Israel wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. A generation whose life was invested not in getting from one place to another, but in adjusting in the freedom to travel that followed slavery. And there are many more wanderers in our story. The story of Abraham and Sarah begins by declaring, "A wandering Armenian was my father . . ."

Maybe it is because we are wanderers that we experience the power of place so intensely. Because there are many places in our story, we have intense experiences of God in specific places. Whatever the reasons for our feelings, I know that we are fortunate to live in this place and that we have known God's presence in this place. Our

spirits have been nurtured by the beauty of Placerville and Harney and Bear Butte. Our sense of what is holy has been shaped by the sunrises and sunsets and the whisper of the wind in the pine trees.

I know with all of my being that God is not contained in any specific place. God is present in all of creation. Even if I were able to travel to the most distant corners of the universe, God would be there. And I know that any place would lack meaning without the stories of our people. By studying history and the sacred texts of our people, I come to understand God more fully and to discern God's call for my life.

But sometimes I set aside the books and the stories and without words simply sit in one place. And in that place I know of God's presence in a way that is beyond the power of words to express.

Surely this is sacred ground. Perhaps every place is as sacred.

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## July 20, 2008 – Wheat and Weeds



Our cycle of Bible readings for worship, the Revised Common Lectionary, is set up on a three year rotation. The years are designated “A,” “B,” and “C.” This year is year A. In the “A” cycle, during the summer, we take a quick romp through Jesus’ parables as reported in the Gospel of Matthew. The parables come quickly and some weeks we read multiple parables. I enjoy preaching on the parables, because they are good stories and they often don’t take too much interpretation. Jesus had a knack for incorporating a lot of meaning into a short, pithy story.

Summertime is a more relaxed time in the life of the church, too. People wear casual clothes to church, schedules may not be quite as busy and we tend to be a bit more informal with our worship. And our attention is focused a bit more on the outdoors. Even though our congregation doesn’t contain too many farm and ranch folks, the agricultural images of Jesus’ parables seem to be appropriate for summer when we at least pay some attention to yards and gardens and have some sense of the process of growing plants.

Today’s parable, the parable of the wheat and weeds drives home the point that Jesus didn’t make his living as a wheat farmer. He didn’t even understand the process of growing wheat very well. There are some crops that can be successfully weeded. Corn and sugar beets are planted in rows and there is space to walk between the rows and one can use a hoe to dig out weeds. It is hot back-breaking work, but it can be done. Wheat, on the other hand, is planted densely, with no room to walk into the field without damaging the crop. Wheat farmers are careful to prepare the soil to minimize the weeds

before planting. While there are some chemical herbicides that can be used to kill broadleaf weeds, other weeds grow up right alongside the wheat and there is nothing that can be done about them. They can't be pulled or taken out without damaging the wheat.

The word for weed in the Greek text is a specific plant: darnel or cockle. It is common in the mideast and is sometimes called false wheat. It is nearly impossible to tell the difference between the plants when they are growing. It is only when the heads are full and ready for harvest that wheat starts to bend over with heavy grain. Darnel continues to stand straight, with nearly empty heads.

The combine sorts out the kernels of wheat and the weeds go the way of the chaff and the straw.

Wheat and weeds together is pretty much the story of wheat farming. Once you've got weeds, there is little that can be done.

So the servants in Jesus' parable, who suggest pulling the weeds sound almost like saboteurs. Surely they would have known that the process of pulling the weeds would have required trampling the wheat. And just as surely they would have known that they wouldn't be able to tell the weeds from the wheat. And the farmer in the parable who suggests sorting things out at harvest time is just as silly. Any wheat farmer knows that the heads of grain are perched on a very slender stalk and that it doesn't take much to knock them off. Trying to sort out weeds at harvest time would be detrimental to harvest.

Maybe Jesus knew this and maybe he didn't when he told the story.

It might be a parable of my garden. I have never enjoyed weeding. I like to prepare the soil and to plant and to harvest, but I'm not much for pulling weeds. I make an attempt, but most years we grow a good crop of weeds alongside the plants we grow for food. The corn is easiest. It is in rows that I can hoe between and soon it grows up tall enough to prevent much sunlight from getting down to the ground level. After about the first of July, I don't need to do any more weeding there. Zucchini is similar. The leaves are so big that once the plants get going, they grow fine. Lettuce and peas and radishes only need a little weeding between the rows and a gentle touch with the weeds that come up close to the plants.

It's the tomatoes that need attention. They don't like the competition and I need to keep them weeded if I want to have an abundant harvest. Even after they start setting tomatoes, little grass and weeds continue to grow up around the plants. I pull them from time to time, but if I was better at it, I'd have a more productive garden. One year I planted my tomatoes with fabric weed barrier all around them. They grew well and I didn't have a weed problem, but the fabric was good for only one season and it seems

wasteful of money and resources to put out fresh fabric each year. So I'm back to pulling weeds from time to time.

My garden has plenty of weeds every summer and this summer is no exception.

I think Jesus understood that wheat and weeds together is the way of life. This earth can produce plenty of grain without the total elimination of every weed. We'll have enough food even when there are some stray and strange plants growing.

So where are we in this parable? Are we wheat or weeds? But more to the point, do we trust God with the harvest, or are we like the servants who want to get in their and pluck out the weeds even if we have trouble identifying them - even at the risk of trampling the fruitful grain?

As a parable of the church, it might be a parable of extravagant welcome. At least it is a parable about trusting God with judgment. Every congregation is a gathering of wheat and weeds together. Perhaps each one of us is a combination of desirable and undesirable traits. While we seek to be productive members of God's garden, there are times when we inhibit the growth of others and prevent them from blossoming. I don't think we need to worry too much about others who want to come into the church. Let's welcome them all and trust God to do the sorting.

We are wheat and weeds together. And we don't need to decide which is which. God will take care of the sorting in God's time. For now let us enjoy one another as we seek together to be the church of Jesus Christ.

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## July 21, 2008 – Anticipation



The tomatoes are beginning to set fruit. The plants still look a little scrawny, but there are plenty of blossoms and a few green tomatoes are appearing. I shouldn't be surprised that the plants are not as large and robust as last year's plants. They have endured a lot. These tomato plants have seen snow and hail and cooler than normal temperatures. But they have had ample moisture and the warm days are coming. I am expecting them to begin to shoot up in the next couple of weeks. But they also need energy for producing fruit. If this is a year for less bushy plants, so be it. I'm waiting for the vine-ripe tomatoes.

I do this every year. In fact, I wrote a blog about waiting for the tomatoes to ripen last July. And last year ended up being a good year for tomatoes.

There is something about a tomato that ripens on the plant that cannot be replicated by tomatoes that have to be picked a bit green in order to be shipped. The tomatoes that come out of the garden always taste better to me than the ones we buy in the store. But if I want to eat tomatoes, I'm going to have to buy them in the store for at least two or three more weeks. Because ours aren't ready.

One of the joys of life that is underrated in our generation is the joy of anticipation. We live in a culture of instant gratification. "Buy now, pay later," seems to be our favorite slogan. But there is a sweet pleasure in anticipating, watching, and waiting that is distinct from the pleasure of getting or having. There are times when the pleasure of anticipation exceeds that of acquisition.

We had wonderful Christmas celebrations when I was a child growing up. Our parents and relatives were wondrously generous and there were always plenty of presents as well as a big meal. But now when I think back on Christmases past, I remember the waiting as much as I remember the actual celebrations. Waiting for Christmas began as soon as the weather began to turn cool in the fall. But it really moved into high gear at Thanksgiving.

We could spend hours pouring over the Sears and Wards catalogues. I could imagine extravagant gifts that I knew were beyond the means of my family. I knew all of the comparative virtues of American Flyer vs Lionel electric train sets. I poured over the various options in Erector Sets. I was drawn to the sets with electric motors and bins of gears. The ferris wheel and crane were among my fantasies as I would go to sleep at night.

But we didn't limit our anticipation to small toys. We looked at the pages of bicycles and even ventured a look at the go-carts.

I don't remember ever being disappointed by Christmas. But I certainly remember anticipation.

Anticipation can be a wonderful thing. The imagination allows the world to be more perfect than reality. I anticipate "big boy" tomatoes that are really big - the ones that produce slices the size of a hamburger. Of course we rarely have a tomato that size. The reality is often different than that which we anticipated.

Much of our life is anticipation. Children anticipate adulthood. Couples anticipate marriage. Students anticipate graduation. Workers anticipate retirement. There is an entire genre of theology that speaks of the future both in terms of the coming realm of God and in terms of heaven that awaits the faithful. There is a relationship between those types of theology and the realities of the present situation. When the church has faced times of persecution, there has been a rise in theologies of the end of time. When the church or its members have suffered injustice, there is a rise in writings about the final judgment. One of the ways that we deal with the harsh realities of the present is to imagine the sweet rewards of the future.

As the nation of Israel suffered increasingly intense persecution under their Roman overlords and the pressures of Rome mounted, the people began to anticipate God's realm. Jesus told parables of the Kingdom of God that were enormously popular in the years immediately following his death and resurrection. The church was sustained by them when Rome totally crushed the Jewish rebellion, Jerusalem was destroyed, and the temple fell. Jesus told story after story about the Kingdom of God. He compared it to seeds and yeast, to hidden treasure and the search for the lost. He told stories of

bridesmaids waiting for the arrival of the groom and tenants who were entrusted with care of the fields.

There is no parable of the vine-ripe tomato, to my knowledge. Tomatoes are used in many middle eastern recipes in the modern world, but I do not know if tomatoes were common in Jesus day. They might not have been. At least they are not mentioned in lists of crops that appear in the Bible.

But there could have been: The kingdom of heaven is like a perfectly vine-ripened tomato . . .

Now there is something that is worth anticipation.

May your life be a balance of anticipation and fulfillment. But may you never forget the joys of anticipation. The best really is yet to come!

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## July 22, 2008 – Summertime



For several years prior to this year things have been hot and dry for weeks by the middle of July. In those hot summers, the grass in the lawn has gone dormant and the grass in the hills has gotten dry and crackly. We're having a different kind of summer this year, and enjoying the change. Spring rains continued throughout June and we've had a few showers in July as well and the hills are lush and green. Summer weather has arrived, with highs in the '90's, but so far we've avoided the weeks of temperatures in the 100's. And we know now that if it turns really hot in August, September is coming.

The little patch by the back deck where I planted wildflower seeds is producing lots of blossoms now, mostly white with dashes of orange, red, purple and blue. I don't know the names of most of the flowers growing there, but it makes a nice little patch of ground. I probably wouldn't have even tried growing the seeds in the past two years with the combination of our travels and the hot dry weather.

One of the treats of this particular summer is that we're traveling a bit less than we do some years. It's nice that the year we get to stay at home we have such lovely weather. Of course our lives stay busy and we don't have the time we think we might have for chores around the house and in the yard, but most days give us a few minutes to dig in the garden or at least take a brief walk around the yard. Some evenings we linger on the deck or in the yard and enjoy the bounty and beauty that the hills have to offer this year.

This week is filled with action at our house, with Susan and Rachel heading off to the United Church of Christ National Youth Event in Knoxville, Tennessee early Wednesday morning. They are preparing their workshop, packing clothes and getting ready to serve as adult leaders for the South Dakota youth who will be attending the event. Nearly 3,000 youth are expected to gather at the University of Tennessee for four days of workshops, worship, keynote presentations, music and fellowship. There was a time in my life when I couldn't imagine ever missing a National Youth Event, but it feels good to let someone else take the leadership this year. I've got the cats and our parents and the usual work load at the office to keep me busy while they are gone.

High on my agenda for this week is wading through a stack of scholarship applications in advance of a committee meeting that will choose nursing grant and liberal arts scholarship winners. Every year there are more qualified applicants than there are scholarships to award. It is fun to read through the applications because they reveal such a wealth of promise and each application is designed to show the best of the student. When we look at the best that young people have to offer it is very good indeed. The process reveals our limits. We'd love to be able to award more scholarships. But there is honor and joy in serving on the committee and enabling funds donated by previous generations to be invested in the future.

The truth is that there are few routines to my work. Each day yields surprises. I never know if a hospital visit or a phone call will last for a few minutes or will be the beginning of something that takes much longer. Reading my e-mail can set off a few hours of work to research and respond to concerns or needs. I'm taking a summer school class this year, so there is plenty of reading and writing that needs to be done each week.

There are plenty of songs about summer. "Summertime and the living's easy." "Those hazy, crazy, lazy days of Summer." "Endless Summer." "We've been having fun all summer long." Our culture celebrates summer as a change of pace and a time of delightful weather. This year is turning out to be a blessing in both ways. Our weather has been truly delightful and we are enjoying a change of pace as well.

The truth is that I enjoy all of the seasons of the year and I appreciate living in a place where there are dramatic differences between the seasons. Our summer is just beginning. There will be some hot days ahead and I'm sure that the hills will dry out. We may even have some anxious days of sniffing the air and worrying about fire. But for now it is pleasant to go out in the cool of the morning and anticipate the gentle warming of the day. The flowers are blooming and it is a joy to be alive in this place.

May you have time to enjoy summer's blessings.

**July 23, 2008 – A Gathering of Youth**



This morning I am driving to the airport to deliver my wife and daughter who will be attending the United Church of Christ's National Youth Event in Knoxville, Tennessee. They will both be serving as adult advisors to the youth who will be attending the event. Our delegation from South Dakota is quite small, but the total event should draw over 3,000 youth.

When I was a youth, the United Church of Christ had not yet begun national youth events. There had been Pilgrim Fellowship National Events for Youth prior to the formation of the United Church of Christ, but it took a while after the United Church of Christ was formed for the structure to be built for National Youth Events. Youth gathered at the General Synod, but those events weren't specifically for youth and there was little youth-specific programming. The current structure gathers youth at General Synod every other year, has a National Youth Event every four years and Regional Youth Events on the remaining years.

I've attended a lot of Youth Events as an advisor. I drove a bus load of youth to the 1984 National Youth Event in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, including an urban plunge with 2 nights in Chicago. I've attended regional youth events in LaForet, Colorado; Forest Grove, Oregon; Honolulu, Hawaii; and Sioux Falls, South Dakota. I've been to National Youth Events in Beloit, Wisconsin and Ames, Iowa, and served on the planning team for the 1996 National Youth Event in Columbia, South Carolina.

I've always enjoyed youth ministry and have seen it as an important part of the work we do together as a church. There is plenty of support for youth ministry in the church. Often adults will use terms such as "the future of the church," or "our future," and give generously to support youth ministry. I've always taken a slightly different approach. Youth are the present of our church. They are a part of who we are right now. And the primary reason for youth ministry is not the process of providing adults to sustain the future church, in my opinion. In fact, youth ministry is primarily mission work. We send our youth into the world to carry their faith and to engage in ministries in other locations, not to sustain and support our current institutions.

Strong youth ministry does not necessarily mean we will have a large church in the future. But God never measures in size or numbers. God doesn't call us to be large or successful in the eyes of the world. God calls us to be faithful. And God calls youth to be faithful as well.

In the past few years, I have tempered my involvement with events that are primarily for youth. It is not that I don't enjoy such events. I do. And it is not that I don't support such ministry. I do. But I have discovered that some of the most important work that we do with youth is the work that we do when we are mixing all ages. Our Costa Rica Ministry has sustained an every-other year trip. Each of the four trips we have taken since 2001 has had participants ranging from teens to seventies with someone in each decade in between. Youth who have the opportunity to engage in mission with elders are more likely to remain connected to the church than those whose experience of the church is primarily with others who are their same age. Our Woodchuck Society is similar - from age 10 to 90 with several people in each decade - all dedicated to serving others.

The church has a long history of raising youth who have wonderful experiences while they are growing up, but who don't remain connected as adults. Now we have to reach beyond wonderful experiences for youth to meaningful experiences that transform their lives in ways that keep them connected to the community of the church.

So my energies have focused on engaging in ministry with youth in new directions in recent years.

Having said that, I am excited for those who will attend this National Youth Event. I am hopeful that some of them might discover a calling to make the ministry their vocation. I am confident that the event will be spirit-filled and faithfully led. I'm glad that the United Church of Christ continues to invest time and energy and financial resources in a national youth event. I'm proud that youth from the churches I have served have participated in every National Youth Event. I'm pleased that we have youth and adults participating in this summer's event. I'm eager to hear their stories and to find out about their trip.

But today I'm the stay at home guy, sending of others to an event that I know will be exciting and meaningful. I feels a bit like when we dropped off our kids at college. I loved college and I was excited about their colleges. And I knew that in order for their education to be truly theirs, I had to leave them and return home.

The United Church of Christ does not need me to have a great youth event - in fact my staying away helps to keep the event fresh and right for the youth who attend without the burden of an other middle-aged guy telling stories of past youth events. But they can count on my support and my fervent interest in the event.

The church continues in many settings. We gather in many places. We have many different kinds of events. And each time we gather in the name of Jesus we are the church. The church is having a glorious meeting in Knoxville, Tennessee this week. I hope it is the kind of event that none of us can ignore.

It isn't the church of the future.

It is the church of today.

Thanks be to God.

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## July 24, 2008 – A Quiet Spot



This week five people were killed in a bomb blast in Kashmir, the pilot of an Indonesian jet that crashed last year killing 21 people was put on trial, the arrest of Radovan Karadzic sparked memories and emotions of the Bosnian war, the US began to scale down its surge in the Iraq war, a leading researcher warned of connections between cell phone use and cancer, Oxfam warned that millions in East Africa are being pushed to starvation because of spiraling food costs, Zimbabweans reacted to the announcement of crisis talks, US senators debated legislation to boost law enforcement and lower crime on Indian reservations, candidates continued to campaign for positions, olympians continued to prepare for the contests that are coming . . .

This week patients in Rapid City Regional Hospital prepared for life-changing surgeries, businesses anticipated the raise in the minimum wage, employees worked overtime to get the new Cabella's store opened in time for the motorcycle rally, we worked on getting our church newsletter ready for publication, and some churches were preparing for vacation Bible school . . .

And this week a gentle rain fell on Sheridan Lake.

Sometimes I leave the world behind and seek out a peaceful place for just a moment. It is an incredible luxury that many of the world's population cannot afford.

The restoring power of nature continues to surprise me after a lifetime lived in places where I have easy access to unpopulated spaces. I am aware of what a luxury it is to

live in this place, and to have access to the beauty of such a place. Many have called the Black Hills sacred. They are, of course correct. All space is sacred. There is no place where God is not present. Every place holds potential for meeting God and encountering the sacred.

This morning as I write, thunder is rolling through the hills. A few flashes of lightning appear on the horizon, but most are unseen from my vantage point and the thunder is echoing from some distance away. I know the storms can be violent with strong winds and rain enough to cause flash floods, but we are so grateful for the moisture after years of drought. It is not hard to remember days when every flash of lightning brought to mind fears of uncontrolled fire.

Today the storm makes me think of the gentle rain that falls on the reservoirs in the hills. They are full and the paddling has been delightful this summer. I haven't been to the lake since Monday, but sometimes just knowing that it is there gives peace and balance to my sometimes hectic life. Just a dozen miles from my home, less than 20 minutes away, lies a lake where I can paddle and watch the great blue herons and ducks and red-winged blackbirds. I know where to go watch turtles and beaver and glimpse silvery fish swimming in the weeds at the bottom of the lake. I can paddle up the inlet and wander through cattails so high no one can see where I am. I can feel the gentle rain on my shoulders and be reminded of God's blessings. And days when I cannot make it to the lake because of busy schedules or pressing business, I can remember. A few minutes with my eyes closed and my memories can restore calm and help me to approach the events of my day with poise and balance.

I think we all need a quiet spot in our lives. Maybe we need more than one. It is easy to fill our lives with "doing" and forget the importance of "being." I am reminded of the power of just being when I visit with our parents or other elders in our community. Despite the dedicated work of activities directors and planners of events, sometimes the most important gift we can give our elders is not any activity, but just our presence. Sometimes we don't even have very many words to say, but we just share the same space for a time and enjoy each other's presence. Sometimes we talk of the events of the day or memories of the past. I am convinced that it isn't what I say or what we do together that is most important. What is most important is being together.

I often define my life in terms of what I do. Others know me for who I am.

Of course we are all a combination of "being" and "doing." A life without action and activity is almost unimaginable to me. My congregation pays me a salary to accomplish tasks and to do things. But I need to remind myself that my ministry is also one of presence - of being present in the places where meanings are formed and lives are lived - of visiting with others and listening - of pausing to feel the movement of the Holy Spirit and taking time to reflect on God's presence in our lives.

It sounds silly to assert that the gentle rain falling on the lake is as important as the world-shattering news that flashes on television and computer screens. It sounds silly to assert that my job is as much about sitting quietly and praying as it is about visiting and organizing and planning. But both of those silly things contain seeds of the truth.

How grateful I am for quiet places in this world.

How important they are in the balance of life.

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## July 25, 2008 – Stuff and More Stuff



The Women's Fellowship holds two large rummage sales at our church each year. The summer sale is coming up and there is a room at the church that is rapidly filling up with rummage that people have donated. Some people bring in their rummage in neatly organized boxes. Others get it to the church however they can. It always amazes us how many items are donated each year.

The sale is a big help to us because we have too many possessions and the time has come for us to get rid of a few things. This year, in celebration of our 35th anniversary, we agreed that instead of buying presents for each other, we would each select 35 possessions to get rid of. It is working. We keep finding more things to take to the rummage sale.

The only problem is that 35 is not enough. There is a lot of stuff in our house.

I remember when we first moved from seminary in to a parsonage. We didn't own furniture, except for one desk. The house was empty. We found a bed that would work for us and got a few items at a rummage sale. Family members were moving and downsizing and we picked up some more furniture. The years passed and more items came into our possession. We tried to get rid of possessions each time we moved, but each move was accomplished in a larger truck.

The acquisition of items has accelerated in recent years. Our children have moved out of our home into their own apartments, but aren't quite ready to have all of their own possessions with them. A few boxes are stored with us. Susan's father downsized from a comfortable three-bedroom home with a full basement and a two-car garage to an

apartment a little less than three years ago. Some of his possessions ended up being stored with us. This week he is downsizing again with a move to an assisted living facility and more things need to be temporarily stored as they are sorted and decisions are made about where things should go. My mother has moved into our home, but most of her possessions remain in storage, in part because we don't have room for them in our house.

The possessions do not have large monetary value, but there are many items that are rich in meaning. And the need to accomplish a move in a short amount of time means that we take the necessary items to the new place, haul a few loads of obvious items to the rummage sale, and put other items in storage to be sorted and distributed to family members.

The challenge for us is not in physically moving items. We have a pickup truck and lots of friends. The challenge is in sorting. For the most part that is not a job that you can have someone else do. Decisions can be difficult and going through the possessions of family members can trigger grief in unexpected ways. A physically simple task can become emotionally difficult.

And so sorting and getting rid of things has become a gift that we give to each other. And, perhaps it is a gift that we can give to our children. Keep the things that hold meaning. Give away the things that we do not need. We are sorting as we go so that the next time of sorting will be a bit easier perhaps.

It has also become a sort of spiritual discipline. We often think of great spiritual leaders as ones who have few or no possessions. The acquisition of possessions can distract us from the things that are most important in life. The quality of a person's life cannot be measured in what one gains, only in what one gives. Learning not to keep and learning to give are important marks of spiritual maturity.

We've got a ways to go. There are a lot of boxes to sort. Our rental storage unit is nearly full.

When we were young and launching our career, we focused attention on acquiring possessions. Now we have entered the season of our lives when shedding possessions needs to be the focus of our attention for a while. The difference in age between our parents and us is a measure of the time that we have to sort and downsize. The time will come when we will no longer have this large home.

Thank goodness the women's fellowship has a rummage sale twice every year. It is no mystery to me how they find all of the items to sell.

## July 26, 2008 – Blooming Hills



Just to the East of the church, the hill slopes down toward an alley and the houses that are below the hill. The church owns the flat land at the top of the hill, but does not own the sloping hillside. Over the years a number of people have taken a look at the view from the top of the slope and thought, "This would be a great view for a home." Some have purchased the hillside lot. After exploring the cost of building on the slope with retaining walls and parking problems, they have sold the lot to someone else who also liked the view. A couple of years ago one of the owners started moving dirt. They got a driveway in and leveled some ground for building. They actually dug the footings for a house. But they stopped their project, decided to live in another place and put the lot on the market. Initially they tried to recover the costs of the work that they had done and the price on the lot was too high for it to sell. It remains unsold. I don't know whether or not they have dropped the price.

I suppose that some day someone will figure out how to build a house on the slope and we'll have a new neighbor. In the meantime, the hillside isn't receiving any attention this summer. In celebration of the lack of mowing and construction, the hillside has erupted in Black-eyed Susans. It is a delightful hillside of yellow. The rains of the spring and summer have left the vegetation tall and thick and the flowers are blooming in profusion without any attention from humans. They aren't particularly apparent from the top of the hill where I usually park. I might not have discovered them except for the fact that I occasionally walk in the neighborhood and I happened to walk down the alley.

There is evidence that the hills have, for some time, occasionally produced abundant wildflowers. When George Custer led a scientific exploration of the hills in 1884, troops encountered fields of wildflowers that were so lush and tall that they could pick bouquets of flowers without dismounting their horses.

We haven't seen as many wildflowers during the drought years, but the wetter and cooler weather of this summer has been perfect for fields of blossoms to emerge. One needs to do a bit of walking for the best views because many open meadows are mowed for hay, but there are plenty of small fields throughout the hills that are growing flowers undisturbed.

It challenges our sense of order. We work to garden, planting our flowers and vegetables, pulling out weeds, adding fertilizer, working up the beds with compost and packing them with straw in the fall to protect them from winter. And we are rewarded by beautiful flowers most years. The hills don't seem to need all of our attention. They produce gorgeous flowers without any human intervention.

Any botanist can tell you that the primary role of the gardener is to work with the natural processes. Human's don't make plants grow. With proper understanding of how nature works, they can encourage growth. They can transplant plants from one place to another either by harvesting and planting seeds or by moving entire plants. It reminds me of the hymn, "We plow the fields and scatter the good seed on the land, but it is fed and watered by God's almighty hand." The chorus of the hymn is a song of thanksgiving: "All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above, then thank the Lord, thank the Lord, for all His love."

We can assume a role in the growing of plants, but the continuing processes of creation are the true source of the beauty. Carefully observing this truth gives us a window to observe one of the aspects of God. God is Creator. and even one who rejects the use of religious language can experience the delight and wonder of the bounty and beauty of this world.

This week has been a busy one, and the weekend will be full of activity for me as well. There is furniture to move, cleaning to be accomplished, people to be visited, worship to be led, care to be given and much more. I won't have time for an excursion into the hills - perhaps not any time for such an adventure for a couple of weeks.

Fortunately I don't need to mount an excursion. I can walk down the alley to the east of the church. The power of creation is irrepressible.

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## July 27, 2008 – Home



One of the projects of this weekend for me has been moving furniture and getting things set up in an assisted living facility for my father-in-law. He moves from the care center to assisted living on Tuesday of next week, and we will be working to get his apartment cleaned out as quickly as possible over the next week. About three years ago he moved from a three-bedroom home to the apartment and we had to sort through possessions and decide what to move, what to save for grandchildren, what to donate to the mission, etc. It was a difficult process for the daughters to sort through the accumulations of more than 40 years of their parents living in the same home.

This move is simpler. There are fewer possessions. But each move represents a downsizing from the previous residence. The space is smaller and there are fewer things that can be taken to the new home.

But it is still a home. So we need to decide what is most important to make a home. Certain pictures and mementos are good reminders of a life well lived and ways to make an institutional space into a home. Certain pieces of furniture are familiar and comfortable and make the space both inviting and personal.

The process has made me think about what makes a place a home. We use the language frequently. When we dedicate a new Habitat for Humanity home, we say to the homeowner, "Habitat builds houses, it is your job to make this house into a home." The implication is that the activities that take place in a structure imbue it with love and other qualities and feelings that make it into a home where one is a part of a family. When I think of the qualities of home, love is high on the list.

So we are making the suite in the assisted living home into a place for Keith, to be sure, but we are also making it into a place for friends and family to gather for the sharing of stories and memories and the joys of living day to day. It needs to be a place for love to be shared and as such it needs to be a place where we will visit regularly and continue our family's heritage of loving relationships.

In our culture, another quality associated with home is a sense of permanence. We are not naive. We know that no home is "forever." We occupy spaces for certain phases of our lives. Houses are bought and sold, families move from place to place. This is becoming especially apparent in the lives of seniors. It is not at all uncommon for retired persons to make multiple moves in the final decade of their lives. They move from a house to a town home, from the town home to an apartment, from an apartment to assisted living, from assisted living to a care center. Each home has a different amount of space, different qualities, and different levels of assistance. The level of disability and the need for assistance with meals and medications varies with each individual. Changes can occur quickly. Keith was quite capable of independent living with meals in the dining room until a medical condition moved him from one eye drop once a day to a host of medicines taken four times a day. Assistance with medications now is essential to maintaining his health, and it becomes a factor in choosing where he will live.

The independence we treasure must be compromised in order to have the care that we need. Homes are about relationships of care and support as much as they are about physical space and possessions. Still there is a sense of permanence associated with each place we choose to live. "Once we make this decision, there's no going back," Keith commented to me last night. I know that the decision of where to live is weighing on him at times. He doesn't ask the questions out loud, but I can tell he is wondering, "What if things don't work out?" "What if I don't like it?"

Sometimes it is easier for our family to deal with moving the furniture and sorting the possessions than with the underlying questions and emotions. But we will continue to deal with all of life. And we will continue to make a home.

Jesus struggled with his sense of home throughout his life. His return to his hometown after he began his ministry was an uncomfortable and awkward situation where the crowds were clearly displeased with him. His ministry was a time of life on the road without a place to call home. Perhaps he found solace in Psalm 90, one of the mainstays of our people for thousands of years: "Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations."

Our true home is never a place - it is always our relationship with God.

## July 28, 2008 – Water Sprinklers in the Evening



We haven't joined the ranks of homeowners who have installed automatic sprinkler systems in their yards. There is a good case to be made for sprinkler systems. They are efficient in the use of water so there is less waste. They can be set to water during the night or in the early morning when water consumption is low around the neighborhood. They can be set to work when the homeowner is away. We haven't got anything against automatic sprinklers. We just haven't installed them. It would be a big job with our rocky soil and large lawn. And it is easy to put off that job for another year.

This year has been a good year for those of us who do not have automatic systems. For the most part the rain has provided the water we need. We've supplemented the rain a bit by watering our flowers and vegetables. But summer is upon us and the days are getting hot. We'll be using a bit more water in the next month or so to keep things green.

There is something a bit nostalgic for me to sit on the porch and watch the sprinklers in the evening. It reminds me of summers past. Watering the yard by hauling around hoses and setting sprinklers requires one to be home. The busy lifestyle of meetings and activities and hardly ever being at home argues in favor of automatic systems that take care of the yard when one is away. And we often get caught up in such a hectic lifestyle. We love to travel and the life of the church can take us away from home at almost any hour of the day or night.

But we enjoy being at home and treasure the opportunities to just sit and watch the sprinklers. When your life is full of meaningful relationships, sometimes just sitting on

the porch is entertainment enough. I'm sure that there was a time, not too long ago, when I would have been bored to tears with the inaction of an evening at home watching the sprinklers go back and forth. But I've mellowed with age and while I still enjoy lots of other activities, sometimes it is a real treat to be able to just sit for a while.

We are treated to delightful evenings in the hills. Things cool off and people begin to turn off their air conditioners, open their windows and enjoy the freshness of the breeze. Porches and decks become almost like additional rooms in the house with a few chairs and a table. The light lasts into the evening so that one can read until past 8 p.m. without natural light. The trees are always generous with their shade and the harshness of the midday heat fades. Plants seem to perk up with the evening cool.

And it is a good time to water. There is less evaporation and the water can soak into the soil overnight where it does the most good for the plants. Moving the sprinkler from place to place is a small job and gives a few minutes for whatever I have been reading to sink in. If I happen to have a few chores such as mowing or weeding, evening is a good time to get after them when it is cool.

Our lives are busy and hectic and we are often reluctant to slow down and enjoy this world. There is a cycle of poverty of time that can make one feel guilty if one is not being productive during every waking hour. Many of the most important things in life, however, require time. Relationships, creativity, intellectual and academic growth, faith and understanding - all of these require unstructured time in order to flourish. Sometimes we get our lives so filled with activities that we can't find enough thinking time to envision another way of living. We just go from even to event and activity to activity feeling tired and hassled and cannot imagine which events and activities might be skipped to allow room to sit and think.

So I am grateful for summer evenings and for the chore of moving the hoses and setting the sprinklers. We don't do it every evening. There is still time for adventures and work and meetings and other activities. But from time to time the gift of a calm evening watching the water sprinklers is a real treat.

I have the feeling that one of the benefits of the high cost of gasoline is that we will all think twice before leaving and spend a bit more time at home. I confess that I haven't noticed much effect on my lifestyle yet, but driving less and staying home more is not all bad. We might get to know our neighbors better. We might take a few more walks and improve our health. We might take time to sit on the porch and read a book even when we are not on vacation.

I bet even the folks who have automatic sprinkler systems occasionally sit and watch them going back and forth and let their minds wander. I hope so.

## July 29, 2008 – Stretching the Day



We were up late last night. There was a plane to meet with the youth and adults who had been attending the National Youth Event returning home. They looked tired as they finally arrived after a delay due to weather. They had met at the airport for their trip at 5:30 a.m. the day they departed. Last night they returned a little after 11 p.m. Many of the days of their adventure had been longer than usual, filled with adventures and activities. Most of them will get a good night's sleep and even sleep in this morning. Some of the adults have to get up and go to work as usual, having taking vacation days to share the event with the youth. They'll catch up on sleep when they can.

Researchers tell us that most Americans suffer from a sleep debt. That is that they are short enough on sleep that they need additional sleep for optimal health and performance. We are proud of our ability to forego sleep and we like to stretch our days to cram in as many activities and events as possible. The average person needs about eight hours of sleep out of every twenty-four. This allows them to wake refreshed and to go through their daily activities without feeling overly tired or falling asleep during the day. Sleep researchers have repeated their experiments many times and it always comes up around eight hours as the average.

But some of the people who have the most critical jobs in our society routinely live with less sleep. The very doctors who conduct the surveys are among those who do average less than eight hours of sleep. Working with less sleep is designed into the training of a physician and most believe that they are exceptions to the research and can get buy

with less sleep. There are even a few studies that illustrate the fallacy of this thinking and demonstrate that many physicians are not performing to the peak of their ability for a simple lack of sleep. Similar studies have revealed sleep deficits in law enforcement officers, public transportation operators others whose jobs are critical to our society.

We all want to believe that we are the exception - that we possess some kind of powers that allow us to operate with less sleep. Most of us who routinely sleep fewer hours find ways to make up the sleep deficit by sleeping additional hours on weekends or on other days off. A few of us have learned how to gain sleep by napping during the day. One study found that it is not at all uncommon for to sleep six and a half hours a night during the work week, losing an hour and a half per night. After five nights in a row, they've lost an entire night's sleep. They then "crash" over the weekend, sleeping late into the day to make up the deficit and return to the short sleep pattern during the week. In most cases, weekend activities prevent making up all of the lost sleep so the work week starts with a deficit and the pattern already involves missing a night's sleep per week.

Studies involving long-term sleep deprivation show that people can adjust and survive with less sleep, but there are costs in terms of long-term health and overall job performance. Sleeping less and working more is an illusion. It can be accomplished in the short term, but over the long term, the lack of sleep is matched with decreases in job performance, so the total output is less for those who sleep less and work longer than for those who get adequate sleep and are fully present for a normal work day.

It is a hard lesson for someone with my personality to learn. Although I can read the statistics and the research, I am continually convincing myself that adding a few hours to my day and skimping on sleep will work for me. Raised with a strong work ethic, I approach almost every problem in life by working harder. I've been proud of the fact that I put in more hours than my colleagues. The truth is that I may not be accomplishing more than my colleagues - more importantly I may not be accomplishing as much as I am capable of doing, were I more attentive to getting adequate sleep.

There is an old familiar hymn, often sung at funerals, "Beyond the Sunset." It speaks of a glorious dawn after the toil of life is ended. The lyrics, by Virgil Brock, envision a life without storms where each is welcomed into the presence of the Creator and a grand reunion with loved ones takes place. It points to a time beyond time when the normal cycle of hours and minutes falls away to another way of being.

We do not control the time beyond the sunset. That is in God's hands. And stretching our days and going without sleep is based in an attempt to stay in control. The quality time that is beyond the sunset requires that we relinquish control.

So this morning's blog is a lesson to myself. I need to back off and allow myself to sleep a bit more. But that'll have to wait for another day. I've got too many things to do today. I guess I'm not ready to relinquish that much control right now. But I admit that I, like

many others, am operating with a bit of a sleep deficit. And that debt, like other debts, will need to be repaid.

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## July 30, 2008 – Children in Poverty



I grew up thinking that poverty was a problem that occurred in far away places. Our family did not live an extravagant lifestyle, but we always had enough food and there was work for anyone who wanted to work. We learned, through the church, and through the lessons our parents taught us, that we had a responsibility to help others who lived in less fortunate circumstances. We spoke of urban poverty and hosted “friendly town” guests from Chicago. We talked about areas of the world that were in need of development to bring clean water and food to people who lived in far away places and were experiencing starvation. I remember reading about rural poverty in Appalachia. My thinking was always that poverty was a problem that affected someone else in some distant place.

We knew stories of the Great Depression. Our parents had come into their teenage years during the depression and the hard times had shaped the adults that they had become. We knew that there was a time when there was scarcity. But we also knew that somehow our families had survived. By the time we came along, depression stories were more about courage and self-sufficiency than they were about the culture of poverty.

So it has come as a surprise to me, in my middle years, to learn that children are more likely to live in poverty in my home state and my adopted state than anywhere else in the nation. Montana and South Dakota lead the nation in child poverty. South Dakota has nine of the top 100 poorest counties in the United States, including three counties in the top 10. Ziebach County leads the nation in child poverty. Todd County is number 5.

Corson County is number 7. So much for the perception that poverty is a problem that occurs in far away places.

And the problem is not getting smaller. Ziebach County, the place where a child is most likely to live in poverty, has a growth rate of 7.4% - over twice that of our state (3.6%). The growth is not due to people moving in to the county for the jobs. The growth is almost totally due to increased birth rates. The place where children are most likely to grow up in poverty is having more and more children.

Most of the people in Ziebach County live in rural and isolated locations. There are only four retail businesses in the county. There is only one grocery store. Most people who live in the county travel for all goods and services. Those who live in Bridger, Cherry Creek or Red Scaffold drive for every needed service. Over eighty miles to Pierre. The nearest health care facility is a toss up - about 45 miles to Philip or a similar distance to Eagle Butte. Faith, in Meade County also has businesses and stores. For the people in Ziebach County, a raise in the cost of gasoline is an immediate raise in the cost of food.

And we are not good at ending poverty. We often do not know how to help. There are some projects, such as our firewood project, that are building relationships and providing direct assistance. Federal programs provide basic nutrition support. Hunger and starvation are not common. There is a culture of sharing and supporting others which helps. There are child nutrition and early childhood education programs in place which address basic and much-needed services for children.

The statistics, of course, do not tell the entire story. Because of the small population, small changes can have dramatic effects and the change in the status of a few families can shift the statistics significantly. But it will take more than a few small changes to change the fact that over 70% of all children in Ziebach County live below the poverty line and the number of children is increasing.

The statistics are an invitation to us to reach out to our neighbors. While we continue to have connections and important mission projects in far-away places, we need to strengthen relationships and build connections to neighbors who are much closer to home.

We know we will not change the statistics over night. We know that some of our work will be frustrating and that we won't always be as effective as we wish. But we also know that we can help. We know that our gospel is clear about how we should treat our neighbors.

We read the story of Jesus' feeding the 5,000 with a few fishes and a few loaves of bread. We marvel at the miracle and say that it is a source of our faith. Ziebach county is just a little over half that number - 2,706 people according to the latest census

information available. There are about 900 children in Ziebach County. We don't need the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000. Half a miracle is enough.

We'll be working and trusting in the miracles that will unfold.

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## July 31, 2008 – Care and Isolation



We have been regular visitors in nursing homes for decades. As pastors, we have had members of our congregations who live in nursing homes and we visit them. We also hold regular worship services in nursing homes. And now our lives have entered a phase when a close family member has been treated in a skilled nursing facility and has made a move to assisted living.

In Rapid City there are several different levels of care available. This is due in part to the increasing population of seniors in need of care in a state that has an absolute and permanent ban on the construction of new nursing homes set in state law. There are only 511 nursing home beds in our city despite a 5% per year population growth. It would take the repeal of a law by the state legislature in order to provide more nursing home beds. The increasing demand has the effect of driving up the cost and luxury of individual nursing home beds and it also means that many elders receive nursing services in assisted living facilities or through home health care.

The federal government, through medicare, provides financial support for specific health care services for seniors, but the system acts as if these services are delivered through an institutional setting. For example, order for medicare to pay for physical therapy, the recipient of the therapy must be home bound. That means that those seniors who receive assistance from medicare for physical therapy cannot leave their home or institutional setting except for medical appointments and to attend church. No visits to family, no trips to the cafe, no outings of any kind. This rule creates an additional need for full-time institutional care, because families who recently had been able to care for

an elder in their home are no longer able to do so when that elder cannot go to day services or a senior citizens' center or have an occasional meal in a restaurant.

In our city, assisted living facilities serve as the transitional institutional setting. In the eyes of the state they are not nursing homes so they are exempt from the ban on new nursing home beds. In the eyes of Medicare they qualify for total institutionalization as long as they keep the residents from leaving the facility. From the perspective of the residents they operate as places with different rules for different people. The freedom to come and go of the residents is dependent upon which services are paid by Medicare. Some are able to come and go as they please, others cannot leave the facility.

For families, the maze of regulations and rules seems like a sudden suspension of basic human rights. The only way to receive the needed services is to give up normal family functions such as having a meal together in a private home. A senior who has been independent for the entire lives of other family members suddenly is confined to their residence as if they were incarcerated. It's like receiving a sentence of house arrest without having committed any crime.

This summer we have watched as youth groups from out of town come to the nursing home to visit as a part of their summer mission trips. The nursing homes are grateful for the intergenerational contacts. Some residents do not often receive visits from children. The normal process of people from different generations having regular contact is much more difficult in an institutional setting than in a private home. So visiting elders has become a "mission." And stranger visits are a matter of "public service" for teens as a special event, not as a part of an on-going lifestyle. The visiting youth groups leave feeling good from the benefit of having shared time and space with seniors. The seniors genuinely enjoy the visits. But that contact falls far short of what our society needs. The increasing isolation of seniors is not just a matter of family care choices, it is built into the system of paying for the care they need. And youth begin to think that isolation and loneliness are necessary components of aging instead of the result of policy decisions made by our elected representatives.

Families who are caught up in the system seldom have time or energy to work for large scale policy changes. They need to become advocates for their particular senior and learn to work the system to obtain the highest level of care possible for their family member. Mountains of paperwork and bureaucratic red tape surround them as they learn to work the system. Out of control cost increases overwhelm families. Fighting the system and working to make meaningful changes takes so much time and energy that people give up.

One of the sources of hope is increasing public awareness and participation. Care is not primarily the province of institutions or of the people employed by those institutions. Every one of us has an obligation of care for others. Increasing visits to nursing homes

and assisted living facilities results in decreased isolation and increased awareness of the issues.

I visit in nursing homes in part because the congregation expects such of their pastor - they pay me to be a link to the institution and its residents. Our society needs more and more people who visit simply to pursue relationships with those who live in institutional settings. Taking a worship service to a nursing home is an incomplete task. When we cannot bring a person to our church, we need to bring the congregation to the person. We will know we have made progress when seeing a child in a nursing home is an every day occurrence instead of the summer trip for the out-of-town youth group.

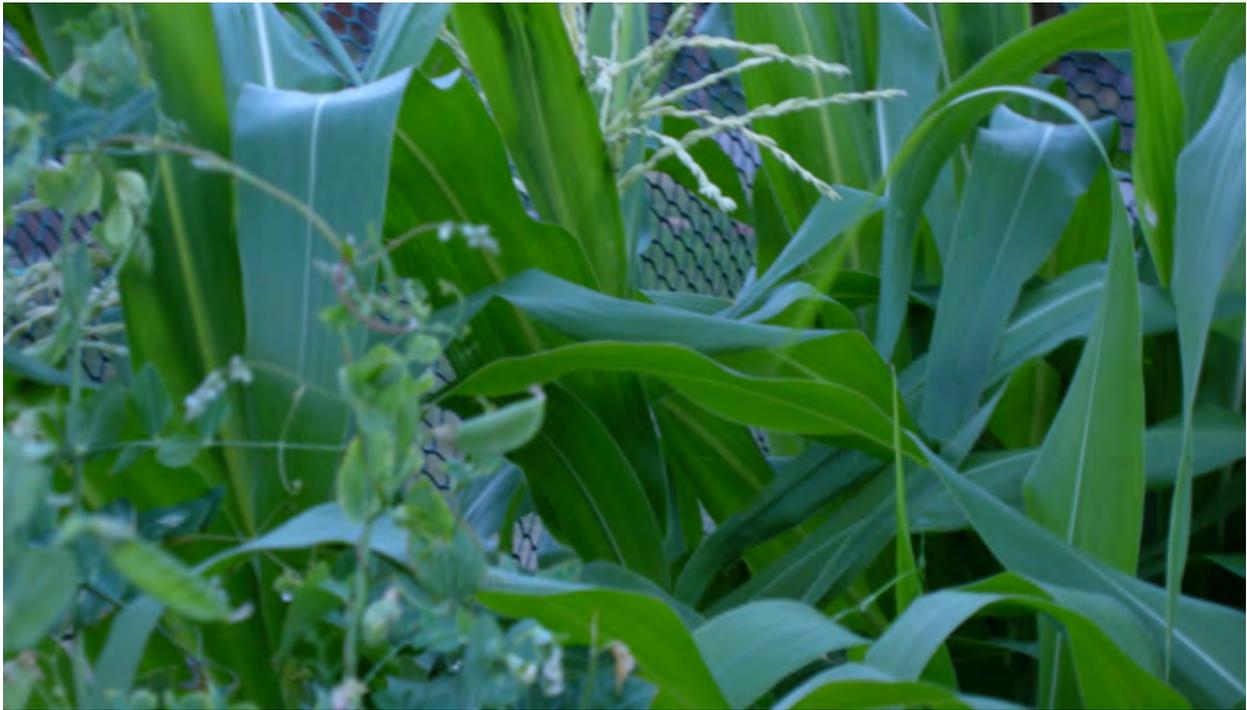
Isolation does not have to be our expected standard for senior care. It is not inevitable. But a badly broken health care system is not going to provide the solution. We will provide the solution by making visits and care a part of our daily lives.

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## August 1, 2008 – Green Therapist



My “to do” list for today is long. It is Friday, we need to get the worship bulletins done. I have a paper and a PowerPoint presentation due for a class I am taking. I have to book airline tickets for fall meetings in Cleveland. We made scholarship choices for the nursing and liberal arts scholarships yesterday. That means 55 letters to write - five with good news and 50 with the news that we do not have enough funding to award scholarships to all applicants. I have an appointment to have a conversation with a friend of the church who may be considering becoming a member. And it is the first day of a new month so there are reports to be completed, bills to be submitted and other paperwork waiting at the office.

And I slept in later than usual this morning.

There is nothing particularly newsworthy or even interesting about my list of tasks, lots of people will be heading out for busy days of work.

But I have found another way to address the stress of a busy life this year. Most years I have a boat that I am building and during the summer I try to get to the lake as often as possible to paddle. But I am not working on a boat this year and the high price of gas and increasing family obligations have made my trips to the lake less frequent. But there is a green therapist right in my back yard - my garden. In comparison to hiring a human counselor, the price is very inexpensive, too.

This is an unusual year for gardens. The corn is taller than I am and is beginning to tassel. But we are still picking peas. The zucchini harvest has begun - there are another six or so ready to pick, but the first tomatoes are just starting to turn color. We're going to have a good second cutting on the lettuce, so there are plenty of salads coming in the next month.

This isn't the first garden I've planted. I've probably become more attentive to my garden in recent years, but we've always enjoyed growing a few things to eat. I think that what has made the garden more therapeutic for me is that I can take time for the garden in small doses. When I head to the lake with a canoe or kayak, I like to have more than two hours of free time. The garden will bless me when I only have ten minutes. Even just walking out to set the sprinkler gives me a sense of calm and a bit of pleasure. This is the season of light duty in the garden. The desired plants are all bigger than the weeds now and weeding is less strenuous. Our garden is small enough that harvesting is light and fun duty. We haven't gotten into a lot of canning and preserving. We mostly eat the food as it comes on. And we have made it to the first of August without an excessive need for watering. The rains have been generous this year.

The garden is a living system. It grows and changes each day. This time of year there are a few things to pick each day and a few items that I like to check to see how they are doing. It is alive, but it is very subtle in its demands. If I fail to water properly, a few leaves turn brown or the plants start to droop. If I neglect weeding, there are no complaints from any of the plants. If I don't get a job done today, the garden will wait until tomorrow. And for a guy who makes his living sitting in an office or visiting in the homes of others, the particular combination of dirt and sweat is a pleasant change of pace from air conditioning and florescent lighting. And in a time of economic distress for many, a garden is an inexpensive hobby indeed. No gas to buy, no driving, just a few seeds and a little water.

I have had several conversations with colleagues in the past couple of months about stress and the need for pastors to find appropriate support systems and coping mechanisms to deal with the problems and pressures of life and work. I suppose that there are stresses that are unique to our vocation, but it is not somehow more stressful than other occupations. Police officers, physicians, nurses, funeral home directors, fire fighters and many other people in our community have jobs that can be stressful and overwhelming. They see human emotion at its worst at times. Those involved in retail sales are working very long hours, especially with the motorcycle rally coming.

Addressing stress, however, doesn't always have to involve expensive and elaborate systems. Plant a garden, adopt a pet, make your family as important a priority as your work. Make space in each day for intentional scripture reading and quiet prayer. Forget about making requests to God - God already knows what you need. Focus on listening to God.

I am not opposed to counselors and support groups. They provide essential and much-needed services.

But I am gaining great therapeutic value from a daily appointment with a vegetable garden. And I am grateful for the gifts of the earth. They sustain more than my body. They nurture my spirit as well. Thanks be to God.

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## August 2, 2008 – Iron Horse



Clarence Ricketts was born in 1892. It was a time that was different from ours. People lived closer to the land. In the United States the majority of working people were engaged in some form of agriculture. It was a time before indoor plumbing, electric lights in homes, and motor vehicles. Most children's toys were home made. Very few of the items in any household came from factories or mass production facilities of any kind.

Somehow, just when we do not know, Clarence became the owner of a toy horse. It was made out of cast iron. Just lifting the heavy item tells one that it is different from the toys children play with today. If a child were to drop that horse on her or his foot, it could cause substantial injury. There are holes in the horse as if it one time had harnesses attached. Perhaps it pulled a wagon at one time. We don't know much of the horse's story.

What we do know is that somehow Clarence kept the horse long enough to one day give it to his son, Keith, who was born in 1920, after Clarence completed a tour of duty driving ambulance for the U.S. Army during WWI. And we know that the toy horse was treasured enough by Keith that he kept it. He still has it. It is one of a very few possessions that made the move from North Dakota to Montana, another move from Libby to Billings in Montana, a cross-town move in Billings, a move from Montana to South Dakota, and a move from an apartment to Keith's current residence. Not very many items have been with him for all of the stages of the eighty-eight years of his life's journey.

If the horse had a memory and the ability to talk, it would be able to tell some wondrous stories of its adventures. It's been played with by at least four generations of children, packed away into drawers and boxes, displayed on dressers and tables, taken to at least one antique show, and admired by visitors.

It has become a symbol of our connection with the past. It reminds us of a day when horses were the primary means of overland travel - when getting from one place to another meant a relationship with a living creature that needed food and water and attention. It reminds us of the generations of our family and the lives they lived in different times and different places. It reminds us that we remain connected to those other times and other places that we know more from the telling of stories than from our own personal experience.

Sometimes, when we talk about the horse, we note that by now it has become a genuine antique. We've even speculated about its value, thinking of the television program "Antiques Roadshow," where people have their treasures appraised. Some items surprise their owners with their value, others have little value if placed for sale. An appraiser's valuation of the iron horse would have little meaning for us, because we have no intention of selling it. The emotional and sentimental value exceeds any amount of money that might be offered.

For us the horse is a way to remember Clarence and the stories he told us of his life. It is a way to remember Keith as a little boy, something that we never experienced and know only from the stories. It is a way to note the passage time and the fact that we occupy only a small portion of the story of our family. It is a bridge between the past and the future of our family. One day it will become the possession of a person who had never met Clarence face-to-face. One day it will become the possession of a person who knows of us only through the stories of the past.

We belong to a people with a past and a future. Ours is not the only generation. While our time on earth seems to us to be momentous, these are not the only significant days in the the story of our God and our people. And we work to remember the past in part because we believe in the future and in the connections between the two times. The stories of what has been are important to the unfolding story of what will be.

The horse, of course, is not the legacy of love in our family. It is just a symbol. Were we to somehow lose the horse, we would not lose the love. We would not lose the stories. We would not lose our history. But having the horse gives us a reason to tell the stories and an occasion to remember the past. It is a reminder of who we are and the places from which we have come. For more than a century the horse has stood silently witnessing the unfolding story of our family.

Our scriptures are a bit like the horse. We know that they do not contain God. We know that they are not the only way to experience and encounter the power of the Creator or

the promise of resurrection. But they contain the stories of our people. They remind us that we are not the first generation of faithfulness. We are not the first to have known grief and sorrow and sadness. We are not the first to have discovered faith and hope and love. We belong to a people whose story spans the generations and whose connection is with generations yet unborn. And the stories of our people are of incalculable worth to us. We cannot imagine life without them.

So we will pass them on to another generation. We know that they belong to our children and grandchildren even more than they belong to us. But in this generation, we will read those stories and treasure those stories and discover new meaning in them each time we pick up the book. And we carry them with us wherever we go. And they find a home in each dwelling that we occupy.

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## August 3, 2008 – Where There's Smoke



Photo of smoke hanging in Red Lodge, Montana by Patty Hooker. The fire is now within a mile of the crest of the mountain in the background.

The sunset had a lot of red in it last night. That is a sign that there is smoke in the air. We haven't been aware of the smoke, for the most part, the wind has kept it moving, and it is coming from a long way away. So far this year we have avoided major fires in the hills. And the Big Horns off to the west are also having a good summer. The smoke in the skies around here are from some of the large fires in Montana.

The Cascade fire exceeded 11,000 acres yesterday, burning in rugged terrain on the slopes above the west fork of Rock Creek west of Red Lodge, Montana. It appears to be a natural, lightning-caused fire. It has inundated the town with smoke and those with breathing problems have been urged to evacuate. It has burned to within a mile of the ski resort at the top of Red Lodge Mountain. When the fire crests the mountain, it will be visible from town and within six miles. As soon as the fire makes the crest, residents who live between the city and the ski resort will need to be evacuated because of the potential of the fire to spot a long distance from the front of the flames due to the lay of the land. Forecasters are calling for winds to 40 miles per hour today. It could be a very dramatic day on the fire lines and a dramatic day for Red Lodge today.

The fire is capable of spreading to the south as well, depending upon the winds and conditions. If it makes a run up the steep slopes on the other side of the creek, it could easily burn to the top of Beartooth pass. The fire holds the potential to close the road between Red Lodge and Yellowstone National Park, cutting off tourism, which is the life blood of the community.

The dramatic forest fires in the wilderness of Montana on the border of Yellowstone Park are due, in part, to the enormous buildup of fuels that is the result of decades of successful fire detection and suppression. The policy that was prevalent throughout the last half of the twentieth century was to fight every fire aggressively. I know the terrain where this fire is burning well, because it was a part of my father's area. For twenty-five years from the 1950's to the mid 1970's he flew fire patrol in that area. When I had the chance, which was relatively often in the summer, I flew along with him. We would get up early and be airborne at first light heading up the Boulder valley, crossing over to the Yellowstone and flying over the park before heading across the top and over the west fork. Sometimes we would take a run around Granite Peak, Montana's tallest. Sometimes we would land in Red Lodge and have breakfast with my grandparents. Usually he would let me take the controls when we were out of the mountains for the quick trip home. Always we were on the lookout for wisps of smoke.

Smoke meant immediate action and the fire might consume much of our attention for the next few days as we directed smokejumpers, ground crews and sometimes retardant bombers to the area.

My father was very good at what he did. He spotted the fires before they got big. And the resources that were available at the time were relatively quickly deployed. Most fires were extinguished within 24 to 48 hours.

The problem with such intense firefighting in the back country was that fire is a part of the natural cycle of the forest. Suppressing every fire resulted in enormous buildup of fuels. The summers of 1988 and 1989, nearly a decade after my father's death, demonstrated to us what could happen when fire got into the dense stands of timber. Fires that could not be controlled raged over Yellowstone National Park and the wilderness to the north of the park. Only the weather fully extinguished the raging infernos. Those fires disrupted the tourist season in Yellowstone Park. Roads were closed for unpredictable amounts of time. Businesses experienced losses in revenue.

The lesson was clear. We can't control every aspect of nature. There are times when we must yield to forces that are greater than we. And fire is one of those forces.

In 1988 and 1989 humans did not put out the fires. The weather finally did. Winter snows came and the fires slowed and finally were extinguished.

I have visited Yellowstone Park regularly since those years. The recovery has been remarkable. Contrary to what I expected, the fires did not destroy the park. New vistas were opened up - there were things I could see that I had never before seen. And the new growth in the midst of the fire snags was quick and dramatic. More trees survived the fires than I expected. Where there were once dense stands of trees that were all the

same age and size now there are mixed and varied stands of trees with some open space between them.

This summer's fire is approaching the kind of fire that raged in '88 and '89. It is burning in an area that has been remarkably free of fires in the last century. It will soon approach fire scars from some more recent and smaller fires and they will affect the mosaic of the fire's pattern. The terrain is on the side of the fire fighters in terms of saving the town of Red Lodge. The fire will slow going down hill and there is a large open area at the top of the bluff over Red Lodge that is wide enough for effective fire lines. The town itself sets tightly in the valley and can be defended.

But full containment of this fire will be provided by nature, not by humans. Over \$4,000,000 has already been spent in fire fighting and that number could double or triple depending on what the fire does. But no amount of money will control the fire in the remote wilderness on the edges of the fire.

There will be smoke plumes in the area until the snow flies this winter.

We sometimes have the illusion that we are in control of things. Our modern technology and advanced skills do give us certain powers. We can detect fires and we are getting pretty good at affecting the direction of fires. We can protect many, but not all buildings. But we cannot control the fires. Even when we were successful in stopping fires for an extended period of time, we were just participating in setting up the conditions for even bigger fires decades down the road.

The fires remind us of who we are and where our place in the world truly is. By accepting and respecting forces that are more powerful than we, we gain a corrected vision of how we fit into this complex world.

A little smoke in the air is a small inconvenience for us. It actually gives us beautiful sunsets. May it serve to remind us that there is much in this world that we do not control.

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## August 4, 2008 – Clouds



As long as I can remember, I have had a fascination with clouds. I love to look at them and watch their movement across the sky. I can remember childhood summers, lying on the grass and looking up at the clouds, imagining that their shapes represented creatures. When I was older I learned to study the clouds for information about what weather might be in store. I learned names: Cumulus, stratus, cirrus, nimbus. I compared the clouds in the sky with those on the cloud chart and learned the difference between fair weather cumulus and cumulonimbus. On summer afternoons, I would watch the clouds develop vertical dimension over the hills and know that thundershowers were coming.

Perhaps my fascination with clouds came from growing up in an aviation family in the days before the development of weather radar. Clouds were a big factor in a decision about whether to start a trip or to stay at home. We had access to weather maps and information through the flight service station, but those were based on physical observations, not on live doppler radar.

I had the delightful experience, at an early age and throughout my life, of looking at clouds from different perspectives. I've flown above the clouds many times and I know that on days when it is gray and cloudy and rainy on earth, it is bright and sunny above the clouds.

I don't think there is anything particularly unique about my fascination with clouds. Humans have been looking at clouds and have been fascinated by them for as long as

there have been humans. The dark underside of a boiling cumulonimbus cloud means that harsh weather is on its way. Rain and sometimes hail, strong winds and sometimes tornadoes are on their way when there is a large dark cloud just upwind. Conversely, there is something inviting about the white pillowy look of fair weather cumulous clouds. Higher and thinner clouds also seem to be to inspire imagination.

Images of heaven often involve clouds. Perhaps this is because of the tradition of burying bodies. If the body goes down, perhaps the soul goes up. At least we know that the body we bury is not alive - something has left it. The ancients thought of the difference between life and death primarily in terms of breathing. A creature that is breathing is alive, one that is not is dead. If the breath has left a living being, it must have gone out - and into the air. And the clouds are up in the air.

These people developed an image of a three-tiered universe. The world on which we live is the middle layer. In their image, there is an underworld - the place of the dead. And they imagined that there was something above the dome of the sky. It must be a source of water, because rain comes from above. It must be a source of light, because it contains the sun, moon, stars and planets. Concepts such as evaporation, condensation and convection had not yet been discovered. The result was that we began to talk of heaven as being a place and that place was somehow above us - up where the clouds are.

Artists painted pictures of angels lounging on clouds as if clouds could be a structure to support weight. Stories of heaven expanded in many different ways. Some clouds look vaguely like castles - perhaps there are castles in heaven. Heaven was imagined as a place that did not have the unpleasant sensations of this life. Pain and grief and hunger would be left behind when one goes to heaven.

Ideas are slow to change. There are many elements of the thoughts of the ancients that are a part of our ways of thinking today. Many of us no longer think of heaven in terms of a physical place, but when we imagine the reunion with those who have gone before or the sensation of meeting God face-to-face, the only tools we have to think about such concepts is the life that we have known. And so we imagine things in terms of time and space the way we experience them in this life.

The truth is that what lies ahead is beyond our ability to imagine. So we use the images and experiences of this life as reference points in our limited imagination. Clouds, with their incredible beauty become ways for us to imagine the unimaginable. We know that heaven is not the same as sitting on a cloud, but it might be a bit like that experience.

In the late afternoon and early evening yesterday the clouds were lit by the setting sun and had a golden color as they spread across the sky. I've watched clouds enough to know that these clouds were going to bring showers to places off to the east. They weren't particularly large thunderheads, but they had grown enough to offer a few

showers as they drifted across the prairies last evening. But from our point of view they were simply beautiful elements in the evening sky, giving a sense of texture and depth to the vista.

Clouds are like that. They remind us that the atmosphere around our planet is vast and that we share it with people on all parts of our globe. They remind us that beyond the clouds - beyond the atmosphere it self - is a vast universe with distances that are beyond our comprehension. Our limited vision reveals only a tiny fraction of the reality of this universe. Even with the best of our scientific instruments we can know this universe only in part.

I didn't go into the house and study the doppler radar last night. I didn't check the forecasts or weather patterns. I simply enjoyed the clouds for their beauty and the evening for its peacefulness.

There is a Joni Mitchell sings a song that imagines the varieties of clouds: "Rows and floes of angel hair and ice cream castles in the air. And feather canyons everywhere. I've looked at clouds that way. But now they only block the sun. They rain and snow on everyone. So many things I would have done, but clouds got in my way." The song goes on to speak of looking at clouds from both sides and conclude, "It's clouds illusions I recall. I really don't know clouds at all." It uses clouds as a metaphor for love and life.

Perhaps clouds have more than two sides. Perhaps clouds make a wonderful metaphor for life and for heaven and for life beyond death. Perhaps clouds are glorious and wondrous enough to be appreciated for what they are, without having to be anything more.

We are fortunate to live in a world with clouds. There are enough clouds to wonder and speculate and imagine and enjoy. And we know that there have been clouds blowing across the sky since long before there were any humans on this wondrous planet. And there will be clouds and humans to watch them long after our time on this earth has passed.

Keep looking up. It stirs our imaginations and inspires our faith.

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## August 5, 2008 – Remember and Renew



I grew up in Indian country. The 1851 Ft. Laramie treaty established about 35 million acres for the Absaarokee, or Crow people. In 1868, Crow country was reduced to about 8 million acres and the government agency was moved to Red Lodge. By about 1870 the Absaarokee were forced to live within the boundaries of the reservation. My home town of Big Timber is in the land that was no longer available to the Crow after 1870. The reservation was again downsized to about 2.5 million acres in 1905 and through a variety of land deals, about a third of the reservation is controlled by non-native owners and operators. I've known Native Americans all of my life, but there has been a distance caused by our history and the harsh realities of reservation life.

By the time I was growing up, there was another gap between native and non-native people in Montana - a gap in wealth. Native people lived in intense poverty, and we were, in comparison better off economically. We noticed the difference when we played Lodge Grass or Crow Agency in basketball. We noticed the difference when we ran into Crow people at rodeos and pow wows. I don't remember thinking about why there was such a gap and difference in our lifestyles, I was just aware that there were substantial differences.

Over the years, we have lived close to Indian country. In North Dakota, our church had a presence on the Standing Rock reservation and ministries among the United Tribes of Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, and Dakota. We had less contact during our Idaho days with the Shoshone and Bannock tribes off to the east and the Nez Pierce to the north. We

traveled to KahNeeTah in Oregon where we were warmly hosted by the Warm Springs people.

Coming back to the Dakotas was, for me, another opportunity to make connections with Native people. I had read a great deal about Lakota leaders. Red Cloud and Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull were figures whose stories I sought out.

But connections have been slow and deliberate. It takes time to build up trust. The formation of the Woodchuck Society was one positive step and we have been able to establish relationships in Eagle Butte and Wanblee.

During our Sabbatical in 2006, Susan and I were privileged to be welcomed into a week of learning circles at the Dr. Jesse Salteaux Resource Center, near Bossejour, Manitoba. The week was a wonderful opportunity for us to grow in appreciation for native wisdom and for native ways of teaching and learning.

Then this summer, the Wawoohola camp gave me and a couple of young men from our church another opportunity to look at life from a native perspective. Our week at Bridger, in the southwest corner of the Cheyenne River reservation was a time of learning about Lakota songs and games and culture. And we began to form friendships.

Last night we had the honor to hosting some of our friends from the Yankton reservation. Judith is flying out early this morning to the annual meeting of the United Church of Christ's Pacific Islander and Asian American Ministries. She will be leading a workshop on issues relating to land ownership. Her sister Judy and Judy's children Curtis and Ashley came along to drive Judith to the airport. Since it is rally week, there were almost no motel rooms available in Rapid City last night and the one they did find was very expensive. So they called me and we received the honor of hosting them in our home.

It was a bit of a scramble for us because we have been working to help Susan's father move into an assisted living suite. That has meant cleaning out his apartment and we have some of his furniture and other items stored in our house. So getting rooms prepared for four guests was a bit of a scramble. but our friends are accepting and we soon had a place for everyone to sleep comfortably. Take and bake pizza provided a supper and things worked out nicely.

Working out relationships with our sisters and brothers takes effort. Genuine two-way relationships take time and trust builds slowly, especially when there is a heritage of distrust. Last night and this morning's experience are another step in building a genuine two-way relationship. While we remember the past and acknowledge its injustices, renewal comes from the way we live with one another today. Life does not come with a "rewind" button. We cannot undo the past. What we can do is live honestly in the present and reach out to our sisters and brothers.

Little steps can be as important as big dramatic steps. We build the future one relationship at a time, one event at a time. Each meal shared, each time we open our hearts and our homes, is a gift of God. May we treasure these gifts.

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## August 6, 2008 – Bike Week



The motorcycles are going past our place in a steady stream these days. It is bike week in Sturgis and once again the hills are filled with motorcycle enthusiasts. The winding roads of the hills are inviting to those who love to ride and the annual gathering is impressive. The civic center and surrounding parking lots are filled with displays and every type of motorcycle imaginable. The parking lots of area motels, restaurants, and shops have more motorcycles than cars. It is not difficult to count four or five hundred motorcycles on a drive through town.

Locals are reporting that there are fewer motorcycles this year. Our country is in a mood of staying at home with the high prices of gasoline. I haven't seen the official numbers, and there probably won't be many of those available until after the week is finished, but even if the numbers are down, there are a lot of motorcycles in the area. Last year it was estimated that over 500,000 participated in the rally. That number is down from the record crowd at the 60th Anniversary Rally in 2000. Sometimes we will stand in the back yard and just watch the cycles go by. We live on a corner and most of the bikes are slowing down as they head toward town and accelerating as they head out of town.

While there are a lot of motorcycles, I don't think I'm seeing as many wild costumes as some years. I haven't noticed the longhorn steer horns or the guy wearing a gorilla costume. Perhaps I just haven't been in the right places. I'm not much for the outdoor concerts and other events. For those who love motorcycles and love crowds, there are still plenty of places to gather and lots of concerts and music events to fill up the evenings.

I have noticed a trend of increasing use of helmets. I'm in favor of anything that increases safety for riders. While I have heard the appeal of the freedom that cycles offer, I am also aware that each year there are tragic accidents and anything that increases safety seems like a good idea to me. We've already had this year's first fatalities and the hospital census is going up as the week goes on. The ambulances and life flight helicopter are getting a workout this week. I suppose it is too much to ask, but I'd love it if we had a week when all the motorcycles came and everyone got home safely without injuries.

I'm always intrigued by the businesses that are present for the rally. As many as 800 vendors set up temporary displays and shops. Temporary vendors do about \$12 million in business each year according to sales tax collections. Some businesses are just what I would expect: t-shirt shops, custom motorcycle parts and accessories, motorcycle-themed souvenirs, and leather clothing. Others are a bit of a surprise. Sturgis Rally Weddings is one of a half dozen officiants who specialize in weddings during the week. The web site lists costs of \$300 to \$450, not including a place, photographer, dress, reception, flowers or any extras. I suspect that the prices are similar to motel rooms: about two to three times higher than the costs at other times of the year. One thing is for certain, couples don't have to spend a lot of time or money for pre-marriage counseling. The courthouse issues about 75 - 100 more marriage licenses during the rally. And of course the tattoo artists do a big business during bike week.

Some churches really get into the week, hosting visiting motorcycle clubs, serving meals as fund-raising events. There are even a few evangelistic crusades. One area church has a bus out front with "Seizing Sturgis for Jesus" painted in the windows. I don't know if it refers to the city or the event, and it is unclear whether their siege will be a long-term event or something that is over in a week. I'm not familiar with the use of military tactics for spreading the peace of Christ.

At our church, we're having a rummage sale this week. Its not that we have anything against motorcycles. We have a lot of members who ride and we treasure every one of them. And we love to welcome visitors and those riding motorcycles get a warm reception just like others. Several of our members are involved in rally businesses and others open their homes to guests during the event. But our church has long been more interested in long-term relationships than sort term events, and we're not much for riding every wave of popular culture.

Still it is impossible to ignore the motorcycles. And doing so would be dangerous indeed. I have a feeling that our children are better drivers because they learned to drive in a place where there are lots of motorcycles. They were taught to look carefully and then look again before making a turn or changing lanes. We all try to drive with a heightened awareness to vehicles that are smaller and quicker than our own. And sometimes we just park the cars and watch the motorcycles go by. And last night I

discovered how hard it is to photograph them when they are moving. I never did get a picture with more than one that was in focus.

No, it isn't just another week around here. It's bike week. And it is an opportunity for us to show our hospitality to our guests and welcome visitors to the beauty of the Black Hills. And if some of us will be happy when the week is over, it doesn't mean that we have to be miserable when it is going on. It is a fascinating phenomenon and an chance to meet some very interesting people. And there is only one "world's largest motorcycle rally."

So ride carefully out there. We really do want this week to be a safe one. Perhaps this is the year we could set the record for the fewest number of emergency room visits. That's a record worth going after.

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## August 7, 2008 – Sharing Produce



In my imagination, I am reasonable gardener. Here is my fantasy: someday our garden will be producing lots of tomatoes and sweet corn just as we are ready to go on vacation, and we harvest boxes and baskets of lush, fresh tomatoes and ears of corn to take as gifts to family and friends as we travel. Here is the reality: one tomato may ripen before we leave on vacation next week and, if we're lucky, the corn will wait until our return. The tomatoes are small and not ripening very well. The cold weather when we first set out the plants seems to have stunted the entire plants.

Of course there is plenty of zucchini. We're harvesting two or three every day now. And we'll take some of it to share with our family. Odds are they all have plenty of their own zucchini. It is not that I dislike these small summer squash. The smaller ones are great breaded and pan fried. They also are good as a part of stir fry. And larger ones can be grated for zucchini bread and zucchini soup. Over the years we have collected quite a few delicious recipes. There is nothing wrong with growing an abundant harvest of zucchini. It is just that it is so easy to do that everyone else produces a similar bumper crop.

In England, they call the plant courgette. Perhaps if we started to refer to them with the more exotic British name they would seem more rare or special. But that is unlikely and I doubt of the name change would fool anyone. Most summer squash have their origins in the Americas and were introduced to Europe during the time of colonization of this continent in the late 16th century. Zucchini is a summer squash that made the trip across the Atlantic from east to west. Originally a European plant, zucchini was

introduced to the Americas at a much later date, probably in the early twentieth century, by Italian immigrants. It is now grown in every state in the U.S. where it thrives.

Zucchini need insects for pollination. I think that bees do the work for us. The flowers are large and yellow and I've seen bees zooming in and out of them. The flowers themselves are considered a delicacy by some and are picked and eaten. They can be lightly breaded and deep fried like tempura or stuffed and baked for a fancy and showy dish. Some people also use them in soups.

The trick with the zucchini squash is to pick them quickly. When they are under eight or ten inches they are tender and the seeds are quite edible. Leave them on the vine and they will grow to great size - some approach three feet. But the insides will be stringy and the seeds will become like pumpkin seeds. I suppose those seeds could be roasted and salted like pumpkin seeds, but we've found we enjoy the zucchini best when we harvest before the squash get too big.

Sharing produce is as old as the process of gardening itself. The earth returns a rich bounty and the crops come on in a burst of productivity. We don't grow enough food for year round consumption in our garden and we usually don't invest much time in preserving our produce. Canning is hard work and takes time and so we generally try to share as much of our produce as possible and freeze and dry a bit of it for later use. So it is good to have family and friends who don't garden so that we can share.

Usually, however, when we have zucchini to share, so do a lot of other people. The joke around here is that people generally don't lock their cars, except during zucchini season when a failure to lock one's car might result in bags of extra squash left in the car by strangers. That, of course, is an exaggeration, but it isn't hard to get fresh zucchini in season around here.

We've planned a vacation starting next week. We'll head to my brother's place and visit relatives on the homestead of my mother's side of the family. Then we're planning to head to Washington to visit our son and daughter-in-law. We'll be taking zucchini to share - whether or not they have an abundant supply. If this is a typical trip for us we'll consume more food from our hosts than we will bring as guests.

Someday I'm going to get that vacation to coincide with the harvest of our garden and I'll arrive with fresh tomatoes and sweet corn ready for eating. At least I can dream - it helps with the motivation to plant an even larger garden next year. Now if I can resist the temptation to add another hill of zucchini . . .

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## August 8, 2008 – Another Sturgis



I made it to Sturgis yesterday. I knew that the traffic would be heavy, so I left Rapid City at about 7:30 a.m. I couldn't go too early because of visiting hours at the Veterans Administration Medical Center. I wanted to be as early as possible because of traffic. The annual motorcycle rally is quite a phenomenon. But most of the participants in the rally don't stop to think that there are many faces to Sturgis.

Fort Meade is one of the other faces of Sturgis. Fort Meade was established during the winter of 1878-79, the same year that our congregation was established in the Black Hills. It was initially home to the 1st and 11th infantry and the reorganized 7th Cavalry. The mission of the post was to provide military protection for gold seekers and settlers who had invaded the Black Hills.

It is no mistake that Fort Meade was established within clear sight of Paha Mato, Bear Butte, a center of ceremony for Lakota, Cheyenne, and other plains tribes. It is reported that General Phil Sheridan, famed Civil War general, selected the site and personally directed where the parade ground and buildings would be constructed.

Fort Meade served as an active base for the U.S. Army until the end of World War II. In 1944, the primary mission of the facility became the active Veterans Administration hospital and nursing home. That hospital and nursing home continue to serve veterans with outpatient and pharmacy services as well as complete hospital, mental health, and nursing home services.

The residential nursing home is tucked away on the back side of the Hospital facility. Most of its residents are unaware of the heavy motorcycle traffic on the road outside of the area. They don't know that the state highway department has to install a temporary traffic signal at the entrance to Fort Meade each year so that visitors to the hospital can safely get on and off of the busy street and the constant flow of motorcycles from the city of Sturgis to venues such as the Buffalo Chip Campground that are adjacent to Fort Meade.

And the bikers, for the most part, are oblivious to the human drama that plays out every day in the hospital and nursing home.

My visit yesterday was with a Korean War era veteran who has had a struggle finding a place to live and a purpose for his life after experiencing many different losses in the last decade. I've been witness to many dramatic turns in his life-journey. I was with him for the funerals of his parents and of his brother. There have been multiple changes in residence in recent years. The time came for him to sell the family home where he grew up and that his parents had owned since the days when his father was a prominent downtown merchant. His stay at an assisted living facility out paced his income and exhausted his savings. Options became more limited as his health deteriorated. He doesn't know if Fort Meade will become his home or if it is just another temporary residence on his life's journey. He feels isolated, cut off, and out of touch. Sometimes he wonders why he keeps on living.

Unlike the motorcycle rally participants, he won't be picking out a t-shirt to commemorate his visit to Sturgis during the summer of 2008.

The nursing home at the Veterans Administration Hospital at Fort Meade is not an easy place to visit. Family members come whenever they can and there is a dedicated group of volunteers who provide a wide range of services, including companionship, to the veterans who live there. But for many, life in the nursing home is a lonely existence. It is a clean, well-maintained facility. But the architecture reflects the philosophy of care of the 1950's when most of the facilities were constructed. Long echo-filled hallways of polished tile and muted colors connect rooms that often have the doors closed. Heavy fire doors close with a clang that is impossible to ignore. Residents have semi-private rooms with shared bathrooms. There are no luxury suites and no visits from professional decorators who create environments.

It was hard to say good bye. I knew that there were other tasks waiting and that the traffic would be picking up for the drive home. I knew that I couldn't solve the problems that confronted the man I was visiting. I was there to share communion and a few prayers, to remind him of the love of his church and to speak of faith. I will be visiting him again, I am sure. Still it was hard to say good bye. I was stepping out of his world of loneliness into the wild and sometimes crazy world of the world's largest motorcycle rally.

Emotionally, the two worlds couldn't be farther apart.

So my prayer is for those who proudly display "support our troops" banners and bumper stickers. Please, folks, understand the size of the commitment that is required. Long after the current war has ended, long after the conflict has been relegated to the history books, long after the bumper stickers have faded and the cars have been replaced, four and five decades from now, the individuals who are currently serving will carry with them the effects of this war. "Support our troops" must become far more than the sentiment of the day - it must be a lifetime commitment. Most of the troops currently serving are younger than I. Many will live longer than I. I won't be there to visit them in the nursing home when they are ready to tell their stories and seek to integrate the experiences of their lives. A whole new generation, many of whom are yet unborn, will need to be engaged in providing the care. Nothing short of the commitment of the entire country will be required.

The care of veterans should not be the subject of politics. It should be a sacred obligation of an entire nation.

As I drove down the road amidst the motorcycles, I saw lots of flags and other emblems. May those who proudly display those emblems never forget the people whose lives have been invested in service.

My dream is that someday I would walk out of the veteran's administration hospital during the rally and discover that the parking lot is filled with the motorcycles of those who are taking time out of their rally to visit. A salute to veterans could be more than a stage event and an evening's entertainment at the world's largest biker bar. It could be real people visiting with real people. Yesterday wasn't the day, but I haven't lost my dream.

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## August 9, 2008 – Adventure



From time to time we get out the old photograph albums around here. Lately I've been enjoying pictures of my parents from the period just before I was born. I suppose it is natural to wonder about one's origins. "What was it that attracted them to each other in the first place?" But more interesting to me in these pictures are clues to the future that I can see. There are qualities that my parents possessed that I can see in my children. In the picture above my parents are just a couple of years older than our son and daughter-in-law are today. Most of the pictures from that phase of their lives have airplanes in them. My father's love of airplanes was so contagious that my mother became a pilot too. In time, he taught me how to fly as well.

In those days anyone who was a pilot was considered to be a wild adventurer. A woman who became a pilot was seen as exceptional. Of course he knew she was exceptional before she became a pilot.

Their backgrounds weren't all that similar. She was the daughter of a small town attorney and state legislator. He came from a North Dakota dry land farming family. Her family was all girls, his was mostly boys. They might never have met if she hadn't taken a break from her nursing studies to attend a play put on in Losekamp Hall on the campus of Billings Polytechnic Institute. I've never gotten the whole story, but apparently he was more interested in making paper airplanes than the play that was being produced.

Looking through the old photo albums, one can't escape the sense of adventure that they shared. Together they traveled far from the places of their births and shared experiences that neither of them might have imagined had they not found each other. Together they found enough adventures to plant the love of adventure in their children and all of us love the opportunity to head off in an unknown direction and experience some aspect of life that we have never before known.

Sometimes I can see that love of adventure in our children. They both love to travel. They both participated in exchange travel to Japan while in high school. We've been fortunate to travel to Australia and Costa Rica as a family and our daughter will be headed to Mexico in a little over a month.

My father, who was a successful businessman told me on more than one occasion, "Experience is a good investment." When he said that he was talking about the value of investing resources in gaining new experiences - doing things that you have never before done - going places that you have never before gone. And my how he loved to travel.

I can remember spreading maps out across the kitchen table and drawing lines on them with the yardstick. The atlas and globe were among the most well-used items in our home. Together we planned a lot of trips that were never taken.

But a lot of trips were taken. Before I was a teenager we had flown in our own airplane to Chicago and Washington DC, Salt Lake City, Seattle and San Francisco. Even our family dog had been up in the airplane, though the dog never developed the love of flying like some of the rest of us.

This life is an adventure with all kinds of surprises that we cannot anticipate. Those who insist on predictability and routine miss all kinds of adventures. Fortunately in a world of high gasoline prices and increasing costs of travel, there are many ways to live a life of adventure. Travel isn't the only kind of adventure. My father taught me the joy of introducing oneself to a stranger and the adventure of learning a new concept and exploring a new idea. It doesn't require a passport to step out of one's comfort zone. There are plenty of adventures to be had following the creek upstream with a fishing rod or hiking over the hill with a pair of binoculars. I'm sure that we went on camping trips when it didn't rain, but I remember the rainy-night camping adventures with great joy and delight. Anybody can see a hard-packed snowdrift as an obstacle to be removed. It takes an adventurer to dig out snow caves and teach about winter survival without even launching an expedition.

My parents taught me that all of life is an adventure. I hope that I've passed that on to my children.

In a couple of days we head off for a couple of weeks vacation. We're going to visit our son and daughter-in-law. We've driven out to their part of the country many times. But there are still some routes that we have not yet explored. Don't look for us on the Interstate. We may not make the trip at the fastest pace possible, but we'll have stories to tell when we arrive.

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## August 10, 2008 – The Wildflowers



The little patch of wildflowers is exceeding all of my expectations. It sports at least a dozen different varieties and the area is filled with blossoms. I had to rig up a few streamers of cloth to flutter in the wind to keep from sharing all of the blossoms with the deer, who discovered the patch last week and decided that boldness in coming right up to our back porch was rewarded by mouthfuls of fresh blossoms. One advantage to the wildflower patch is that there is no weeding, because I have no idea what is going to come up, so whatever grew was allowed to grow. I suspect that there are a few things growing in the patch that were seeded from the bird feeder that hangs above the patch, but I haven't noticed any thistles and the wheat growing there adds a certain character to the little flower patch anyway.

The truth is that it doesn't take much to entertain me. There are a lot of things in this life that bring me pleasure. A patch of flowers from a single packet of seeds is a delight. But it is not the only one. There are joys around every corner in this life.

In a conversation with a friend about a week ago we were lamenting some of the trends in our culture. We had been talking of the fact that our local hospital has remodeled two floors of the building into luxury private suites. "We Americans are less satisfied with more and more, and that bothers me considerably." It certainly seems that items that recently were considered luxuries now have become necessities. The quantity of consumer goods that are available is astounding. We seem to need ever bigger and bigger homes to hold all of the possessions we have. Shopping has become a way of

life. The opening of a new sporting goods store is an event that dominates the front page of the newspaper for more than a week.

In addition to everyday items such as groceries and clothing, the big discount stores have entire departments of electronics, entertainment, sports equipment, and aisles of toys. Shopping itself has become a huge consumer of our time and a major recreational activity for many. People flock to the mall and the stores just to see what is there even when they don't need to buy anything.

And it seems to me, quite frankly, that there is more enjoyment in planting a packet of wildflower seeds than in an entire store full of consumer items.

Not that I am immune to the national frenzy of consuming. My home is filled to its limits with things that we probably don't need. There are many things that at the time seemed important to acquire and now I can't remember why I thought it was important to purchase them. And there are a lot of items whose obsolescence was planned from the beginning. We used to have shelves of record albums, which gave way to cassette tapes and CD's and now we find that a library of music doesn't need to consume physical space, but can be contained in digital files on a computer. I shudder at the generations of photographic equipment that I have purchased that I now no longer use. And I have boxes and boxes of slides that I intend to scan into the computer to preserve and sort. There are enough photographs in our house to last me a lifetime.

The problem with all of the private ownership and all of the consumer items in our society is that they distract us from what is most important in our lives. We think that having palatial homes and enormous cars is a sign of success. But genuine success is measured in terms of what we give, not what we gain. We think that large screen televisions and collections of movies will give us pleasure, but the pride of ownership is a fleeting sensation soon replaced by a newer, bigger and better item.

My friend said, "Sometimes I pray for a crisis that will make us look at ourselves. Maybe the price of gas has to go to \$10 a gallon before we slow down. How can we teach people that giving up a bit of our self - our self-ness - might benefit someone else?"

He was, of course, hinting at a truth that we also know. Giving - genuine giving - is a source of deep joy. We have even turned giving into a consumer commodity in our culture. "Would you like to add a dollar to your total for cancer research (or muscular dystrophy, or whatever cause is occurring this month)? As if adding a dollar to a hundred dollar purchase would somehow soothe our guilt. As if adding a bit at the checkout counter would make giving easy. Like many of the other cheap consumer items we carry through the checkout, we get what we pay for. Unplanned giving a dollar at a time dilutes the joy of giving.

And money isn't the best commodity to give in the first place. The joy of giving is often more apparent when we give of our time to work side by side with others. Like planting a packet of wildflower seeds, we don't know what the results of our giving might be. We have to trust God to bring forth the blossoms.

The wildflowers growing by my back porch have many lessons to teach me. And they have become a symbol for me about some of the changes I want to make in my life. I have started this year with fewer trips to the store and more strolls around my own yard. I'm spending more time with dirt and plants this summer. Admittedly it is a good summer to do so with a year of ample moisture and gentle summer heat.

Maybe I don't have to wait for the crisis to make changes in my life. Maybe the simple knowledge that often "less is more" is enough to make me think twice before buying anything. Maybe I can learn to give a bit more for the gift of having bit less. Maybe I can learn a lesson from a packet of wildflower seeds.

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## August 11, 2008 – Heading West



I guess that every person has certain ways of identifying him or her self. There are unique experiences or qualities that makes us who we are. I have always, even for the four years that we lived in Chicago, thought of myself as a Westerner. Chicago was, in my mind, temporary. We knew that we would live there for three or four years and when we finished our education we would head west once again. When my life has gone through phases of seeking a new setting for ministry, I have always looked in a very small area: the states of the northwest.

Mind you, I have never thought of myself as a west coast person. Seattle and San Francisco are nice cities to visit, and I love to go to the beach, but I've never thought of myself as living in one of those places. It may be because I don't think of myself as a city person, either. Somehow I'm best suited to smaller places that others might consider to be isolated.

In reality, I probably am able to live and be happy in a large number of places, I have enjoyed the places where we have lived because the opportunities presented themselves and I become attached to people. Friends and neighbors are important and most locations have plenty of people to offer. I feel lucky that I've lived in places with enough, but not too many people.

Anyway, when an opportunity for a vacation presents itself, my instinct is to head west. Having a son who lives on the West coast is a huge incentive, I have to admit. But there

has always been something about me that enjoys driving off into the sunset, westward ho! and all of the other cliches from old television programs.

Although I've lived outside of Montana more years than I ever lived there, it is the state of my birth and I've never shed the sense of somehow belonging to that state. I've crossed it on most of its highways and driven a fair share of the gravel and dirt back roads as well. It is filled with places of memory for me and many vistas evoke stories of good experiences. Like South Dakota, the state has a lot of variety from the open high prairie country of the east to the majestic mountains of the center and west.

Once we've spent a couple of days in Montana, we'll keep heading west on this trip. When I was younger, I thought of Idaho as the gorgeous stretch of winding road on the way to Spokane. After a decade of living in that state, I discovered that there is a great deal more to Idaho. It has deserts, high plains, and open vistas as well as alpine meadows and clear deep mountain lakes.

From Idaho we're heading to Washington, which is a state that I do not know as well. I've crossed Washington on the Interstate several times and have visited Seattle and Whidbey Island in the sound. I've driven down the coastal highway and marveled at the mountains and rainforest. Cedar and Hemlock and Douglas Fir are inspiring trees. But there is a lot of Washington that we have never explored. So we'll be taking some roads less traveled and slowing our pace as we wander towards the capitol, Olympia, where our son and daughter-in-law live. After a visit with them, we'll probably find a few more obscure roads as we follow the sunrise back home.

Long ago, our people made a discover which was revolutionary at the time. It seems obvious from our perspective, but for thousands of years all people believed that gods were attached to specific places and that to travel was to leave their gods behind and to be subject to the powers of different gods. When Abraham and Sarah discovered that God is in distant places and that the same God ordered their lives when they traveled far from the land of their birth, the discovery made them distinct from all of the other people in the ancient near east. It gave them power to be detached from a specific place. Over the generations, our people have collected volumes of stories about how God is the God of the entire universe and how there is no place where one could go where God is not present.

We are a people who have found God to be active in every place. We were even slower to grasp the concept that God is also present in every time. The stories of our past are so filled with encounters with God that we have been tempted to think of God as always being revealed in history. But while we do find God's actions in the history of our people, we also experience God's participation in our present lives. What is more, God calls to us from the future, beckoning us to new patterns of living and new relationships.

We do not know where life's journeys will take us. What we do know is that wherever we wander, God is with us - behind us, ahead of us, around us.

*A brief note for regular readers of this blog: We will be traveling on the back roads and living in our camper for a couple of weeks. I expect to write every day, but postings to the internet will be irregular depending on our access to the web. I'll return to daily early-morning postings by about the 25th of the month. Thanks for your patience.*

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## August 12, 2008 – Launching



We made it little was down the road yesterday. We are traveling at a slower pace than we used to go, in part because of our desire to use less gasoline and in part because we can afford the time on vacation. Getting things ready and getting out of the house took a lot of effort. We used to scoop up our kids in their pajamas, load them into the car and drive a ways before we stopped to feed them breakfast. Traveling with elders is a bit different.

Susan's father will be staying at the assisted living center where he lives, but her sister is coming and staying in our house for a week during our vacation so that he can get a visit and his life won't be too disrupted by our absence. My mother is traveling with us for a couple of days and will stay with my brother and my cousins for about a dozen days while we travel on. This meant loading up and taking along a considerable bit of equipment: walkers, a small wheelchair, and other items. By the time we had everything organized and were ready to start driving it was lunch time.

But we are on our way. The traveling has been safe and uneventful. Our accommodations last night were very comfortable and it was easy to get our things in and out. We have a small kitchenette in our motel room - enough to make our own breakfast. Who knows, we may be on the road earlier today.

Traveling, like much of life, is a process of sorting. We have to choose what we will take with us and what we will leave behind. Most travelers, I suspect, take too many things with them and carry items that they do not need. They say that the Oregon Trail was

littered with household items that were cast off as the travelers decided that they would rather have the convenience of traveling light than the heavy possessions with which they had left.

We marvel at the sight of giant RV's some the size of the largest buses and some of them pulling another vehicle or a large enclosed trailer. There are amenities in those vehicles that make them most home-like: washers and dryers, microwave ovens, televisions with satellite systems, recliners, and more. Most of the people who are using those large vehicles spend much more time living in them than we do in our little camper, but we are quite content with our camper - which has more amenities than any of our previous modes of travel. We used to get two kids a tent, sleeping bags, cooking utensils and all of the other gear that we needed for a couple of weeks of camping into a small car. Now we drive a pickup truck with our camper in the back.

Genuine joy does not come from the amount of possessions we take with us on our journeys. Sometimes our possessions can get in the way of relationships with other people and other opportunities to learn. Traveling light can be the best way to go to many destinations.

Somehow we made the decisions about what to bring and what to leave behind. Only one kayak is on the roof of our camper, though I contemplated taking two or three boats on this trip. We each have a few books and enough clothes to be comfortable. Hiking boots and jeans will be the preferred dress for the next couple of weeks, so we don't need too many clothes.

In this life we are learning to live with less and to travel with less. We still have a ways to go, as we are definitely not traveling as lightly as we might. My friend says, "We seem to be less satisfied with more and more." We're trying to learn to be more satisfied with a little less.

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## August 13, 2008 – At the Ranch



The Missouri River breaks in Montana are still rugged country. The flat lands transition to river bottom in a series of steep coulees. Constructing a road from the top to the bottom is a challenge and the two roads that go in and out of the river ranch follow trails that were discovered long ago in the days before automobiles. The land at the bottom is productive, with the river providing ample moisture. It is at the bottom that several different members of our family homesteaded. To prove up a homestead meant constructing a house of some sort and living on the land for the required amount of time. Our grandmother was the last generation in our family to prove up her claim. She was a bit frightened around horses in the first place, being the daughter of a court reporter and more accustomed to live in town than living out in the open country. The steep and narrow road that led down to the river from the expansive fields at the top of the hill was a challenge in good weather. The bulk of her adult life was not to be lived on the ranch, but proving up the claim and obtaining the land was an important factor in the wider family's ability to survive in this country.

A century ago the culture of this country was quite different that it is today, but there are many things that are the same. The hills are still steep. The road is still treacherous. The river bottom is still good land. And it still takes more than the government-allotted 160 acres to support a family. These days the river ranch is a combination of the claims of several family members plus additional acreage that has been purchased over the past 120 years by various family members.

My corner of the family never lived on the ranch. Our grandmother, after proving up her claim, lived the life of an attorney's wife in nearby Ft. Benton. It was there that my mother and her sisters grew up. My mom went to nursing school, met and married a pilot and they eventually made their home in a town a couple of hundred miles to the south where there was a safe airport and work for pilots.

But the eldest of the five girls in my mother's family became a farm wife and her eldest son, my cousin, is the current resident at the river ranch. His niece and family are the active farming family as my cousin is semi-retired. But in ranch life no one is retired during harvest. The combine is in the field and the first truck loads of grain have been hauled and the routine of machinery repairs and long days is underway. Some family members are working for neighbors to keep the operation going and 14 hour work days are the norm.

In the midst of all of this activity and work, the hospitality of the ranch continues. I think that the people who have lived here have always been welcoming of visitors. One has to make an effort to get to this place and the effort is well-rewarded with the good food, rich fellowship and joyous life of the ranch. It is a great first stop on our vacation.

Meals are what brings the family together on the ranch. Between meals everyone is either working or sleeping. Last night we had supper with my brother and other family members in town, and then drove down to the river ranch. Supper was just beginning in the stretched-out day of ranch life. And there was more work to be done as long as there was any visible light. Getting the harvest fired up always means working out a few kinks in the operation. There are repairs that were unanticipated, fuel and equipment need to be moved to the right locations, and it seems there is always a vehicle that needs to be shuttled from one field to another.

When it was really dark, there were more conversations to be shared and catching up to do. Another cousin arrived after dark and the hospitality of the ranch made sure that all were fed and that there was a bed for each one.

The life of the river ranch is definitely not my daily routine. But it is a good life and it feels so much at home to be invited into ranch life.

For those of us who live in cities and towns and whose source of food is the market, it is important, from time to time, to go to the places where our food is produced. Or simple prayer, "give us this day our daily bread," has a whole new meaning when we are watching the combines cut the wheat and riding in the truck and watching the grain being augured up to the top of the bin. The wheat still has a long journey to make before it becomes our food, but here on the ranch wheat is scooped straight from the bin and ground in a small mill for the bread and cereal that is served every day.

It gives a whole new meaning to the prayers we say, sometimes without thinking of their meaning.

It is early. Dawn's first light is creeping over the bluffs to the East. And it is time for work to begin at the ranch. The computer needs to be put away for now and a different level of activity will soon take over. May the work of my hands contribute to the harvest today.

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## August 14, 2008 – Mixing Things Up



One of the pleasures of vacation is that the days don't have to have the same routine as our everyday lives. I am accustomed to writing my blog first thing in the morning. I get up, write a 800-1,000 word essay and then feel as if my brain is ready for the mental and intellectual challenges of the day. It is a discipline that works for me and blogging is simply a different form of journaling, which I have been doing for a long time. I sort out my thoughts, process some of my reactions to the day and then go on for whatever is next.

This morning, instead of writing first thing, as soon as I got up, I took my kayak to the lake and paddled for an hour or so. It was a different kind of reflection - a different kind of meditation. There is a gentle breeze blowing down the lake so there is a modest chop on the surface and I had to pay a little attention to my paddling, but I had the lake to myself and it was a wonderful way to start the day.

We're at Whitefish Lake, one of the beautiful natural lakes in northwestern Montana. We drove around the southern edge of Glacier National Park on highway 2 yesterday and so have been enjoying the incredible scenery of this part of the world.

When I was a boy, my uncle had a place on Flathead Lake, another gorgeous lake not far from here. They had obtained a small piece of land with a bit of waterfront just after the second world war, when there weren't many buyers for that kind of land. They dug an outhouse and camped in tents. Later they build a boathouse that was little more than a garage, but when the boat was pulled out there was room for a wood cookstove and a

few bunks. My uncle was an electrician at the paper mill in Libby. In the summer, when the whistle blew on Friday, they'd head for the lake and then have Saturday and Sunday at the lake before driving back in the dark on Sunday and heading back to work on Monday. Each year there were two weeks of vacation and sometimes those weeks needed to be spent visiting relatives or on other business and sometimes they could be spent at the lake. Every few years the whole family would gather at the lake, setting up a field of tents, cooking over the campfire and playing in the cold water. My uncle had a boat that could tow one or two skiers and most of us cousins learned to water ski a bit.

The land has been sold. The complexities of the next generation combined with the increasing land values and increasing taxes to make it time to move on from that wonderful place.

These days, an electrician can't afford to own a place at the lake. Instead they work on the construction of the mansions that surround the lake. The paper mill is closed. Those jobs are gone. Most locals work in jobs that are one way or another related to the business of vacation homes for the rich and famous people who come here to ski in the winter and play in the lake in the summer. It is not at all uncommon for someone from out of town to purchase two or three adjoining cabin sites, raze all of the existing buildings, and build an enormous house that will be occupied only for a few weeks each year. They go into town and buy the best ski boats and sometimes multiple jet skis and other items. They spend a lot of money in local restaurants - places that have gotten a bit too expensive for the locals. Whitefish Lake State Park, where we are staying is a small area of 10 acres sandwiched between the railroad tracks and the lake. It is one of the few public access points left on this lake.

You have to be rich to play here. And very few people get rich staying here. The rich folk come and go. In the town of Whitefish there is a large showroom for concert pianos owned by a London piano dealer. They also own several condominiums in the area. The piano dealer flies clients into Western Montana from all over the world. They are given a weekend of recreation and a chance to view and play the concert pianos, which, when sold, are shipped to whatever location the customer desires. The economics of such a transaction are beyond my comprehension. I'm sure my uncle would have been unable to believe such a business might exist in Western Montana.

But these days, even the pristine beauty of Montana is for sale. The slogan of Sonny Todd Real Estate is "We Sell Montana." And locals, for the most part don't have the money to buy it. It is not that there aren't some local success stories. There is a boat dealership and marina that does a brisk business. The car dealerships sell a lot of high-end vehicles. And the real estate people have made a lot of commissions. The business of taking care of the yards and cleaning the houses doesn't pay as well. Serving in the restaurants and washing the dishes won't make a wage that allows one to regularly eat in those restaurants.

An the proliferation of mansions drives up taxes for everyone - often to the point where the only reasonable economic decision for a family is to sell out a piece of property that has been in the family for generations.

This isn't the first time that outsiders have come to this area and pushed aside the locals. Ask any member of the Blackfoot nation. There was a time when Blackfoot, Assiniboine, Shoshoni, Bannock and Nez Pierce thought they had this land to themselves.

They say you can't halt progress. Whether or not these changes are progress is debatable, but even if it cannot be halted, it is possible to mourn the losses along the way. Empty roads and quiet nights with no lights are a thing of the past on the southern edge of Whitefish Lake. Ranchers and local business people mixing at the coffee shops is a thing of the past. They've even zoned the huckleberry stands out of the city limits. To find a guy selling flathead cherries out of the back of his pickup truck, you've got to drive over to Columbia Falls, which is where most of the restaurant and motel workers and the folk who work of the lawn care and cleaning services live. They don't wear the designer clothing sold in the boutiques. They run down to Kalispell and shop at Walmart.

And I am not a local. I have out of state plates on my truck. I'm in the state park for one night and then we're off to the rest of our lives. We won't be here when the snow needs to be shoveled and the roofs need to be repaired. The times are changing and we are changing with them.

Still, I miss the days when a gang of cousins floated around the lake on old inner tubes and fashioned masts out of spruce branches and sails out of old bed sheets. We may have had more fun than the folks who jet into their mansions and run around the lake in their \$75,000 ski boats.

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**August 15, 2008 – Mimanagish**



In Absarokee, the word Mimanagish means “singing waters.” It is the word for the sound of a rushing mountain stream. It is the name chosen for the church camp of the Montana-Northern Wyoming Conference of the United Church of Camp. The river that is rushing by that camp is the river along which I grew up. It’s sound is as much a part of my memory as are the other sensations of that river.

Last night I was treated to the joy of sleeping next to singing waters again. We are camped next to the icicle river on the Eastern slope of the Cascade mountains in Washington. There are three major roads and a lot of other roads that cross the Cascades. Interstate 94 crosses near the route of the old US highway 10, from Ellensburg up over Snowqualmie pass to Seattle. The southern route, Highway 12, goes over White pass, from south of Olympia to Yakima. The northern route, Highway 2, goes from Wenatchee to Everett over Stevens Pass. We’re taking the northern route over Stevens pass this trip. We like to explore different mountain passes. When we lived in Idaho, we attempted to cross every pass between Idaho and Montana, including the gravel and dirt roads. We haven’t made many crossings of the Cascades in Washington, but if our son and daughter-in-law continue to live here for several years, we’ll certainly try a few other routes.

But oh the treat of going to sleep and waking up to the sound of rushing water outside of our camper! I had forgotten how much I love that sound and how magical it is for a restful night for me. It transports me back to my childhood and makes me feel safe and at home. In the really high water times, at the peak of runoff, the water will roll the

boulders at the bottom of the stream bed and make a kind of cracking, clunking sound. The water is lower now, running crystal clear and, as we used to say, "1/2 a degree above solid ice." It is cold. The snowfields that feed it are not far away.

The hydrology of the Black Hills is different from that of higher mountains. The Black Hills have not glaciers or permanent snow fields. The water runs off in streams and bubbles forth in springs as the result of winter snows, summer thundershowers and an abundant underground aquifer. In the high country, the streams flow from snow banks that last the entire summer, aided by an occasional rain shower. There is enough surface water to combine to form mighty rivers like the Columbia and the Missouri and to provide ample water for people many miles down stream. On this side of the pass the rivers flow into the Columbia basin and then cross the Cascades again through the Columbia Gorge - a riverbed that is older than the mountains themselves. The Columbia was already flowing through the area when the Cascades rose through volcanic action, and it continued to find its course through the area despite the dramatic mountains rising around it.

In geological time, the Cascades are still young mountains, with several active volcanoes, including Mt. Saint Helens, which erupted in a violent and dramatic display a couple of decades ago. Mt. Ranier, at 14,411 feet, is the highest of the cascades and is the goal of many mountaineers. It is surrounded by a dramatic and beautiful national park. Glacier peak is over 10,000 feet and Mt. Saint Helens is still over 8,000 feet after the top was blown away by the volcano. The immediate blast area around Mt. Saint Helens is now a national monument and there are displays set up to teach about volcanic activity and the geology of the Cascades.

There will be n mountain climbing for us today, just a beautiful drive with clear views of Glacier peak and, if we're lucky, great views of the San Juan islands in the Puget Sound as we descend into Everett. We'll have to contend with a bit of Seattle Traffic as we skirt the city on our way south to Olympia, but we'll avoid rush hour and be camped next to the Nisqually river this evening.

The Nisqually is calm and quiet where we will camp tonight, so singing mountain rivers will remain a rare treat for me. A memory that can be refreshed each time I visit a mountainous area.

We are indeed fortunate to be able to travel these remarkable roads and mountains and to see the beauty of this world. Each day is a day of gratitude and joy.

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**August 16, 2008 – Yil-me-hu**



For the next week we will be camped in Nisqually country. We discovered this campground a year ago when we were visiting our son and daughter-in-law in Olympia and have been eager to return to this place. The Nisqually delta is now a federal wildlife refuge and just upstream there is a campground near the traditional fishing grounds.

For as long as people can remember the Nisqually have observed Yil-me-hu, the first fish ceremony. The first fish caught in the spring was prepared in an earth pit stove, shared and eaten by members of the village. The bones, left intact, were returned to the river, pointing upstream. This display was symbolic. It meant that the villagers were respectful to the fish spirits and wished that, because the ceremony had been done correctly, many more fish would come up the stream during that year. A dance followed the ceremony. In Nisqually, yil-me-hu means “salmon arrival dance.”

There won't be much of a salmon run this year. The fisheries have been devastated by a variety of causes including over fishing, losses due to dams, changes in ocean conditions and diseases. The entire state of Oregon is closed to salmon fishing this year and Washington is allowing only limited ceremonial fishing.

On the plains we have often reflected that the end of the buffalo culture occurred in about forty years. It took less than a single generation for the plains to go from uncountable herds of buffalo to none. A similar decline in the salmon fishery has taken place in the past fifty years. The difference is that the salmon decline has occurred in my generation. I have lived through these years. Fifty years ago the fall salmon run at

Redfish lake in Idaho had so many fish that they literally filled the stream from bank to bank. The waters would froth with the fish so plentiful that there was barely enough water to cover them. Those salmon were born in the cool gravel beds of the lake, were flushed downstream on spring floods from Redfish creek to the Salmon River, from the Salmon to the Snake, from the Snake to the Columbia and from the Columbia to the ocean. They spent their adult lives in the ocean and then returned upstream nearly a thousand river miles to spawn at the end of their lives. And they came by the thousands. In 2006 only two native salmon returned to Redfish lake. It is entirely possible that people could forget how the lake got its name.

Here, closer to the ocean, the salmon season is earlier, running through the summer months and ending in October. There are currently fishing restrictions on Salmon and not much fishing is being done, and there is speculation about whether or not it is too late for the fishery to ever recover. There are a few hatchery-raised salmon in the river and these are caught and eaten. The hatchery fish have a fin clipped for easy identification, but few people have seen any native salmon for several years. There is a national fish hatchery in the Cascades that specializes in salmon reproduction and releases thousands of fish into the water, but the natural life cycle of the salmon may be forever interrupted in this area.

The truth is that it will take more than respect at the first arrival of the salmon each year in order to insure a stable fishery. It will take no less than an international effort to control overfishing, address barriers to spawning, re-introduce some levels of flooding to flush salmon to the ocean, study and seek solutions to oceanic dead spots and the build up of toxins in the oceans, and implement solutions that are workable. The solutions may cause no small amount of disruption in the lives of small and large fishing operations in the Pacific.

The past few years have not been among the best for Pacific coast fishermen. From Alaska to Baja, the fish runs have been smaller and later. Regulations have limited catches and profitability has plummeted. Small commercial boats are for sale up and down the coast. For many years, the economy of the region has been based on harvesting the bounty of nature. Logging and fishing have been among the most common ways of making a living. Both industries are now experiencing limits due to over consumption and the effect on the local economies is visible. The new high-tech economies of Seattle and other urban areas offer jobs, but not for people whose lives have been based on logging and fishing. The skills needed to survive in this century are vastly different from those used in the past. The old ways are passing right before our eyes.

These changes don't wait for our convenience. They don't consider the plans and hopes of individuals. The consequences for families caught up in the transition are as devastating as were those of previous generations who experienced dramatic changes. The salmon dance won't be sufficient to preserve the old ways of life.

So is good to be camping on the Nisqually reservation and contributing, though just a bit, to the local economy. Who knows, it may be that the annual return of the tourists may become as important to the new economy of the region as the return of the salmon once was. I suspect, however, that the dance for the return of tourists will not have a name as poetic as yel-me-hu.

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## August 17, 2008 – Walking the Dog



Our son and daughter-in-law have a young sheltie. They adopted him a little less than a year ago and have already been through several adventures with him. He fell and broke his leg when he was a small puppy. The injury has healed well and he walks without a limp. They have been through obedience training with the dog and he is well behaved. He responds to voice commands and a few hand signals and is a delightful pet.

But pets involve responsibility. The dog needs to be walked twice a day. In their two-career lifestyle this usually means a somewhat shorter walk in the morning and a longer walk in the evening. The weather has been warm here this week, and the dog has lots of long fur, so the evening cool is a good time for him to walk. Our kids know lots of paths and urban trails in the area and their walks are varied and interesting. The dog contributes to their health, in part, by encouraging an active lifestyle with lots of walking.

While we are visiting, we get to join them on their walks. The walks provide an excellent setting for informal conversation and for catching up on the things that are most important in our lives. We enjoy talking over a cup of coffee or a meal or sitting in their living room and having a talk, but the walks give us a different setting and we tend to talk about different topics as we walk. We can imagine the future and talk about their hopes and plans as well as hear about the challenges and opportunities of their careers.

Being parents has been an amazing experience for us. In some ways it seems as if it was a very short time ago that our children entered our lives as tiny babies. In the early

days we would be amazed to just look at them. And each new discovery that they made was a landmark in our lives as well. There were days when we didn't think that it was possible for us to be any more tired, having had our sleep interrupted multiple times in a single night. There were times when a child was sick that we worried, perhaps excessively, about what might happen.

Each stage of our children's growth was a new adventure. They went off to school, made friends, went to camp, learned to ride bicycles, and eventually learned to drive a car, choose a college and move out of our home. It is hard to keep from bursting with pride when we are around our children. They have become delightful adults and we feel so privileged to have been a part of their lives.

And we know that there are new challenges and adventures that lie ahead for us as parents. Our shifting relationships with our parents as we have become their primary caregivers reminds us that we all change and we all are aging. Some choices and situations with our parents are models for us that show us a path that we wish to imitate. Others are reminders of things that we will choose to do differently. We keep learning and we keep finding new patterns of relationship and new ways to wind our journey through this life.

The shorter lifespan of a pet speeds up the process of learning to care for others. Because their lives are shorter than ours, we witness their growth from youth to old age in a span of a decade or a little more. Pets are good teachers about life and about relationships. Once you adopt a pet, the responsibility cannot be escaped.

It is good to see our children take the responsibility of caring for a pet seriously and to see them so capable in that role. They demonstrate the values of love and commitment and faith and hope with which we raised them. They take initiative and responsibility in big and small ways.

Walking the dog is a new and wonderful connection that we have with people that are important to us and a connection to the things that are important in their lives. How grateful we are for this opportunity.

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## August 18, 2008 – Farmers' Market



Susan has been reading Barbara Kingsolver's book: *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*. It reports of the Kingsolver family's adventure in eating foods that are produced locally. They made the decision to move from the Southwestern United States to a small farm where they planted a large garden, raised animals for food, and supplemented their own produce with things that they purchased locally. Kingsolver reports their family's adventure with such joy and enthusiasm that it is compelling and inviting. They discover that they have choices that are nutritious and provide very pleasant eating experiences. The choice that is good for our planet and future sustainability is also a choice that is filled with joy. The book doesn't present the family's choices in terms of sacrifice or "giving up," but rather in terms of rich abundance, hope and joy.

Of course the choices that lie before most of us are not the same as those that the Kingsolver family made. Many of us do not have access to enough property in the right climatic zones to grow all of our own food. The covenants in our neighborhood prohibit the raising of large numbers of chickens. And the only way for us to have milk products that are locally produced would be for us to have our own cow. There are no commercial dairies in our area. And in our corner of the world, locally produced food would be heavy on the grains and meat and very light on fruit.

Nonetheless, Kingsolver's book has got us to thinking. We do have more choices than we think. As we travel, we enjoy stopping at local fruit stands and other places that sell local produce. Olympia has a wonderful farmers' market and there are booths and stalls filled with delicious and delightful local foods from vegetables and fruit to seafood. There

are abundant choices that do not involve huge amounts of transportation from far away places. This trip coincides with harvest time for berries and we've had fresh blackberries, huckleberries and blueberries. Local peaches, pears and apples are available and delicious. And there is a wide variety of vegetables available - many of which are ahead of our garden back home.

Our everyday choices do have an impact on how others live. Our expectation that supermarkets offer fresh tomatoes and bananas year round is extravagant in terms of the amount of fuel consumed to transport them to us. It is not at all uncommon for our produce to have come from Central or South America and we eat fruit that is grown all around the world. The choices we make about what we eat probably have more impact on the amount of fuel in the world than the choices we make about what kind of vehicles to drive and how much to travel.

The invitation to be a bit more conscious of how our choices impact others and the world in which we live does not have to be framed in terms of what we are giving up. Although limiting food choices has a rich and long spiritual tradition with fasting seen as a religious choice, our food choices can also be framed in terms of positive choices. We can choose nutrition over convenience. We can choose to invest a bit more time and a bit less money. We can choose to cook our own food instead of purchasing so much processed and packaged food. And we can choose to give attention to our food choices so that we are making them with intention instead of just doing what is easiest.

When we travel by camper, we don't eat many meals in restaurants. We prefer to cook our own meals and eat on our own schedule. Our camper has limited storage space, so we don't carry a lot of food with us. We stop and shop in the areas we are visiting and sometimes part of our traveling entertainment involves menu planning and food shopping. We like to eat what is in season and enjoy local foods. Being here at the coast means that we are eating more seafood than we do at home.

One of the gifts of vacation is time to think about the choices we make and the opportunity to make different choices when we return home.

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## August 19, 2008 – Twenty-something



Yesterday, in addition to having time with our son and daughter-in-law, we had a visit with a niece and nephew. For many months, our attention has often been focused on the needs and challenges of life for our parents, who are in their eighties. This week we have been more immersed in the culture of our children and their peers, who are in their twenties. One thing that has become clear is that the challenges of being twenty-something are quite different from the way our lives were when we were that age.

It is not always easy being twenty-something in the United States today. In the span of our lifetimes, the average age of first marriage has climbed from the early twenties to the late twenties. It is now approaching thirty. This means nearly a decade of working out relationships that are often complex and confusing. Today's twenty-somethings are no less eager to find a mate and forge a life than we were, but popular culture does not support lasting and permanent relationships. Media images of people in their twenties are of characters who go through many different intimate relationships and living configurations, who are delaying marriage and parenthood while they sort out issues of career and the challenges of living independently.

The popular notion is that you have to find yourself in your twenties. And the popular notion doesn't support making a permanent commitment to another person as a way of finding oneself. Many young people who come to the church in their late twenties to become married have experienced multiple intimate relationships that have broken up with all of the pain and grief of a divorce, but without the paperwork and public support.

Another difference for today's twenty-somethings is the ever-increasing cost of education. We graduated from college and graduate school with a combined debt about the size of a down-payment on a house. It was paid before we purchased our first house. Today's young adults often graduate with debt that is the size of a mortgage and that debt delays their ability to make a home purchase.

Young adults truly want to be independent of the families of their origin, but families continue to be a safety net for them. Relationships break up. Jobs come and go as they try to find a start for their careers. Financial challenges overwhelm at times. The maze of credit cards and cell phones makes it easy to accumulate additional debt. Some young adults need to move back into their family homes two or three times before finally becoming successfully launched on their own.

So when we witness our children and their cousins as they navigate the stresses and challenges of being in their twenties in contemporary America, we are pleased and delighted at the people they are becoming. Somehow they are finding a path through their young adult years that is respectful of their peers and of people of other ages, that is responsible with relationships and with financial management, and that is rich in meaning and discovery. With so many potential dangers in the world, they seem to be finding a way to live lives that are safe and sane.

This is not to say that they are making the decisions we would make. Our lives are much different and our experiences are much different. It makes sense that our choices, too, would be much different. But they are finding their way in a world that is fraught with danger and challenges. And they are doing so with grace and dignity. We are privileged to be witnesses of their lives.

Our parents came into adulthood as the Great Depression gave way to World War II. We entered our adulthood amidst the War in Vietnam, the Civil Rights Movement and the rise of feminism. Our children are entering their adulthood in a time of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, intense distrust of government and what may prove to be the worst recession since the great depression. Our times and our circumstances are different. But we continue to be a family in the midst of the differences. And there is great privilege in being the middle generation between our twenty-something children and our eighty-something parents. We do not live in either world, but we can see both worlds and they give added meaning to our fifty-something years.

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## August 20, 2008 – Boston Harbor



Not far from Olympia there is a harbor and marina. In most weather the place is well-protected from the winds and provides safe moorage for a wide variety of boats. The Puget Sound is still home to a large number of working boats, but not so many as in years past. The sound has been used as a transportation corridor for timber that is cut in the nearby forests and transported to limber mills across the water. Fishing and clamming have been important parts of the local economy for as long as people have lived in the area. But these days the boats in Washington's Boston Harbor are mostly pleasure craft. The area is a good place for sailing and recreational fishing. Aluminum masts and fiberglass hulls seem to be most common, but there are still a few beautiful wooden boats. Some of the masts on those boats are sitka spruce that grows locally.

Port Townsend is now the center of wooden boat activity. The annual wooden boat festival at Port Townsend is the west coast's largest and the area is home to several reputable repairers and restorers of traditional wooden boats. Pygmy kayaks manufactures wooden kit boats in Port Townsend and their designs are shipped all over the United States.

Boston Harbor was a good place for a gentle paddle yesterday. I haven't been paddling much on this vacation. Family obligations and the weather have not cooperated. It is hard to get one's enthusiasm up for paddling when it is raining so hard that you're wet head to toe before the boat even gets to the water. But the rain is what gives the lush green vegetation that makes this area so beautiful and provides for the giant trees

whose canopies grow together allowing for dry walks on rainy days. And family is why we chose this destination for our vacation in the first place. It has been a good trip

But yesterday did give me the opportunity to paddle. There was a breeze once I cleared the point at Boston Harbor and I headed into the wind towards the capitol in the distance. The swells were generally one to two feet and the boat can handle much bigger waves without problem, so it turned out to be a good work out. The harbor seals were not out swimming and the sailboats were staying in the middle of the channel. I saw a couple of other kayakers, but there was plenty of room for me to be by myself and paddle at my own pace.

Paddling is a good way for me to clear my head. The motion of paddling is gentle, not that much different from stretching one's arms in the morning. My little boat has a comfortable seat and paddling into the wind insures that the return trip will be quicker than the outgoing one. The shoreline is covered with trees, some are giant, stretching more than 100 feet into the sky. Douglas fir, hemlock and spruce share the territory with a few deciduous trees. Most of the homes and other buildings are tucked into the trees and you only notice them as you paddle by. With the city of Olympia in the distance and its domed capitol building easily visible, one does not have a sensation of paddling in the wilderness, but it doesn't take too much of a stretch of the imagination to think of the first peoples who discovered this region by walking and who lived off of the abundant gifts of the waters, so walked along the shores and developed communities in protected places.

Even centuries later, when seafaring people from Europe came to the Puget Sound, it must have seemed like a place of unlimited resources. There are so many magnificent trees and the waters are teeming with crabs and salmon and many other delicious fish. The beaches are great for collecting clams. The rich resources are not, of course, unlimited. The pressures of so many people and the development of large cities like Seattle and Tacoma with their industries and freeways and other activities have caused some environmental problems and the local people have become aware that they need to treat the natural resources with respect. Olympic national forest has teamed with other national and local preserves to devise management plans for the forests and many diverse people have come together to work on plans to protect the sound and its sea life.

My paddling has a small impact, though I consume more than my fair share of gasoline traveling out here from South Dakota. My little boat leaves no pollution in its wake and the materials from which it was built are modest. A little cedar and a bit of cloth to cover the seat and form the spray skirt. The boat also has some modern epoxy imbedded in a layer of fiberglass to protect and seal the hull. Properly cared-for the boat should last for many decades - long beyond the span of my life. Unless I break it by handling it improperly, the paddle will out last several boats.

It feels good to paddle a little boat on a sound that connects to a vast ocean. There is a clear water passageway all the way around the world from where I paddled yesterday. Of course I do not have the proper boat nor the skill to paddle across an ocean, my boat rises and falls with the tides and is a part of a system that is vastly larger than I. This planet and its people scarcely notices my passage, but the water in which I paddle has supported the great clippers and whaling boats of the past as well as gigantic oil tankers and freighters that transport goods around the world. Throughout history, more freight has been shipped by boat than by any other means. The water that supports this gigantic movement of goods is the same water upon which my little boat bobs up and down.

I think that a tiny kayak on a vast and immense ocean is a good metaphor for my life. In the big scheme of things, I am tiny and insignificant. Yet I have the awareness to reflect upon the vastness and to witness the beauty of this great creation. And I am capable of being in relationship with that which is great in this world. From my tiny moment in history, I can imagine and connect with generations of people who have gone before and reach out with hope to generations yet unborn. I can participate in causes that are far bigger than myself. And I have been given the gift of consciousness - not only of myself, but of the larger universe of which I am a part.

I don't know if other kayakers contemplate cosmology as they paddle, but I know that ancient mariners did as they gazed up at a sky full of stars as they floated on a vast ocean. The Psalmist says, "When I look at your heavens, the moon and the stars that you have formed, what are humans that you are mindful of us?" It is one of the great paradoxes of creation that we are small and seemingly insignificant and yet we are invited to love and to be loved by the creator of all that is.

May you experience meaningful paddling on the seas of your life.

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## August 21, 2008 – Visiting Art



The theologian Paul Tillich used to make the distinction between the world of action and the world of reflection. He challenged his students to achieve balance in their living that took both worlds seriously and allowed for both action and reflection. The life of a theologian may require more time in the world of reflection than that of a fire fighter. And certainly there are people who do most of their learning in the world of action, while others learn best in the world of reflection. Tillich himself spent a great deal of time in the world of reflection. His books are intellectually complex and his ideas are stimulating today more than a half century after he wrote them.

My life, generally, has a balance of action and reflection. I read and write and prepare sermons, but I also do hands on administration, visit people in their homes and in hospitals and care centers, participate in a wide variety of church activities and remain active in the life of the congregation. In fact, for me, the worlds of action and reflection are sometimes a bit reversed from what one might expect. I find that I can engage in reflection while performing simple tasks such as weeding the garden or working with wood in my garage. While I am aware that I think of gardening when I am not in the garden or of boat building when I am not in my garage, I also know that engaging in those activities gives me time and space to reflect on other aspects of my life.

There are, however, activities that are nearly pure action or reflection. Operating a machine such as a bobcat or loader tractor for me involves focus and concentration. I don't have any energy for thinking about anything except the task at hand when I'm operating a piece of machinery. The action doesn't leave much space in my mind for

reflection. On the other hand, reading a book is almost pure reflection. Other than turning a page and holding the book, there is very little mechanical action involved at all. While my mind is as focused as when I operate a machine, it focuses on ideas and concepts and on making connections between the words I am reading and the life that I live.

Visiting an art museum is another activity that is pure reflection for me. There is a little walking involved, but my mind is free to wander through the museum's images and a wide range of life experiences without the need to produce any product or pre-conceived result.

Yesterday we visited Tacoma's incredible Museum of Glass. We entered the museum by the way of a large sky bridge over a freeway and railroad tracks. The bridge has two large installations of glass works that are amazing in the brilliance of colors, the intricacy of shapes and the interplay of light and reflection upon the glass surfaces. The image above is from a ceiling that spans the sky bridge with thousands of pieces of glass in the shape of shells and other aquatic items. It gives the feeling of being under the sea and looking up toward the light of the sky, but the objects through which one is looking are very different from what one might encounter diving under the sea. It is a world of fantasy - quite different from any external reality.

The museum is arranged so that an audience can gather in a large workshop area close to the fiery furnaces that heat the glass. A narrator gives some information about the process as artists heat and shape the glass. The mixing of colors and the ways in which centrifugal force and certain tools are used to create shapes is fascinating. The heat is intense and one can imagine how much warmer it is down on the floor where the artists are working.

There are large galleries of glass art. Many of the pieces are incredibly large and there are textures and shapes that one might not expect of a material as hard and brittle as glass. The varieties of colors rival any other media. And some of the beautiful pieces are simply clear, without any color except for that which is reflected or viewed through the glass from some outside source. Other pieces have brilliant colors and combinations of color that are amazing.

It was a journey into the world of reflection for me. I will never master the skills required in order to make anything out of glass. The objects that I viewed and appreciated are well beyond my ability to make. Other than the gentle touch of the gift shop, which I resisted, there is no invitation to action for me in regards to the art. I just looked, appreciated, and enjoyed.

Vacation is, for me, both a time of action and reflection. The actions are different from those of my everyday life. We drive large distances to visit family. We camp every night. We prepare our meals in the small kitchen of the camper. I paddle a kayak and we take

long walks. The reflection is, often, about the work I do at home. I think about better ways to accomplish tasks, reflect on problems that need solutions, generate new ideas for programs and church activities.

Sometimes my reflections have no immediate practical application. I think about the beauty of God's creation or wonder at the power of creation that has been shared with humans. I can be amazed by a wooded path and a modern museum in the same day. Yesterday was one of those days. It was enough to just have been witness to the great beauty that can be created by humans. There are days ahead that will demand much action. There are many tasks that need to be accomplished. But it is good to journey in the world of reflection for a few more days before resuming the life of action.

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## August 22, 2008 – Turning Toward Home



Photo by Isaac Huffman

Yesterday was a fun day. I paddled in Henderson inlet. Being a person from the plains, I still haven't figured out the tides exactly, but we arrive a couple of hours after high tide and there was plenty of water to paddle down the inlet to a finger of the sound and around a point to another inlet. The area was, until the late 1970's, a place for assembling large log rafts which were floated up the sound to saw mills. There was a small railroad spur that allowed loaded rail cars to go out onto a large trestle and the logs could be dumbered directly into the water. The area now is a nature preserve and there are hundreds of harbor seals in the area. The seals, too are protected, and boaters are warned not to approach the rafts where they sun themselves. They are curious creatures and a couple of them swam more than a hundred yards from the rest to have a look at my kayak. I saw jellyfish, a staple in the diet of the harbor seals. There were all kinds of birds, including herons, pelicans, seagulls and more.

The berries are ripe and we picked a couple of pounds of blackberries. Later we went to a "u-pick" blueberry field and picked a couple of pounds of blueberries. We had blackberry cobbler for dessert last night and there'll be blueberry pancakes for breakfast today. We'll have enough berries to take with us for the start of our journey home.

Today and tomorrow we'll try to make some miles to be back in Montana where my mother is staying by Saturday night. The process of picking her up and visiting with relatives will fill up Sunday, but we hope to do a little driving on Sunday as well so we can return home on Monday or Tuesday.

There is a bit of sadness in leaving. We've had a wonderful visit and we've enjoyed our time with our children. But life is not all vacation. There is meaningful work awaiting us in South Dakota and we have a home and friends in that place as well. A couple of weeks of living in our camper reminds us of the pleasures of a larger home. And there is that balance of the world of reflection and the world of action that I wrote about yesterday.

Over the years, we have tried many different configurations of vacations. Our circumstances have changed significantly. What worked well when we had tiny children was different from what worked before we had children. The things that worked when our children were littler were different than the things we did when they were teenagers with busy schedules and active lives. We often invested our vacations visiting our parents when we lived far from them. Now that they live with us, we head towards our children's homes. Each phase of life brings a different focus for our adventures. There is no one formula for vacation that is somehow better than all of the others. There are many options and we make choices.

For this phase of our lives, it makes sense to mix a few days of driving with several days of staying in the same area, instead of being constantly in motion. Although we fold up the camper so we can drive every day, we have been staying in the same space in the same campground for a week. We like this tiny spot tucked between the Nisqually Indian reservation and the edge of Fort Lewis. There is a little helicopter noise some evenings and the trains go by a bit too close, but the river is gentle and interesting and the salmon run is beginning so we see the native fishermen pursuing the life of their grandfathers and great grandfathers. We discovered this campground last October when we visited and expect that we will visit it again.

But today we say goodbye to our camping spot and our children and head out across the cascades. We intend to take a different route across Washington than the one by which we came, exploring some different country and seeing some new sights. Once we get into Montana we'll be taking familiar roads and trying to make some time. We are eager to see my mother and to pick up with her life.

We have our pictures and our memories and leave here refreshed and ready to turn our heads toward home. Over the next several days, I will begin to think more of the challenges and tasks that await me at the church. I never can just lock the door and walk away from the church. Even with great and competent leaders to cover for me when I am away, there are many issues that will occupy my consciousness as we head into the fall season. It is good that we have the drive to give me time to think and to change from the vacation mode of life to the more active world of work. It is all a part of keeping the world of reflection and the world of action in balance.

How fortunate we are to have a home that is our destination.

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## August 23, 2008 – Changing Scenes



The Cascades are beautiful with some famous and outstanding mountains. Our route yesterday gave us some good vistas of Mt. Rainier and Mt. Saint Helens. We lunched along clear creek and walked down to view clear creek falls. From the top of the falls we could see down stream to the reservoir that is formed by a dam. After lunch we noticed that we were definitely on the dry side of the Cascades. By Yakima, the only green was in irrigated fields. As we drove, we remarked at the changes in agriculture in the region in our lifetimes.

Fields that used to be dry land wheat now have giant center pivot irrigation systems and are growing sweet corn. There are still a lot of apple orchards around Yakima, but there are also a lot of other fruit. Apricots, peaches and plums are grown. Grapes may be becoming the dominant crop in the area. There are a lot of fields of grapes and many new wineries. We also saw hops growing in the fields and a few new breweries. The agricultural development of the area that boomed in the quest to produce food during and after the Second World War is giving way to another kind of boom - a boom that is producing the products to support the contemporary American lifestyle.

Outside of the irrigation zones, there is hardly any vegetation at all - not even enough to support a few head of cows. Many of the steep hillsides have fire scars, but where there is grass growing it is very short and very dry. Combining is finished on the hilltops and the stubble fields are similar in color to the grass of the draws and hillsides.

A crop that is new in the last twenty years is trees grown for paper pulp. The giant fields of what appear to be poplar trees are planted thickly and one would certainly get lost if you ignored the “no trespassing” signs and wandered into the trees. The trees are harvested by large machines and fed into giant chippers. The fiber is used to make paper.

The temperatures rose as we continued across the high desert region. After spending a week at the coast with temperatures ranging in the fifties and sixties, the mid eighties seemed like a blast furnace when we stepped out of our pickup.

We are camped along the Snake River at Hells Gate State Park this morning. Soon we will be headed back into the mountains of Idaho and Western Montana. We’re heading over Lolo pass into Missoula this morning and then across the state to Helena and Great Falls on our way to my cousin’s place. The drive will afford us a lot more interesting scenery and many changes in climate and temperature. The wheat harvest should be nearly completed as we get to the River Ranch. The ranch crew may even be able to take a bit of time off after weeks of 14 hour days. If things are not finished, we’ll arrive before the crew has stopped cutting for the evening. Generally they don’t cut on Sunday mornings, so we’ll get a little visit before heading on towards home.

As we travel we marvel not only at the magnificent and diverse scenery of this land, but also at the people who have figured out so many different ways to make a living off of the land. The crops are diverse and varied and the occupations of the people also are amazingly diverse. There are many different ways to live and ingenious people are thinking of new ways to make their way in this world.

Not all of the changes delight us. California-sized mansions are showing up all over Washington’s wine country. The size of the homes and the huge displays of wealth is disturbing. We also have driven by the trailer camps of the migrant workers and the mobile homes of the year-round laborers. We know that the bounty of the land is not shared evenly. There are farmsteads with crumbling barns and aging equipment where we know the owners are struggling to stay on the land and to avoid selling out to the huge agribusiness corporations with their fleets of machinery and files full of water rights. Abandoned homesteads don’t last long in this country. They are soon taken down and the land is plowed up. The farms get bigger and the signs of the folks who used to live on and love this land are erased.

The joke in our car this trip begins with the words, “If they would have asked me . . .” I offer my opinions on all sorts of things from the speed limits to the location of homes to the choice of crops. All of these things were done without my participation and without my input. There is much in this world that I do not control. And if I were in charge, the world would not be a better place. I’m prone to making all sorts of mistakes. In some cases I would make different mistakes than those currently in charge, but perfection

would not be achieved. We find our way in this world in part by learning from our mistakes.

Still it is good to see what is going on. We're enjoying the drive and the view. Today's journey will be on roads that we have driven before, but there will be new things to see nonetheless.

More adventures await us.

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## August 24, 2008 – Return to the River Ranch



While we have been traveling, mother has been hosted for the last week at my cousin's home. It is as close to a family homestead as we have. The ranch along the Missouri River in Montana incorporates the homestead of my mother's parents and grandparents. Mother did not grow up at the ranch. After her mother secured her claim, their family lived in the town of Fort Benton, about 25 miles downstream from the ranch. Driving down the hill to the ranch always feels like coming home to me. I lived and worked at the ranch for two summers during my high school years, but I've never spent a winter at the ranch. We've visited in all seasons and it has been the place of several family gatherings over the years.

It was good to re-connect with mother after a little over a week on the road. She is in good health and good spirits and we plan to have a rest day before taking two more days to return home with her. Although Susan and I routinely drive the distance from the ranch to our home in a day, the trip is just too much for a single day for mom.

Norman McLean wrote that his life is formed by rivers. The same might be said of me. I grew up next to the Boulder River in south-central Montana and we spent our early summers exploring and playing in the two-mile stretch of the boulder between our home and its confluence with the Yellowstone River. The boulder is barely navigable, but we floated it in inner tubes and homemade rafts. My first ventures with canoes and inflatable rafts were on the Yellowstone.

The Yellowstone flows into the Missouri near the Montana-North Dakota Border. The Absarokee people called the area between the two rivers a perfect place for living. They were adapted to harsh winters and sometimes blistering summer heat. The land was productive for buffalo and continues to produce a great deal of beef. There are some very beautiful hills and valleys and some forested areas as well as great expanses of open grassland. It is a good country and it supports many different kinds of human activity. It remains a land with lots of space and few people, and that is the way that the people who live there like it.

The Missouri River is one of the great rivers of America. It starts with the confluence of the Madison, Jefferson and Gallatin rivers at Three Forks and makes a large arch northward before heading off to the East. It cuts a giant swath through Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota. It forms the Iowa-Nebraska border before heading cutting across Missouri to join the Mississippi. Its annual floods have been somewhat controlled by a series of dams which also provide hydroelectric power and make increased irrigation possible. Although there is a dam upstream near Great Falls, the Missouri flows close to its natural levels as it goes by the River Ranch. The trip downstream to Fort Benton and from there through the White Cliffs, is a wonderful float and there is a lot of spectacular geological formations to view as well as abundant game along the shores. It still seems a bit wild in this area and one can imagine the journey that Lewis and Clark took up the river. Lewis returned by the Missouri. Clark took a southern route across Montana, joining up with the Yellowstone near present-day Livingston and meeting up with Lewis near the confluence of the two rivers.

All of these stories and more are a part of the river ranch. We tell parts of them when we gather and we add to them the stories of my family. My grandparents and great grandparents are buried in Fort Benton. The ashes of my aunt and uncle were scattered on the bluffs over the Missouri. Our people have literally become a part of this land.

I am a wanderer. I have not lived in any one state or any one place for more than a couple of decades. It is likely that we have more wandering in our future. My cousin has lived in the ranch all of his life. It is likely that he will die here or in town, close to the ranch. Our stories have been very different. But we cross paths from time to time and we enjoy the stories that we share of the lives we lead.

The river keeps flowing. It is a new river each time you look at it. The water is constantly in motion on its way to the Gulf of Mexico. The banks also are shifting and changing, though their rate of change is slower. Even when we stay in the same place the world changes around us.

So we'll stay here for a day and then journey on. Life still has more adventures in store for us.

## August 25, 2008 – Down the Road



Every day at the ranch is an adventure. Yesterday we borrowed my cousin's car to visit some nearby relatives. The car quit just like it was running out of gas. Since we knew it had gas, the fuel filter is the first thing to suspect in this country. After that the fuel pump was suspect. It turned out to be a crack in a fuel line that allowed the pump to suck air into the line. The end was cut off of the fuel hose and when it was reattached the car ran once again. Figuring out what is wrong and making repairs is an everyday part of farm life. While we were fiddling with the car, a large semi was loading an almost-brand new combine at a neighbor's place. A rock had been picked up by the header and wasn't noticed until it was into the collective and the combine was being transported to a dealership for repairs. Because the combine was part of a machinery rental program, another one had already been delivered to take its place during harvest. Ranchers who rent combines have to compress the work and get it all done in as short a time as possible. Combines are not inexpensive to rent.

There was some animal that was really bothering the dog last night. It couldn't be silenced from its barking. Elsie went out with a flashlight and saw something in a tree, but before it could be identified it was gone. It certainly got the hackles up on the dog. Every day on the ranch is an adventure.

But our life's adventures have mostly involved the road out of the ranch and heading down the highway towards our home, which has for most of my life been in another state. Our plan is to make it part way to Rapid City today so that tomorrow's journey won't be too stressful and we can arrive at home in time to accomplish some chores

before heading back to work on Wednesday morning. We have a brother to visit in Big Timber and some items to deliver to Susan's sister in Red Lodge for her niece, so there will be a few stops along the way.

We won't be traveling very many miles by gravel road today, but the paved roads we will take won't be the most-traveled roads in the state, either. And tomorrow we'll be traveling down a favorite road, Highway 212, that winds through the Crow and Northern Cheyenne Reservations before heading out of Southeastern Montana at Alzada. There are a lot of Americans who have lived their whole lives without ever visiting Alzada, Montana. From there, it is only about 40 miles to Belle Fourche and then an hour home.

It has been a good vacation with a wide variety of activities. We've spent time with our families and had a few days to ourselves as well. Our camper has provided a good home on the road. As we turn towards home, I am mindful of all of the people who have worked to support our vacation. My brother and his family and my cousin and his teamed up to provide care for my mother while we traveled. A seminary student and a retired pastor led worship one week, and our worship arts coordinator led worship the second week we were gone. Our secretary covered some of our work while we were gone and volunteers kept committees meeting and handled the business of the church. A lot of people combined their efforts to support our trip.

So we'll leave the ranch and its particular adventures today and head down the road. Each road has its own set of adventures and we know that the next ones will be worthy of our time and attention as well. There is a part of us that wants to keep traveling and a part of us that wants to arrive at home and settle back into our routines. Mixed feelings are probably a good sign at the end of a vacation. It is meant to be special time and a change of pace. This one certainly has been so.

We'll start on the gravel roads and build up gradually for the Interstate Highway on which we'll end the trip. Maybe our re-entry into our usual lives and routines will also be gentle with easy transitions. Onward we go!

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## August 26, 2008 – The Summer the Mountain Didn't Burn



The last night of our vacation was spend in Red Lodge. Susan's sister has lived here for nearly 30 years and it was the retirement home of my father's parents, so it is a place I have been visiting all of my life. What is different about this year is that a huge wildfire burned out of control in July and early August heading directly towards the town. Firefighters finally succeeded in stopping the forward motion just a mile short of the top of Red Lodge Mountain, the ski hill that stands over the town. The flames came within six miles of town. There were weeks of smoky skies and worried looks. The fire made a strange glow in the evenings and there were times when the flames would shoot high enough for folks in town to be able to see them. The community's annual "Festival of the Nations" was cancelled due to the smoke and firefighter operations.

The hill above town, where the airport is, is free of trees, so the houses in town were never really threatened by the fire, but the economy of the region is based on tourism - skiing in the winter and Yellowstone Park in the summer. If the trees on the mountain had burned, everyone here would have felt the pressure on the local economy.

So, for the locals, 2008 is the year that the mountain didn't burn. Prayers of thanksgiving for the firefighters and for the respite that the weather gave the area are still a part of table grace for families around here.

People who live in the forest now know that it is not "if the forest will burn," but "when the forest will burn." Fire is a part of the natural processes of the forest and until relatively recently its role was not understood. Decades of fire suppression have

allowed fuels to build up in the forest to the point where natural fires burn more violently and are larger than they would have been if some earlier fires had been allowed to run their course. Years of drought have stressed the trees and even though the drought broke this year, the trees have not fully recovered. It is anticipated that there could be as much as several decades of big fires before the forest begins to recover part of its balance.

There are not good records of the cycles of fire and re-growth, but foresters now believe that those cycles run in large blocks of time from a human perspective. It may be more than a century since conditions like the ones now being experienced have occurred. It may be that the cycles of the forest are better understood from the perspective of centuries than from the perspective of years. The problem is that federal land and forest management policy operates in short bursts. Administrations change every four or eight years and the philosophy of management swings with changes in national leadership. The perspective of any Secretary of the Interior can be vastly different from predecessors or successors. And land management is never the central focus of a political campaign or an administration's policy.

It can be frustrating for career employees of the Forest Service to have to endure the changes in policy and the simple fact that the focus of their work can shift dramatically as a result of decisions that are made thousands of miles from the mountains of the west.

But the focus in Red Lodge is not on policy or even on the national convention of the Democratic Party this week. People are simply thankful that the fire didn't come any closer to town and that the ski resort and their way of making a living was preserved for another year. It isn't that they don't care about politics, it is just that more immediate concerns have taken center stage this year. The town was relatively free of smoke last weekend and quite full of motorcycles who arrived for an annual rally. Business was up and there was a sense that life as usual was going to return.

The folks around here tell their story in terms of major events. There was the year that there was a fire in the coal mine and the year that a blizzard shut down the town for weeks. Now they have another year to add to the local annals: 2008 was the summer that the mountain didn't burn.

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## August 27, 2008 – Home



We pulled into our driveway yesterday in time to have dinner at our own dining room table. It was a good trip for us. We drove 3,419 miles without any trouble with the truck. We visited family in different locations. Our camper provided a good home on the road for us.

Some observations from the trip illustrate that our culture continues to change. None of the people that we visited on the trip subscribe to a daily newspaper. The routine that is so imbedded in our lives, is much less a part of American culture than it once was. My brother, who works part-time for a daily newspaper, knew the headlines and was even able to go out to his truck and find a copy of the newspaper, but it isn't part of their regular way of life. All of the homes we visited had computers and access to the Internet, though not all homes had high-speed Internet access. All had televisions, though there was never a television turned on in the homes we visited and we didn't watch any. We survived two weeks without regular access to the news. We did listen to the radio a bit and we got headlines from passing newspaper vending boxes and displays in stores. The world got along well without our constant monitoring.

People are not traveling as much this year. The most often cited reason is the high price of gasoline. We never had trouble finding a space in a campground to park our camper. Each campground we tried had available spaces. We saw quite a few recreational vehicles on the roads. We weren't the only ones traveling with our camper, but campground operators, roadside produce vendors, and clerks at attractions that we visited along the way all commented on the decrease of tourism from preceding years. It

was interesting that the lowest price we paid for gasoline on the trip was our initial tank of gas at home and the prices at home upon our return were the lowest we had seen on our trip.

Although there are apparently less people traveling, most are traveling at the usual speeds. We chose to drive at a slower pace to save fuel and we spend most of our time on back roads, but the few times we did drive on Interstate highways, we noted that the traffic was flowing at or above the speed limit. Despite the attention given in our local paper to over the road truckers reducing their speeds to save fuel, we didn't notice much of that. Most of the big rigs we encountered passed us quickly. On back roads, we often traveled right at the speed limit and still were passed by the big trucks. We even wondered if the high fuel costs have resulted in decreased enforcement.

Not many people travel with people who are different ages than themselves. We did encounter families traveling together, but very few elders. Most campgrounds have a few children traveling with their families, and we did find a couple of campgrounds that were mostly families with children. However, the majority of other campers we encountered were people just like us: middle aged and better couples traveling by themselves. Because we did have my mother with us for four days of our traveling, we noticed that the Americans with Disabilities Act has not removed all barriers for those who have trouble with mobility. Most businesses provide special parking for those with disabilities and there are more accessible restrooms but many challenges remain. At one state-operated highway rest stop there was ample accessible parking, paved walkways and restrooms with accessible stalls. But the restroom building was 100 yards from the parking area up a relatively steep hill. We weren't using a wheelchair, but I wished we had. We had to stop to rest in order for my mother to walk up and down the hill.

This trip didn't involve visits to the most famous of attractions. We did drive by Glacier Park on our way through Montana, but for the most part we were on back roads and away from the big tourist draws. All of the tour bus groups that we encountered on our trip were carrying Japanese guests to our country. Most of those busses were painted with Japanese characters, so they are working full-time carrying Japanese tour groups. Bus tourism across the United States is popular with Japanese tourists. Japanese tour operators are well-organized and are succeeding in filling their busses. The majority of Japanese tourists we encountered speak quite a bit of English and communication is not a problem.

This promises to be a good year for Northwestern farmers. We watched a lot of combines in the field and the grains looked good. Columbia River grain terminals have large piles of wheat on the ground, their silos filled to capacity. Barley and flax harvests also promise to be good this year. Harvest of peaches continues in the fruit regions and the apple trees are filled with fruit ready to be picked. After many years of drought, 2008

might be a better year for farmers. The combination of an abundant harvest with high prices doesn't happen very often.

One thing hasn't changed, however. It is good to be home. We love to travel, but we also love to come home.

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## August 28, 2008 – Stormy Weather



CNN Photo

Three years ago this week, Hurricane Katrina slammed the Gulf Coast, leaving behind a trail of destruction and human suffering. This week, as we remember that event and the failures of our systems of help, storm forecasters are predicting that Hurricane Gustav may hit the coast of Louisiana. The storm has already left 22 dead, including six children as it passed over Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Some forecasters predict that the storm will increase in intensity to become a category 3 hurricane before it makes landfall somewhere on the Gulf Coast. The threat of the storm has already been enough to cause oil prices to rise. Louisiana's governor, Bobby Jindal, has declared an emergency in advance of the storm, deploying 3,000 national guard troops to coastal regions to help set up shelters prepare for possible evacuations.

One doesn't have to look hard to find news of violent weather and its effects on human lives. Severe flooding in the Bihir region of India has claimed 87 lives as an entire river has changed its course, moving about 75 miles from its bed.

Severe weather has been a part of this planet since long before humans were documenting its effects. The speed with which news travels around the globe has given us increased awareness of natural disasters. Hurricanes have been battering the Gulf Coast and severe flooding has affected the Indian subcontinent since before history was recorded. The increase in human population on the planet means that there are more people affected by the storms and changes in the environment, some caused by humans, have changed the ways in which these natural disasters affect certain regions.

Changes in the Mississippi delta caused by upstream dams and other human activities mean that the intensity of storms making landfall near New Orleans is increased. The failure of levees and pumping systems contributed to the suffering when Katrina hit three years ago. There has been much work done on repairing levees and pumping stations, but officials predict that any rain in excess of one inch per hour would exceed the city's pumping capacity. It is estimated that as many as 30,000 people may need assistance with evacuation in a "worst case" scenario. About 7,000 have signed up in advance for such assistance. The city is more prepared for a storm than it was a year ago, but far less prepared than officials would like.

In the midst of all of the preparations, storm forecasters are reminding officials that predicting where the storm will go is imprecise at best and that knowing exactly what will be happening a few days from now is impossible. While we know that a devastating hurricane will again hit Louisiana, we do not know its timing. It is another reminder of the limitations of human technology. We do not control the weather and we do not know enough about the forces of this universe to accurately predict what will happen in the future. Despite amazing advances in technology, our human industry is insufficient to prevent natural disaster. New Orleans has the highest capacity pumps in the world. Officials know that they would be insufficient in the face of a storm like Katrina.

For as long as humans have experienced natural disasters they have been asking, "Why?" Why would a good and all-powerful god allow such human suffering to occur? It is the question that can never be answered to the satisfaction of a victim of a storm or a family member who survives to grieve the loss of loved ones. The reality is that God's relationship with us does not involve manipulation of the weather or control human decisions. True human freedom means that we have the power to make mistakes and poor judgments. God is not the cause of the disasters we witness.

Even as we prepare for the next storm, the church is busy dealing with the effects of the last one. Part of the long-term recovery for New Orleans has been a continual presence of the United Church of Christ in recovery work. Our church has made a commitment to the long-term work of recovery and continues to participate in community organization, distribution of resources and helping people rebuild their lives after devastating losses.

This life brings us seasons of stormy weather. Sometimes it is in the face of storms that our true nature is revealed. May the storms that threaten us this year reveal a depth of caring and compassion for one another that enables us to support each other no matter what happens.

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## August 29, 2008 – Falling Stars



Photo by Frederick Hore

Regardless of your party affiliation or who will get your vote for President of the United States, the show in Denver last night was quite a spectacle. And once again, as we sat in our living room watching it on television, I was reminded of what an unlikely candidate Barak Obama is. He is the son of an absent father, and did not come from a political family. He is a graduate of an elite law school who worked as a community organizer. He is the junior Senator from Illinois and a man that some have considered too young and too inexperienced. And he is his party's candidate for President of the United States of America. Perhaps John McCain, who will be nominated by the Republican Party next week, is just as unlikely as a candidate. Not every one who was taken prisoner of war in Vietnam survived. And many of those who did survive bear scars that prevent them from becoming candidates for anything. He was the victim of one of the most brutal personal attacks in the history of American politics during his 2000 campaign for his party's nomination. He is a survivor.

But not everyone was watching television last night. A few minutes before the speech began the 911 call center in Rapid City received a call from a distressed and panicked young man who arrived home too late to save the life of his younger brother. The firefighters and ambulance workers and deputy sheriffs who responded acted quickly and professionally. The emergency room personnel were prepared and competent, but the timing was wrong. We who witnessed parts of the event could not deny the reality of death. We could not deny the cruel, gut-wrenching pain of a brother and a mother and a room full of family members whose tears were too much for boxes of tissue to absorb.

Last night, as many in our nation focused their attention on a man who had only known his father for a short time when he was ten years old, the sons of absent fathers sat in jails, overdosed on illegal drugs, drank themselves into stupors, and participated in gang violence. Last night, as 75,000 people crammed mile-high stadium to celebrate “The Audacity of Hope,” children of struggle and poverty tried to figure out how to make the time pass in empty apartments, prepared to head off to a new school year without any new clothes, chased cockroaches out of empty cupboards, and cried themselves to sleep wondering if anyone cared. Last night, while people screamed themselves hoarse and scooped up souvenirs of an historic event in the story of this nation, single moms collapsed from exhaustion, made up stories for their babies to hide their own pain, stared into empty purses in despair, hid their tears from their children and asked themselves how much longer they could keep from falling apart.

As a pastor, I am every bit as much in the business of hope as any politician, though our callings are very different. I will never be asked to make a big speech to a stadium full of people looking for a hero, or to bring hope to a nation that has grown cynical and distrustful of the process of government. I am called to speak words of hope to a mid-sized congregation in a city with hundreds of other churches all clamoring for attention and donations. I am called to comfort the widows and survivors who grieve in the middle of the night without public attention. I am called to live so deeply in the scriptures of our people that truth that took generations to discover will not be lost in our generation but passed on to our children and grandchildren. I am called to hop in my pickup truck when I'd rather be heading for bed and drive into the hospital to meet strangers who have nowhere else to turn.

In the wee hours of this morning, I drove home on mostly deserted streets. In our town they turn the traffic lights to flashing bursts of red or yellow when there aren't enough cars to justify cycles of green, yellow and red. As I headed out of town, the clear night sky was putting on its usual display of grandeur. I parked the pickup and got out and looked up at the night sky in all of its glory. It is the same sky that inspired one of the poets of our people to utter, “O Lord, our sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! . . . When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” Our people have been looking at the night sky and repeating that song for thousands of years now and we are no less amazed at the glory of the night sky.

Then I saw a meteor streak across the night sky. Perhaps it was part of the end of the annual Perseid show that we receive each August. I know enough of science to realize that a meteor is not truly a falling star, but the brilliant and brief streak across the night sky was like one of the stars had fallen. I thought of a fifteen year-old kid who seemed to have his whole life in front of him and who couldn't find a way to go on living for even one more day. I glanced at my watch and realized that in a little over three hours the

morning glow would signal the beginning of the dawn of a new day: today. It is a sunrise that he will never witness, and a sunrise that his distracted and grieving family will scarcely notice or remember.

A star fell last night. There was nothing particularly remarkable about the moment. South Dakota ranks in the top ten states in the nation for teen suicide. Over 20 of every 100,000 teens die by suicide each year. The rate for Native Americans in South Dakota is even higher at 24 per 100,000 or just over twice the national average. There are families that have seen the deaths of three or more of their teens to suicide. No, it is not remarkable that a star fell last night.

What is remarkable is that I saw it. This child can never be anonymous to me. He can never be a statistic.

After the glow of the meteor had faded I looked to the Big Dipper and to our friend, the North Star. They were as brilliant as usual. The stars of the Milky Way were too numerous to count. A star may have fallen, but the light has not gone out of the night sky. Hope may be challenged, but it will not die. Today is a new day, but I will not be the same.

Resurrection always takes us by surprise. And I am too tired to take responsibility to look for it this morning. That's where a couple of thousand years of our people's experience comes to our rescue. We don't have to search. We don't have to assume all of the responsibility. We are not alone. God, who notices every star that falls and cares for every wildflower in the field loves us - no matter what.

Like the candidates and those who cheer them on, my night was short last night. Real hope is never contained in a spectacle or the drama of a single event. Real hope is born of the story of our people who once were slaves and now are free, who once were lost and now are found, who once had no hope but now have hope, who once doubted love but now live where "nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

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## August 30, 2008 – Last Weekend Before School



The days are definitely getting shorter. We notice it most at the end of the days. We rise and go to bed in the dark again. The timing is just right for me to see lots of wonderful sunrises as I head out of the house each morning. And our house is situated on a hill with a great view to the east, so the sunrise is a special treat each day. I think that I have more photographs of sunrises than anything else about this home. Of course, I took a couple more pictures this morning. It is beautiful.

This has been a good year for those of us who don't need too much heat. The thermometer topped 100 degrees only briefly on a couple of days. For the most part we have seen temperatures that were quite nice throughout the summer. We got enough warm days in August for the tomatoes to get the boost they needed and now we're eating fresh tomatoes with every meal. If the frost holds off, we'll have tomatoes for some time now and soon our production will outpace our consumption.

School has started in many places around the country. Here in Rapid City, the public schools begin on Tuesday, but the Catholic school system began classes last week. I happened to be on my way to the hospital yesterday when a row of school children was lined up to cross the street from the cathedral to their classrooms. Fresh, clean uniforms and kids that are anything but "uniform." I saw a couple of boys sticking one leg out as far as they could without being reprimanded for being out of line. I probably would have been one of those boys had I been in the line.

It is surprising how quickly our home has adjusted to not having school-age children. For a decade and a half our lives revolved around the school schedule. School events were posted to our work calendars, our times of arriving at the office were adjusted to

provide rides to children, and we had the annual ritual of the week before school. When our children were younger it was a week of excited anticipation. They were fired up about school, but also anxious about what it might mean. There was a sense of the unknown about each new school year. Who will my teacher be? What will the homework be like? Will I have any friends? As our children entered their high school years, there seemed to be more dread and less excitement. The less structured schedule of summer had to be given up. School meant a degree of dealing with a bureaucracy. Schools with 2,000 students have a lot of organizational problems and the process of registering for classes and getting all of the paperwork in order can be frustrating and impersonal.

The last week before school can be a stressful time for families. So the last weekend before school is often set aside for a host of family adventures that will be more difficult once school begins. Last trips to the lake or to a vacation cabin are scheduled. The weekend is not purely recreational for all people. I noticed that a local hardware store will be open on Labor Day. That means that there are plenty of home improvement projects planned for the weekend. The sad thing is that it also means that those who work in the hardware store don't get the weekend off. What does it say about our society that we can no longer find a way to take a day off from work? I understand that essential workers, like hospital staff, firefighters and police officers are needed every day of the year. I am not convinced that the stores have to be open so that we can shop every day of the year. And I am sad that so many people are denied the simple pleasures of a day off. The days of community picnics and less structure seem to be fading.

I fear we have forgotten the commandment about remembering the Sabbath and keeping it holy. If we can't get the concept of a holy day of rest, does our society have much of a chance with respect for parents, murder, adultery, stealing and covetousness?

We've planned a weekend of light activities at the church. The office will be closed today and Monday and on Sunday we've scheduled worship but no meetings. We want our families to have time for each other this weekend. I've started out by posting my daily blog at least a half hour late this morning and I may be even later on Monday. The week really isn't much different for us. We'll be preparing for worship today and we usually take Monday as a day off anyway. Day off often means a time to catch up on household repairs and such. But there may be time to slip up to the lake for a picnic or a short paddle or maybe both.

May you experience sabbath this weekend. Who knows? It could become a habit.

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## August 31, 2008 – The Burning Bush



There are times when the task of preaching is one of explaining a text that is not familiar to the congregation. The Bible is a long and complex collection of readings and there are some passages that are obscure and not often read. But, it seems, more often, my job is to speak about something that is familiar. Because we follow a cycle of readings that repeats every three years, texts re-appear. Even when I focus my sermon on different readings within the lectionary, I have now completed ten cycles of the readings. Each time I research a text for preaching there is a small sense of *deja vu*: I've considered these thoughts before.

I'm sure that it is similar for the congregation. When the text is familiar they must wonder what new insight or idea could come from something that they have heard many times before.

Of course the job of the preacher is to make connections between the text and the lives of the congregation. Since the lives of our people are constantly changing, the connections are different each time I consider a text. And there are new insights to be gained from studying the familiar. Our Bible is a collection of big ideas and concepts - ones that did not emerge in a single generation. The story of the exodus was shaped and re-shaped by the history of our people and a lifetime would be all too short to discover all of its meanings. We never really master the stories of scripture, we merely encounter them from our limited perspective.

So today we consider the remarkable story of God's call to Moses. Moses was an unlikely candidate for the position of leader of our people from slavery to freedom. He had a fiery temper that had already gotten him into trouble. He had a strange past, being born a Jew, but raised an Egyptian. It was unlikely that the slaves would trust someone who had lived in the house of Pharaoh during his youth. He was not an eloquent speaker. He tripped over his words and sometimes was unable to say what he meant. Sometimes his brother had to speak for him in order for him to be understood. It seems a mystery why Moses was the one chosen.

And God's method of getting Moses' attention was strange as well. Jacob discerned God's will through interpreting his dreams. His father has wrestled with an angel in the night as well. His great-grandfather Abraham had heard the voice of God in the words of visiting strangers. The traditions of our people already held many stories of God coming to people in many different ways.

Fire wasn't one of them until Moses turned aside in wonder at a bush that burned but was not consumed.

Fire has fascinated people for as long as people have known about it. It seems to have a life of its own, dancing and flickering, light rising on waves of heat. And yet it is not alive in the sense that humans and animals are alive. It does, however, exhibit behavior. It grows and subsides, moves and travels. It consumes fuel and transforms them into heat and smoke and ash. It warms and provides a means for cooking food and it is capable of burning. Parents are aware of the attraction and the danger of fire. They warn their children of its danger. If you play with fire, you're going to get burned.

Moses was fascinated by the appearance of the fire. It caused him to turn aside from what he was doing, but it wasn't the sight that changed the course of his life and subsequently changed the course of human history. It was what he heard when he approached the fire: "Take off your shoes, you're standing on holy ground."

It was a lesson that our people had been trying to learn for several generations - at least as far back as grandfather Abraham. God is not restricted to a single place. Holiness is not reserved for chapels and altars and places of worship. God is everywhere. Every place is sacred. There is no place that one can go to be away from God. You can't run away from the great movement of God's relationship with the people.

Moses didn't get to choose his vocation. Moses thought being a shepherd was fine enough. God demanded no less than the liberation of the people who had been slaves for so many generations that they didn't have a clue how to behave as free people. Moses thought working for his father-in-law would be a good way to get by. God demanded no less than serving the people of Israel as they discovered their identity and wandered through the wilderness in search of a home and a future.

The burning bush was nothing compared to the fire God ignited in Moses' heart. The passion for freedom and justice burned within him so brightly that after that day he never turned aside from his quest. It burned but did not consume the man Moses was becoming. A genuine passion for freedom is like that. It burns without consuming. It is no less a miracle than the fire through which Moses heard God's voice.

But today I have the task of talking about that familiar story with people in a new place in their history. And ours is not a time marked by passion for the causes of religion or commitment to faith over the long haul. Ours is not a time when people are inclined to trust any leader who asks them to turn aside from their pleasures and pastimes.

Compared to Moses' audience with Pharaoh, however, my congregation is incredibly receptive to the message. And if I don't get the story explained fully, I know that the opportunity will arise again and again. As long as I live the stories of our people will dwell within me and seek expression in my life.

Once again we'll be playing with fire in church this morning. It is possible that sparks will fly. God's call to freedom continues to burn brightly in the lives of the people. May we recognize God in the flames of our spirit.

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## September 1, 2008 – Labor Day



In our human traditions, Labor Day signals the end of summer. Although the equinox is still twenty days away, the first Monday of September signals the return of fall programs and schedules for many community organizations. The start of school is one of the calendars by which we measure our activity.

There are other signs that the summer is passing. The twin fawns that were born last spring are nearly as large as their mother. Last night they checked out my wildflower bed and our compost heap before heading across the street to the neighbor's place. Somehow they have survived the threats of growing up in a semi-urban neighborhood and although they aren't exactly car smart they have managed to survive their crossings of Sheridan Lake Road where the traffic whizzes by at 45 miles per hour and more. You can still see the spots on the young deer, but they are not as pronounced as they were a month ago. In another month they will have faded completely.

The mother turkeys have been showing off their broods lately. It is interesting how some baby birds hardly look like the adults they will become. As soon as the down is off the chicks, they look like miniature turkeys.

The garden is settling into its late summer produce. We're still getting zucchini, of course and the tomatoes are coming on pretty good. We haven't harvested any corn yet, but it is getting close. The corn harvest isn't going to be quite as good as it looked earlier. We probably took our vacation at the wrong time and the watering may have been a bit lax while we were gone. But we will have corn and we are used to

supplementing our own production with corn from the farmers market, which has been very good for several weeks now.

We had a brief rain shower last night but parts of the lawn are going dormant from lack of water, a typical phenomena for a 1/2 acre lawn with a somewhat lazy homeowner. Even the parts of the grass that are green require less frequent mowing than a month ago. I'm ready for the break. I often wonder why someone would want to live in a place where the grass had to be mowed year round. People in those places miss the joy of blowing snow in the winter, too.

We plan to take advantage of the day off by getting our family together. We'll probably cook outside on the grill and have picnic fare.

In this part of the country we have wonderful autumn weather and so this weekend is not a signal of the end of outdoor activities. Last year we were picking vine ripened tomatoes into October and there have been several years when we have taken autumn vacations. We usually get a good frost sometime in the last week of September or the first couple of weeks of October, so we've got another month or so before we need to worry about that. And our weather continues to be good after that first frost with many pleasant days for outdoor activities.

Labor Day is a good day to reflect on the contributions of hard-working men and women who provide so many services to our society. We celebrate the tradespersons who build, wire and plumb our homes and then keep working to keep them in repair, the workers who keep our water flowing and carry away our garbage, the maintenance people who keep hospitals, libraries and other public buildings safe and secure. Work is one of the blessings of this life, and on Labor Day we celebrate the workers and their contributions to our society.

I wish we could curb our consumption for a single day so that those who work in retail trades could have the day off as well. I confess that this year I haven't planned ahead well enough and will be making a quick trip to the grocery store and I'll be glad that they are open to serve me and others.

I am sure that there will be plenty of parades and picnics across the country. Such events provide good places for politicians to loosen their ties and ply their trade in an outdoor setting. The Democrats have just finished their national convention. The Republicans convene their four day event today. These events provide jobs for reporters and television commentators.

Fortunately the seasons don't change in a single day. Like so many other things in life, the change in seasons is a gradual process. There are, however, changes that we can see. The days are shorter and the nights are a bit cooler. We have started to check for

jackets or sweaters before heading outside in the evening. And the schedule of meetings is starting to fill up once again.

Many cultures count the passage of time by counting the seasons. It is not a bad system. I know I enjoy watching the changes.

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## September 2, 2008 – Weathering September



NOAA Satellite Image

It was chilly in our bedroom when I awoke this morning. I had to lie there for a minute to remember the feeling. It seems like it has been a long time since I have felt chilly. It's not a rare feeling around here, even in the summer, but after August's heat, it feels good. The news coming from Louisiana and Mississippi is hopeful. It sounds as if people got to shelters and that the blast from Gustav wasn't as bad as forecast. I'll reserve my judgment for a day or so. I remember that the initial reports from Katrina were that things weren't as bad as forecast - then it turned out that it was worse. But I remain hopeful. There are some people in crowded shelters and there is a shortage of creature comforts with the electricity down, but it appears that most are safe for the moment.

Hannah, the next hurricane in line appears to be heading for landfall on the Atlantic Coast, perhaps somewhere in the Carolinas. Tropical Storm Ike is headed toward the Bahamas and is forecast to become a hurricane. This is the season for violent weather throughout the Atlantic.

I heard a radio interview with a woman whose Mississippi home was flooded by the storm surge that followed Gustav. It was the third home their family had owned in three different states and the third to receive major damage from a hurricane. One is almost tempted to invite her to consider living in South Dakota. We haven't had a hurricane in recent memory. Of course we are not immune from violent weather. Ask any resident of Spencer or Oglala. Tornadoes can wreak havoc. And the homeowners whose homes

were destroyed by wildfire last year lost no less than those whose homes were destroyed by hurricanes.

The good news about the lessening strength of the storm is that there was less loss and fewer people were affected. The bad news is that we are always in danger of becoming complacent. The truth is that New Orleans was not ready for a Katrina-sized storm and things could have been much worse. Constant vigilance is part of preparing for disasters.

For someone who has lived his entire life far away from coastal areas, the size and the power of these storms is truly impressive. I look at the satellite images and see storm clouds that fill the Gulf of Mexico and realize that there are forces in this world that are truly immense. Even with the diminished force of Gustav, there are a lot of places across the Southern United States that have gotten a lot of rain and there is more to come.

The forecasters tell us that this is only the beginning of the season and that there can be a lot more big storms in the next couple of months. A good deal of prayer and preparation are in order.

Most of the world's population lives in coastal areas. The centers of continents are relatively lightly populated compared to the coasts. There are many attractions to coastal areas and not everyone seeks out the solitude and separation from other folk that we treasure. And the effects of severe weather are not limited to our country. The victims of flooding in India are suffering more intensely than folk in the Gulf states. The effects of severe drought are more evident on the African continent than in our own. One doesn't have to look very far to see the effects of weather upon human populations and suffering seems to lurk in every corner of the globe.

But there is work to be done where we are. Once again we will participate in special offerings to support the victims of storms. There will be a call for more work camps and more resources to help clean up flood damaged homes along the Gulf. The "flood buckets" that our congregation made up for the material aids offering this year probably will head toward floods closer to home, but they are part of the bigger picture of disaster response through our network of congregations in Church World Service. CWS is already at work in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, other Caribbean locations and on the Gulf Coast, distributing blankets and supplies. Because CWS has been at work in Gulf Coast states continuously since Katrina hit, there are more volunteers, better organization and more resources in the area than was true before Katrina.

We will weather September and October together. And we will weather the rest of the months of the year. And we acknowledge that we need each other and that we are all connected. As we wait anxiously for news of loved ones and of people we have never met, we are reminded that we are all one human family on this globe.

May we continue to participate in systems of help and relief for our sisters and brothers who are victims of the weather.

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## September 3, 2008 – Beneath the Cross of Jesus



I have tried to live my life as a disciple of Jesus. Christianity is more than an idea for me, it is more than a philosophy. It is a commitment. The relationship with the church that began with the faith of my parents is one that I have made my own. The faith into which I was confirmed has become a life-long passion that defines who I am. I am reminded of this faith by many different things. One of those reminders is the large white outdoor cross that stands on our church grounds. I park near that cross and I look up at it every day. I have seen it in all kinds of weather and all sorts of lighting. I've watched the sunrise behind that cross many times and I've looked up at it in the dark of night. I've looked at it with a cloudy background and with a clear blue sky behind it. I've watched a rainbow arch over it.

I am unapologetically Christian. It is something that I have been for all of my life. Certainly it is something that I will be for as long as I live. My faith is not some garment that can be taken off and put on again at will. It is my identity. Christianity is not what I do as much as who I am.

Having said that, I am aware that the family of Christians is a wide and diverse family. There are those within and those outside of our family of faith who have an understanding of Christianity that is quite different from mine.

There are Christians whose faith calls them to work for the conversion of all non-Christians to our faith. I am not one of them. There are Christians whose interpretation of scripture make them opposed to scientific method. I am not one of them. There are

Christians who believe that being Christian makes one morally superior to others. I am not one of them.

This does not mean that those other people are somehow less Christian than I. We belong to a very large and very diverse family of faith. Not all Christians are fundamentalists. Not all Christians are politically conservative. But some are.

The news media like to make the world seem less complex than it really is. They want to assign labels to people and pool them into categories. There are conservative fundamentalist Christians who are being very outspoken participants in this week's Republican National Convention. The religious right has been very vocal and forceful in pursuing its political agenda for many years. But it is a mistake to assume that they speak for all Christians, and when news reporters make that assumption their stories mislead. God cares for all humans and hasn't expressed any preference for one political party over another.

I have learned a lot from my conversations with Christians who lived in China during the years of the cultural revolution. The official governmental repression of religion did not stop people from being faithful. It did not take away their traditions or their convictions. There were many hardships and cruelties endured by faithful Christians in those years. But one of the blessings of that kind of pressure is that Christians found ways to set aside their differences. Denominationalism became petty under that pressure. Distinctions became unimportant. While the distinction between Roman Catholic and protestant continues in contemporary China most other denominational distinctions have faded. There is a strain of exclusive fundamentalism that has arisen recently among Chinese Christians. It is the result, in part, of missionaries who have come to China since the cultural revolution. The challenge to the theology of the traditional churches and the demand that "real" Christians must adhere to a narrow set of beliefs stands in contrast to the history of the Church in China and to the ancient traditions of our faith.

It seems that whenever and wherever Christians try to make their faith exclusive and define it by who does not belong, there is certainly more to the story. Contrary to the line of reasoning that you will find in some corners of our faith, the early church was widely inclusive. Distinctions between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free persons, between men and women were all overcome in the vision of Paul and in the lives of early congregations. This does not mean that there were no differences or tensions - hardly so. The New Testament contains story after story about conflicts that arose in the early church. Our tradition of disagreeing with one another is as old as the church itself.

So to my brothers and sisters in the faith who believe that those who disagree with them are not Christian: "We are not going away and we will not give up on our claims to the faith and the family of faith." And to the outsiders who think that we are all the same:

“We are a large and diverse family and if you think you can lump us all into the same category, you’re missing the truth of the situation.”

And to myself: “We are all members of the same family and I cannot say to another part of the family, ‘I have no need of you.’” (1 Corinthians 12).

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## September 4, 2008 – Day of the Children



This Sunday we will be holding our annual “kick off” event for our church school. In an aging congregation, the number of children can vary quite a bit as families with children tend to come and go a bit more than our older members. The congregation, however, remains committed to quality programming for children and the smaller size of our classes enables us to provide more individualized attention to the children who participate in our programs. There will be plenty of excitement with a clown, balloons, an old fashioned potluck dinner and special activities for the children.

Sunday also is the beginning of our annual “40 Days of Prayer for Children.” Each year we participate with Christians around the world in setting aside 40 days for intentional prayers for the world’s children. The stories of our people are filled with horrible stories of attacks against children. Children are all too frequently the innocent victims in the schemes and power plays of adults. Moses narrowly escaped death when Pharaoh attempted genocide to decrease the population of Israelite children. Matthew reports a similar narrow escape when Joseph and Mary take Jesus to Egypt shortly after his birth to avoid Herod’s attack on Jewish children out of fear of an uprising. The tears of mothers weeping over the death of their babies stain the stories of our people and color our view of the world.

Attacks on children are not relegated to the past, however. Innocent children continue to be disproportionate victims of war, famine, violence, and poverty throughout the world. Children are forced into armies, beaten, discarded and abused in many countries of our

world today. In every generation we are called to stand up to acts of violence against children and to defend the innocent.

When we think of children, our thoughts are drawn to our sister church in Los Guido, Costa Rica, where children are the majority of the participants. In the neighborhood surrounding the church there are many households of single mothers with multiple children. The church's feeding and Christian education programs attract lots of children, at times more than the facility can hold.

September is the month of independence for Costa Rica. September 15 is Día de Independencia, the national day of celebration of independence. But there is another holiday in Costa Rica in September that is similarly important. Next Tuesday is Día del Niño, the day of the children. Children are venerated in Costa Rica and there will be events and activities throughout the country. More than 2,500 children are expected for the national celebration in downtown San Jose at Teatro Popular Melico Salazar. Clowns and other performers will participate in drama and skits to entertain children. Additional events are planned for the national museum and other cultural centers. There will be other events in churches and homes to celebrate children and their value to the nation.

Of course children are of great value in every country. And most of the world's children will not be receiving any special attention this month. That is one of the reasons why 40 days of prayer for children is so important to us. We need to turn our attention away from the things that make the headlines in the newspapers and the evening news on the television. We need to remember that the loudest and most dramatic events are not the whole story of our world. We need to be reminded that children, often forgotten in poverty and a world of violence are worthy of our love, our care, and our coordinated efforts to give them security and the basics resources of life.

Our Sunday School song declares, "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in God's sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world." As disciples of Jesus, we too are called to love the children of the world. Unlike Jesus, we are not able to love all the children at the same time. We need to extend our love one child at a time.

So Join me on September 7 and for the next 40 days by offering a prayer for children each day.

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## September 5, 2008 – Multi-cultural Faith



Over the years, I have ended up with a large number of symbols of faith. Crosses, candles, pictures, musical instruments and other items have come into my life and they have meaning to me. These items are not my faith, but rather symbols that point the way to experiences and stories through which my faith has grown. In my office there is a table that is intricately carved. It was purchased from the artists in India by my friend Bill Hughes. After Bill died the table was donated to the church and it has come to be in my office for this time. It is covered with many different symbols of faith: a cross from El Salvador, a drum from Kenya, a lei made of nuts from Hawaii, a boomerang from Australia, Maracas from Costa Rica, sweetgrass and sage from the Dakota prairies. There is a Chalice and paten we obtained in Chicago just before our ordination and another set that was made by Sioux Pottery for the 1996 National Youth Event held in North Carolina. There is a dish of ashes burned from the palms of Palm Sunday. Near the table is a didgeridoo and a rain stick.

The objects on the table change from time to time as new items are acquired or as others are given away or find different uses. It provides a focus for my meditations at times and at other times it provides interesting items for children to explore and ways to speak to them about travels and about different cultures.

The first experiences with mission and the expansion of Christianity were to nearby places with similar cultures. The expansive Roman Empire provided a language for faith and a setting for taking the faith to other areas and new audiences. As the years went by, Christianity spread inside of a variety of cultural contexts and language groups. For

the most part the faith spread as people spread so that it was always delivered in a cultural context. When the Roman empire expanded into northern Europe and England Christianity came with the Latin language and ties to the culture of Rome. When Europeans settled in the Americas, they brought Christianity wrapped in their own languages and cultural traditions. In the nineteenth century, when the first missionaries from the United States ventured to Hawaii and then to many other countries of the world they took language and culture with them.

We have made mistakes of imposing our culture on others without respect for the culture and traditions that were present. The story of the expansion of Christianity carries many wonderful tales of loving and dedicated people who freely shared their faith and brought medical care, education and other important services to people in distant locations. That same story carries tales of cultural imperialism and of deep disrespect for the traditions and cultures of others. At the same time, Christianity has been shaped by the cultures that the faithful have encountered as they traveled around the world. Hymns and songs from other languages and cultures express the faith in deep and powerful ways. Hand-painted crosses and hand-stitched art works from central America give vibrant color and rich meaning to our story.

Christianity is a multi-cultural faith, with expressions from around the world.

The table in my office reminds me that not all faithful people experience Christ in exactly the same way and that we gain much of faith from other people and other cultures. The story of Christ has been taken to the “ends of the world” and now that faith comes to us from all sorts of places. There is no single language that expresses our faith. Chinese and Swahili, Lakota and Spanish, English and Japanese, and a thousand different languages are used for heartfelt prayers and expressions of faith. Our church with its mission and ministries is just one small corner of a world-wide family of faith.

The table in my office is not an altar. Its items are there to be picked-up and used to be explored and experienced. It is not the central visual focus of my private devotions, though I sometimes light the candle on the table and look at its objects as I pray. It is, rather, a way to tell some of the story of my faith journeys and of the faithful people who have guided and enhanced my faith.

And sometimes, when I tell the stories, others can experience the vast scope of our faith in this wondrously diverse world that God has created.

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## September 6, 2008 – The Fawns in the Yard



Regular readers of this blog are probably tired of my deer pictures. I keep trying to take good pictures of the deer in our yard, and my lack of skill as a photographer and the quick speed of the deer often results in blurry photographs. Besides, I keep talking about deer in the blog over and over. Part of the reason is that they are a part of our lives. We see them nearly every day. And deer change quickly. The twins that were born in our back yard last year are no longer identifiable with us. We think that they are probably a part of the gang of about seven yearlings that are roaming our neighborhood. The mothers are getting ready for the changes of winter. They're weaning this year's fawns and they're pushing the yearlings away to their own activities. The little bucks are starting to sprout their spike horns and there is a sense of change in the air.

The fawns being weaned means that we're seeing them, primarily in the daytime, when we don't see the does. During the day, when the moms think it is safe, they leave the fawns. This year's twins have hooked up with another spring fawn and the three of them hang out in our yard quite a bit because our neighbor to the West has a quarter acre that is not mowed and cover is close for the little deer. But they like to munch the tender green grass in our yard. They also check out the compost pile each day and when they can reach it, nibble on corn leaves through the garden fence. Their spots are starting to fade, but they still show.

It always amazes me how the little ones can seem to disappear just by walking into the tall grass.

I think that we may be in for an early fall this year. At least the mothers seem to be weaning their little ones a bit earlier. The geese are starting to gather into larger groups and the trees are showing a little bit of color. Because our spring was so late the summer seems especially short. My sweet corn need a week of hot weather and sunshine. The same wouldn't hurt the tomatoes, either. I think the yield is going to be down from last year by quite a bit, but we planted a couple of extra plants this year, so we should do OK. The cherry tomatoes are really producing and we're getting a couple of ripe "big boys" about every other day. But there are a lot of green tomatoes on the plants and it keeps threatening to freeze. It didn't quite make it to sixty today and there was a hard frost about 20 miles from our home this week.

Change is in the air.

Normally I like change. But a few weeks of summer weather wouldn't hurt my feelings at all this year.

The good news for someone like me who doesn't deal with heat too well is that we never had a spell of extreme heat this summer. I think I only saw a few days in the '90's and only one that I can remember when it got up to 100 degrees. As usual our nights have been cool and our home has been very comfortable without air conditioning.

Tomorrow signals another change for our congregation. Sunday School Rally Sunday is the kick off for our fall programming. It will be the beginning of our fourteenth year as pastors of this congregation. Having completed thirteen years as pastors of this church means that we have lived here longer than any other place in our married lives. We also have served this congregation longer than any of the other pastors who have served it in its 130 year history. We've been pastors for one tenth of the church's journey. Longevity has its advantages. It also can mean that we fall into routines that may not be the most helpful. Our congregation will need to continue to explore new ideas and new ways of ministry. In a few more years, the majority of the congregation will have belonged to the church fewer years than I have. I am already seen as part of the "old guard." Room will need to be made for new leadership to emerge.

I'm up early today for a three-hour drive to Chamberlain for a four-hour meeting. Three hours to return home means a ten-hour day by this afternoon. It is what we do in South Dakota. The distances are long and we need to find the energy to get together with our colleagues and work together on the mission and ministry of our Conference. As one who loves to drive, the challenge is still inviting. And today I'm traveling with three colleagues so the conversation in the car will be spirited to say the least. Maybe our meeting is the signal of more change. The South Dakota Conference is experiencing considerable change since the resignation of our Conference Minister and the move to a single staff person during an interim period while we evaluate our priorities and consider what our next steps might be. Today's meeting gives us the opportunity to do

some “out of the box” thinking about how we might engage in meaningful mission and ministry together without the level of staff support that we have experienced in the past.

The little fawns in my yard are not aware of all of the changes that are occurring to them. They have never experienced winter’s cold and they have yet to see their first snowflakes. They’ve survived the dangers of the busy streets and escaped the mountain lions so far. But life can be harsh and there are many dangers that await them in the months to come. Right now they are experiencing a bit more freedom and learning to graze a bit farther from their mothers. They are experiencing the sense of safety that comes from having a few peers around. They are learning to eat enough to maintain their health.

Perhaps we too are like the fawns. We have much to learn and we really don’t know what the future holds for our church, for our conference, for our country, or for the world. We will have to wait to experience history as it unfolds. It seems to us that the times in which we live are momentous, and perhaps we are right. Change will come whether or not we seek it. Many changes are caused by forces beyond our control.

With change in the air, so is excitement and opportunity. May we learn the art of balancing caution and exuberance as we embrace the changes of our lives.

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## September 7, 2008 – Daily Bread



We eat in order to sustain life. Food is required for our bodies to function. But very few of us have lived for any amount of time on the bare minimum of food required to sustain life. We are used to having many choices about food and a great variety of foods available to us. And food, for us, has become more than sustenance. Eating has an important social function. We gather around the table to share the joy of eating and the joy of being together.

Religious communities have many traditions and ceremonies that involve food. The stories of our people are filled with reports of times when food was scarce as well as reports of times of plenty. And food has become a part of some of our most sacred ceremonies.

The Exodus from slavery in Egypt is one of the “forever” stories of our people. Long before the birth of Jesus, our people had identified ourselves by the telling of the story of how we were once slaves and how we came to be free people. Our scriptures contain a direct mandate to teach the story of exodus in every generation. It is a duty of parents to teach this story to their children.

Long before the time of Jesus, the telling of this story was accompanied by a special meal and ceremonial foods. By the time Jesus said to his disciples, “I have long desired to share the passover with you,” there were centuries of tradition that surrounded the meal and the stories that accompanied it.

Our people had to leave Egypt quickly, with short notice, so the passover is served with unleavened bread. Since there was no time to allow the bread to rise, it was baked in haste and came out flat. Our people used the blood of lambs to mark their doorposts when the angel of death visited the Egyptians, so lamb is the main course of the passover meal. But the lamb must be prepared in a specific way so that we remember how it happened when we left the land of slavery. Bitter herbs remind us of the bitterness of slavery, haroseth reminds us of the mortar that was used in construction when we were forced labor. Saltwater reminds us that we passed through the Red Sea from slavery to freedom. The meal is served with four cups of wine, each with a special meaning and offered with special ceremony. Each item of the meal has a significance and a meaning. Instructions for preparing, serving, and eating the passover meal appear in many places in our scriptures. In Exodus, Deuteronomy and Leviticus there are different sets of instructions, all with a common theme: This meal is more than getting food into our bodies to sustain them. It is about getting our story into our hearts and minds that we might continue to live in freedom.

Key to our identity as a people, however, is a dramatic transformation of that meal. Jesus, on the night that he was betrayed and on the eve of his arrest, trial and crucifixion, gathered his disciples in an upper room to observe the passover. It was the traditional meal of our people, endowed with meanings and rituals that had been practiced for centuries and were ensconced in scripture and tradition.

But on that night Jesus took the bread after they had eaten, offered a prayer of thanksgiving, broke it and gave it to his disciples. On that night, Jesus took the cup of blessing, gave thanks and gave it to his disciples. He asked them to remember him whenever they ate and drank. He spoke of the broken bread as symbol of his broken body and of wine as symbol of the blood of his sacrifice.

Ever since that evening, our people have made special ritual and ceremony over the sacrament of communion. With the simple gifts of bread and wine or juice, we have sought to remember faithfully the sacrifice and the love that Jesus shared. When we eat and drink this meal we experience the continuing presence of the resurrected Christ in our lives.

Because it is the common practice of all of the disciples of Jesus, it has also become a meeting point for the great family of the Church throughout so many generations. In this meal we are connected with faithful persons whose lives occurred before our time and with those who are yet unborn. Our meal symbolizes the legacy of faith that did not begin with us and that will not be ended when our time on this earth has come to its conclusion.

A simple bite of bread and a small sip of juice carry, for us, layer upon layer of meaning. We think of the journey from slavery to freedom and of all of the hard lessons we learned on the way. We think of the sacrifice of love and how life triumphs over death

even in a world that is broken and often filled with evil. We remember when our faith was shared by a dozen disciples and when it has been shared by crowds in cathedrals. We remember our hard times and our celebrations. We think of our forebears who have died and of distant generations who will be born long after we have died.

A simple bite of bread and a small sip of juice carry so much meaning for us that we often are not conscious of all of the nuances of the act. We are never certain which emotions will be stirred by a particular occasion. We know that what we are doing is a participation in something much bigger than ourselves. It is a sacred act: sacrament.

Jesus' instructions to us about this meal contain nothing about the role of priests and bishops, of authorization for ministry or who says what words when the meal is shared. These all come from years of tradition and from the very human institution of our church. Jesus simply asked, "whenever you eat, remember." The sacrament doesn't lie in the rituals of the institutional church, but in the common memory shared.

Today we will eat. Today we will remember. It is enough for now.

We will continue to have discussions and debates about who becomes a minister and how that process is accomplished. We will continue to have dissension within the church about who should be our leaders and what their authority should be. We will continue to grumble about the ways that our church fails to live up to our expectations at times. But those will not be our focus for today.

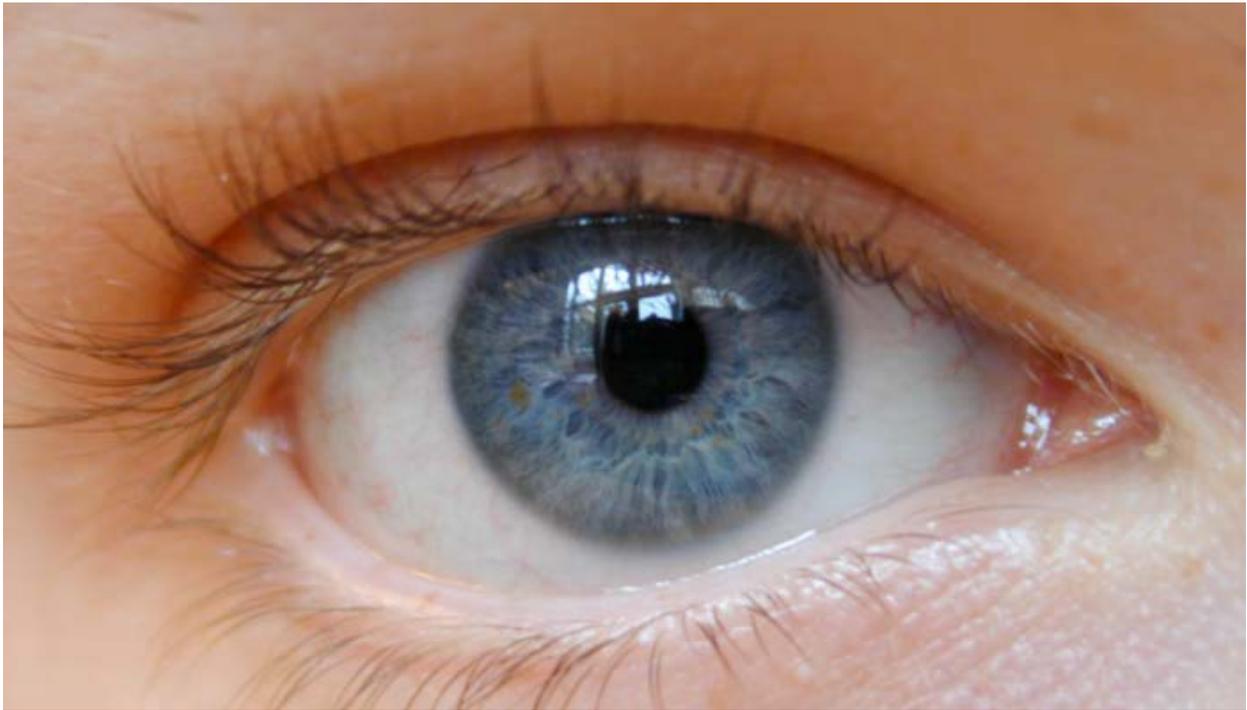
Today we will eat. Today we will remember. It is enough for now.

And it is enough for tomorrow if we share our meal with our guests and with our children.

Come to the table, for everything has been made ready.

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September 8, 2008 – Vision



At least once a month I sit down for a conversation with a friend who is blind. We've been visiting together for more than a decade now and she has been blind for all of the years that I have known her. Sometimes when I talk to her, I close my eyes. I try to imagine what blindness might be like, but of course, I cannot. I don't have any frame of reference for total blindness. I have had a few experiences of having blindfolds over my eyes, sometimes for a couple of hours, but never for days. And without my glasses, the world is pretty much out of focus. But I am lucky to have the kind of vision problems that can be corrected by glasses. But I have had enough conversations with my friend over the years to know that blindness is not the worst thing that can happen to a human being. And that living with blindness can be a life that is filled with meaning and with joy. I still would not wish blindness for myself or for anyone else.

My family has a history of imperfect vision. I remember the stories of my aunt going to Chicago to be fitted with contact lenses long before they were popular or convenient. I remember the elaborate preparations for inserting the lenses. She had suction cups to take them in and out and there were all sorts of chemicals for cleaning them and for soothing her eyes. Later, as an adult, I was fitted with contact lenses and wore them for some time. I didn't have to go through the kinds of elaborate processes that those who wore the first contact lenses did.

Later my aunt received cornea transplants. First one eye and a year later the other. The process meant leaving the farm and spending several months near a university hospital where the procedures could be completed.

So I come from people who are a little out of focus, but there isn't much blindness in my family. We do have a history of diabetes and there have been several different family members who have had vision problems due to diabetic retinopathy. Vessels in the back of the eye leak and cause swelling that makes it difficult for the eye to focus. Left untreated, it results in a loss of focus and eventually blindness.

But we live in a time of incredibly effective eye treatments. There are a wide variety of medical interventions that can be used to slow the effects of various diseases and, in many cases, to reverse the negative effects on vision. Ophthalmologists are able to go far beyond offering lenses to correct vision. There are now surgical interventions that can reduce or eliminate the need for glasses. And there are many different options for the treatment of diabetic retinopathy. Medicines and laser treatments can reduce the leaking. Other treatments can address the edema.

We're up early this morning because my mother is going to have a procedure to address her vision problems today. The procedure is called vitrectomy. It is a common procedure for addressing problems related to diabetic retinopathy, but the procedure is also used for a variety of other eye conditions including macular hole, retinal detachment, and bleeding, injury or infection within the eye. The procedure is performed under a microscope and special lenses that enable the doctor to see the back of the eye. It involves tiny incisions through which microsurgical instruments are used to complete the work.

It is an amazing process to consider. I can think about it in a very rational way and I can understand that the surgeon has practiced this procedure and other procedures under the microscope, but it is still challenging for me to understand how humans were able to develop and conduct such surgical techniques in a way that these procedures become routine for those who perform them. Inserting anything into a human eye could never become routine for me. But then, I could never become a surgeon. It is a special calling.

My role today is to wait and to be a caregiver for my mother. We are very hopeful that this procedure will result in a significant improvement in vision. Of course there are no guarantees, but there is much experience with other patients to support our hopefulness.

I suspect that the surgeon is named in the prayers of people many times each week. I know he is in my prayers this morning. God, of course, is not in the business of intervening in human history for the purpose of giving verbal directions to competent surgeons. God's way of guiding the hands of the surgeons is much more subtle. I have no doubt, nonetheless that God is present in the process.

When you consider the anatomy of the eye, vision is an incredibly wondrous phenomenon. When you consider all of the potential injuries and diseases that can

affect treatment, it is amazing that doctors and surgeons have developed such incredibly effective treatments for such a wide variety of conditions. We are fortunate to live in this time when there are so many good options for treatment of eye disorders.

Still, I may experiment with closing my eyes a bit this morning. I'm comfortable trusting the surgeon to do his job. I'm not quite ready to watch all of it.

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September 9, 2008 – Seeking Freedom



The commandment to teach the story of the Exodus in every generation has been honored for thousands of years. Some generations have been more thorough in their teachings, others have been less so. But the truth is that our people have never fully realized the potential of freedom. We, like the Israelites roaming throughout the desert, are continually finding activities and causes that limit and restrict our freedom.

We think that pursuing whatever we want is an expression of freedom, but that kind of thinking often leads to enslavement. Many families in our community and around the world are feeling oppressed by a lack of time. They think they want the best for their children so they choose to raise children in two-career households so that there will be more financial resources. They sign up their children for constant activity so that they will have structures in their lives and so that they will be occupied while the parents are working. They develop complex schedules of activities and invest large amounts of time and financial resources in having the right uniforms, driving children to and from

practices, watching games and other activities, and more. They become busy that there is less time at home. Meals are eaten “on the run,” and days off from work are filled with events and activities. They believe that they are in control of their time, but they find themselves feeling out of control. They long for a morning to just sleep in, a time to just relax, a few moments to just be at home. And they think that their exhaustion comes from the things others do to them.

Freedom is about making real choices. It is about the ability to know when to say “no” as well as “yes.” Freedom is understanding your priorities and making the decisions that reflect those priorities.

For thousands of years, our people have believed that the first priority of each one of us should be our relationship with God. It is the first of the ten commandments: “No other gods.” But we have rarely lived our lives as if there was only on God. We have pursued financial success, the accumulation of power and prestige, rank and standing in our communities, honor, luxury, and a thousand other goals before our relationship with God. We have focused our attention and lived our lives with many other priorities that take precedence over knowing and loving God. The bottom line is that all other gods enslave. Only one God leads to freedom. So we become enslaved in seeking wealth. No amount of money is sufficient. The more we earn, the more we need to earn. The more we spend, the more we need to spend. We need to spend more so we need to earn more. It is a cycle that can lead to frustration and to the accumulation of a great deal of material items. But it doesn’t lead to freedom.

A similar discussion can be held with each of the commandments. You probably know of all of the justifications we make for failing to honor the sabbath. “I’ll just work for an hour, it will make the rest of the week go more smoothly.” “There is a crisis, it is just this week.” “We have to schedule the event on Sunday, there isn’t any time on any other day.” “It is the only day of the week I get a chance to sleep in.” Soon so many things have encroached into our time and our priorities that we get everything upside down.

We read the stories of the Israelites grumbling in the wilderness and making a golden calf and we think, “how stupid.” Couldn’t they remember how they got out of slavery? Couldn’t they trust Moses for a few minutes? Hadn’t God already done enough to keep them from straying? But the truth is that we are no better. We may not be melting down pilfered jewelry in order to make a pagan fertility symbol, but we adopt the customs and the ways of the surrounding culture as readily as they did. And we are quick to engage in any number of practices that limit our freedom.

It seems that the lessons of our forebears have to be learned over and over again. Maybe that is why the scriptures are so strident in their instructions to teach about the exodus over and over again. Teach it to your children when they are lying down and when they are rising up. Write it on your doorposts and on your hearts.

It seems that it will take even more repetition before we get it.

We often seek a gentler and easier form of religion. We think if we display the commandments we will have followed them. We discover easier ways to come up with the appearance of complying. The third commandment is an excellent example. We have often thought convinced ourselves that it has to do with cursing and our choices of words. But committing acts of violence in the name of God takes God's name in vain more than our choice of words. Using God to justify our own wants and needs is taking God's name in vain more than uttering an expletive. True freedom lies in truly not taking God's name in vain in the way we live our lives as well as in our choice of language.

So our story continues. And we have much to learn before we will truly become a free people. There is much to be learned from the ancient stories even after thousands of years of telling them. So we will tell them again and again - for generations to come.

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## September 10, 2008 – Thirty Years



Thirty years ago today I knelt in the sanctuary of Mayflower Congregational United Church of Christ. In those days the sanctuary and the fellowship hall were the same room. It was before they built the new sanctuary. Kneeling next to me was my wife. We had been married for five years. All of our married life, we had been students, first completing our undergraduate degrees at Rocky Mountain College and then four years of study at Chicago Theological Seminary. We had been through Clinical Pastoral Education, we had served as interns, we had studied and written and passed our examinations. We had been examined by the committee on ministry and recommended to a council of the church. We had been found fit by an ecclesiastical council. We had received and accepted a call to serve.

As we knelt, we could feel hands upon our heads and shoulders. Among those hands were the hands of Franklin Elliott, pastor of Mayflower church and mentor to us both. We had come to trust Frank's keen sense of the role of the arts in worship, his carefully chosen and poetic words, his genuine pastoral care and concern for people. He had officiated at our wedding in the same room. We had chosen the same theological seminary as Frank, in part because of our respect for him as a minister, his intelligence, his quest for deeper meaning, and his leadership in the church we loved.

We felt the hands of Ross Snyder, teacher, mentor, friend. We had first met Ross through his books and later had known him as a challenging teacher who pushed us harder than previous teachers. His insistence on precision in language has been with us for all of our professional careers. His sense of the poetic is something we have often imitated, but never quite achieved. Ross was fifty years older than us and still going

strong - teaching and inspiring new generations of ministers, educators and theologians. Ross' wife and partner, Martha, had taught us both in seminary as well. She was the director of the preschool that was run as a lab school by the seminary as well as a professor at the seminary. We had spent hours working with children and additional hours reflecting on the meaning of the experience. Both of us had papers that we had written for Martha become the first professional papers that we had had published.

We felt the hands of Bill Peterson. Bill had been my clinical supervisor for two years. He had watched my work, lent a gentle hand and offered advice. He had seen me make mistakes and taught me how to recover from them. He had read my papers and reports and offered meaningful feedback. Together we had taught classes and planned programs. Bill had taught me about church budgets and about living within the donations of generous people. He had taught me about inspiring generosity in others and discovering generosity within myself.

There were other hands as well. Herb Schneider was a formal and conservative pastor of a German Congregational Church who had served as our "in care" advisor. He had studied our course choices and offered advice. He had prayed with and for us. He had challenged our theological assumptions and witnessed to his own. He had demanded that we go through every step of the process and not compromise on any detail of our church's discipline. Al Thompson was then a young pastor serving his first call in Columbus, Montana. He had shown enthusiasm for the ministry and especially for outdoor ministries, one of our passions. We had met at church camp after all.

In the room were our parents and family members. Susan's aunt and Uncle, Sybil and Bill Pogany were the directors of Placerville Camp in South Dakota and members of the congregation that 17 years later we would be called to serve as pastors and teachers. Ann Hanson would go on to serve in the Conference Office and then to become Minister for Children, Families and Human Sexuality Advocacy for Justice and Witness Ministries in our church's national setting. There were youth we had attended camp when we were managers of Mimanagish, the conference camp. There were adults who had taught us in Sunday School.

We were surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.

It was a once-in-a-lifetime gathering of people. I could not have imagined that just a little over two years later my father would die from a very aggressive cancer. I could not have imagined that Ross Snyder would be laid low by a stroke, that Frank Elliott would die of heart disease, that Sybil and Bill Pogany would not go on forever. So many people who were in the room that evening have scattered to distant places and have completed their life's journey.

We had just made some very big promises. We had promised to be diligent in our prayers and reading of scripture. We had promised to be zealous in maintaining the

truth of the gospel and the peace of the church, speaking the truth in love. We had promised faithfulness in teaching and in preaching, in administering sacraments and providing pastoral care. We had pledged confidentiality in counsel and we had accepted the faith and order of the United Church of Christ as our own.

Thirty years later it still makes me shiver to think of the moment. The responsibilities and commitments are no less awesome than they were on that day. The words of the prayers that were said still ring in my ears. “. . . let the same mind be in them that was also in Christ Jesus. Enable them to nourish your people in the faith of the gospel. Fill their speech with truth and their lives with purity. Increase their faith in you, strengthen them in the day of trouble, prosper their words and works that your name may be glorified and your truth exalted . . .”

Thirty years ago today Susan and I were ordained into the Christian Ministry and were granted ministerial standing.

I suppose there is nothing unique about a thirty-year anniversary. The promises we made and the prayers we prayed are as meaningful on any other day. But today I begin with a memory and an awareness that the promises I made and the actions of the church that day are still as important and as meaningful as they were then. In many ways they have grown in meaning as the years have passed. Today I begin with a prayer that I might continue in faithfulness to the vows I have made.

The value of those promises may be even more important in the years to come than they were in the years that have passed.

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## September 11, 2008 – Remembering



Photo from National Fallen Firefighter's Museum. [www.firehero.org](http://www.firehero.org)

Today is a somber anniversary. The presidential candidates of the two major political parties have agreed to suspend their campaigns for 24 hours and will come together in New York City this morning, leading our nation in a time of remembering the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon that occurred on this day in 2001.

It is interesting how we always personalize memories. We tell one another where we were when we first heard the news. We recall the emotions that we shared. While it is true that it was an event that affected the entire world, it is also true that most of us were a long way away from the scene of the tragedies and the most painful part of the grieving. Even for the families who lost loved ones on that day, there is now the distance of time. Seven years is enough time to sift through some of the emotions and to look at the event with a slightly different perspective than was possible when the event was closer in time.

Nearly 3,000 people died. All 265 occupants of the four hijacked planes died instantly. In the first building hit, the North Tower all stairways above the 92nd floor were destroyed. 1462 people died in that building. Another 600 people died in the South Tower, where evacuations had begun before the plane hit it and one stairway survived the initial crash. At the Pentagon 125 military and civilian personnel died. The numbers compare with losses from other causes. It is a little less than the number of people who die in automobile accidents each month. We have lost far more people to heart disease and cancer since the attacks of 911. More US service personnel have died in Iraq since

that war began. Our country has known grief in many different ways and the numbers are enough to overwhelm previous losses.

And it is important to remember that the United States wasn't the only country to experience loss on September 11, 2001. The victims of the attacks were citizens of 90 different countries.

As tragic as was the death of innocents at the hands of 19 hijackers, there was something more going on that day. A generation had passed since the last large-scale organized attack in our country. We had grown into an illusion that we were somehow more safe and less vulnerable to attack than those who live in other countries. The sense of "it couldn't happen here," and "terrorists attack in other places," could no longer be sustained.

The truth, however, is that after the initial shock of the events occurred, we went back to life as usual. Of course there is no life as usual for the families of the victims. And there is no life as usual for the families who have lost loved ones in Afghanistan or Iraq or for those who have suffered debilitating injuries in those wars. But for most of us, there was little real sacrifice and our lives were not terribly disrupted. We probably notice the effects of the day most when we travel by airline and we have grown accustomed to complaining loudly about those inconveniences.

Politics and dissension have delayed the completion of the 911 memorial in New York City. It is not expected to be completed by the tenth anniversary three years from now. That is probably life as usual for large scale government funded projects.

It is difficult to clearly point out what we have learned or how we have changed in these seven years. Fortunately we have been spared additional terror attacks. Unfortunately there are many places around the world that have not been so spared.

So today is a day to remember and to pray. It is a day to discern what the lessons of this anniversary might be. I suspect that there is meaning that is yet to be revealed. The holiday from the intensity of political campaigns is appreciated and having our attention focused elsewhere will be good for us. Perhaps we will tell the stories of where we were that day one more time. Perhaps we will view bits of memorial services on the television. Perhaps we will join the families in their pledge to never forget that day.

I hope we will continue to think about the causes of such violence and work to end the terror of innocent victims claimed by unforeseen attack.

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## September 12, 2008 – Hurricane Season



NOAA Weather Radar Image

Our daughter has been saving for a year for a vacation in Cancun, Mexico. Tomorrow is her departure day. Her father, who can be a bit of a worrier, has been watching the weather in the area for a couple of weeks. The forecast for Cancun is looking good. Although it is raining there this morning, Hurricane Ike is picking up speed and the forecast for tomorrow in Cancun is for mostly sunny skies. But there will be plenty of powerful weather in the Gulf of Mexico this weekend.

The weather radar image with today's blog is almost a day old. The live weather image, which is not available for reproduction, shows Hurricane Ike filling the Gulf of Mexico. It is growing in size, intensity and speed with each passing hour and current predictions are for landfall somewhere near Galveston, Texas late today or early tomorrow. There is already minor flooding in the Texas barrier islands and heavy rain is reported. The eye of the hurricane is still hundreds of miles away and the category 2 storm is expected to strengthen throughout the day and be a category 3 storm by landfall.

Lives are already being disrupted by the storm and more disruption will follow. Advanced techniques for predicting severe weather, combined with heightened awareness in the wake of the devastation of Hurricane Katrina a few years ago have resulted in early action to evacuate those most threatened. The National Weather Service's Hurricane Warning for Galveston Bay, Texas states "Persons not heeding evacuation orders in single-family, one or two-story homes will face certain death." There is considerable alarm about the threat from this storm. It is anticipated that the

storm will affect as much as 40% of the Gulf Coast and that there will be some areas that will be uninhabitable for weeks following the storm.

The simple truth is that we cannot control the weather. There are forces in this world that are much stronger than we. Things that seem permanent to us are subject to change. Possessions that have taken a lifetime to acquire will be wiped out by this storm. Beautiful homes will be damaged, some beyond repair. People who felt settled and secure will lose that feeling forever. Officials are working hard to minimize the loss of life and we pray they will be successful, but the threat is real and we humans seem to have a great capacity to ignore danger until it is too late. People want to stay put and they think they can survive any storm. We are not that strong. We are vulnerable. And the world is full of stories of people who took a gamble with their lives and lost.

It is far too easy, however, to sit here in the middle of the continent and make pious statements about what people living along the coast should or should not do. It is not our homes that are threatened. We don't know for sure what we would do if we were in the place of those who live in the affected areas. And our judgment is not the factor that matters for the people in the storm's path.

So, like a worried father watching the weather reports for the vacation destination of his daughter, we gaze at the storm from a great distance. We are not, however, entirely without ability to help. Advance preparations like sharing in Blanket Sunday and making donations to Church World Service, the Red Cross, and other agencies help us to be ready to respond to disasters when they happen. The storm kits that we made up and sent off will help bolster the needed supplies for clean-up after the storm. Disaster response teams are ready and waiting.

But there have been many disasters and the resources are limited. Our response to future appeals will be critical in order to maintain the ability to help those most in need. There may be appeals for volunteers to go to affected areas to work at recovery. We need to be prepared to respond in whatever ways we can.

Events like this hurricane bring those "moments of mission" that we share in church into focus. There are still a lot of folks who can remember the devastating flood that struck our city in 1972 and how important the blankets and other supplies were in the process of recovery. Our people have always been generous in their support of making those blankets and supplies available for others. And the need continues to grow.

So we will watch and wait as the events unfold.

And perhaps we will be inspired to even greater generosity to help with the recovery.

## September 13, 2008 – Sweet Corn



The sweet corn is starting to play out in the garden. We've probably got a week or so of corn left to harvest. We haven't had enough harvest to get ahead of us, so we can just eat it as we pick it this year. The year started out looking good for the corn, but after the corn tasseled out there was a period of time with strong winds and the garden is just too small for all of the silk to get pollinated if the wind blows it very far. So we have small ears and not all of the kernels are well developed. But what we have tastes good, and we have supplemented with corn from the farmers' market this summer. The tomatoes are producing at just the right rate for our table. We're harvesting a couple of tomatoes each day and a handful of cherry tomatoes as well, so we're keeping up with them. 2008 will not be remembered as a great year for tomatoes in our garden.

It was rainy overnight. The signs are present for an early fall. I've even noticed that a few of the trees are beginning to sport a few yellow leaves. With our late spring this year, it seems as if summer was very short. We never did have an extended period of hot weather and the moisture has held steady throughout the summer. It is good to see water levels hold in area reservoirs and to have some sense that the drought has come to an end. We'd seen enough dry years and felt enough fire threat to feel a sense of relief at moisture levels returning to someplace closer to normal.

I'm not ready for the return of cold weather. I have a lot of outdoor chores that need to be completed and I always imagine more projects than are practical. I've got plans to expand the garden next year, and it would be best to get the fence moved and the ground worked up yet this fall. The house needs to be painted and there is a long list of

additional autumn chores. We can have wonderful weather in the fall around here and I'm hoping that will be the case this fall. Often after the first cold snap and frost there can be several weeks of delightful weather that encourage outdoor activities.

Still, there is no denying that the seasons are changing. The kids are back in school and meetings that had been taking a summer break have resumed. Fall programs are cropping up and the days are shorter. I wake and go to bed in the dark again.

There is something in us that wants to hang on to things, even though we know that change is on the wind. We had barbecue with fresh sweet corn last night, even though I had to stand in the rain to tend the grill. We are reluctant to start cooking the soups and other favorites of the fall season. I have long noticed the resistance to change in the congregations that I have served. The futile attempt to keep things the way they were never succeeds and always creates disruption. Rather than fighting changes, congregations that can welcome changes are more successful. However, I now notice a similar resistance to change in my own life. Although I know that the world is changing, I am a bit nostalgic about the way things used to be and I sometimes drag my feet with some of the changes in the world and in our ways of relating to one another. There is a certain sense of inertia that I have to overcome to become excited about the new things that are coming.

Perhaps it is a natural part of aging. Perhaps it is the reasonable product of having lived in a time with so many changes. Whatever the reason, I acknowledge that I can, at times, be less than enthusiastic about changes in our lives and our organizations. I never thought I'd be a spokesperson for the old guard, but we each get a bit older each year.

So my fall resolution this year is to be open to the newness that is emerging and to welcome the change that is a part of this life.

Perhaps God is doing something new in our lives right now.

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## September 14, 2008 – Digging a Hole



Yesterday I had two different projects. I am finishing off a series of articles for a journal. I've known for months what the deadline is, but I probably put off the project a bit longer than I should have. Now I need to be focused in order to meet that deadline. So I spent several hours at the computer writing. When I took a break from the writing, I worked on my other project: digging a hole in the yard.

I'm not digging the hole for the fun of it. We need to install a larger access to our septic tank so that we can keep it in proper maintenance. It is one of the things of rural home ownership where prevention is very important. We want to make sure things are working properly so that we prevent problems. The system is now over 20 years old and we need to make sure everything continues to work well.

Digging a hole in this rocky ground gives one an appreciation for the miners who came into the hills in the second half of the nineteenth century. As I dug, I was making two piles: one for rocks and another for dirt. The rock pile is as large as the dirt pile. One doesn't use a shovel as much as a large iron pry bar to move the rocks. The miners who came to the hills had the same challenge. Using only hand tools for the most part they dug into hillsides and stream banks. It is said that they were motivated by the lust for money and the love of gold. I'm not sure my motivation was much different. I was seeking to avoid the expense of having an excavator come out and dig the hole for me. I kept telling myself that I was saving hundreds of dollars by digging the hole myself.

The balance of hard physical work and intense mental activity made the day a good workout for me. When I was hot and tired from digging, I could come inside, cool down and turn to the writing project. When I got hung up in the writing, I could turn to digging to free my thoughts for more creative thinking. At the end of the day, I had done pretty well on my writing. Three or four hours should finish that project. I didn't do quite as well with the digging. I estimate that I still have to or three feet more to dig. There doesn't seem to be an end to the rocks. I may end up hiring the excavator to come and finish the project at a cost that will be virtually the same as if I had hired the job done in the first place.

But my time digging wasn't wasted. Those of us who have jobs that are more sedentary need physical exercise. Our bodies were designed for physical work and when we don't get enough exercise there are all kinds of consequences in terms of our health. And, for some reason, my personality isn't the kind that enjoys going to a gym or club to work out. I greatly prefer productive work to riding a stationary bicycle or lifting weights on a machine. Even if I didn't save any money by digging the hole, I had a sense that my work was of some benefit beyond my need for exercise. And if I ever want more work, I have a growing pile of rocks to move. As hard as I worked getting them out of the ground, I have no intention of re-burying them.

I am sure that I was more productive with my writing yesterday than I would have been if I had not had the hole to dig. I know from experience that I am not able to sit at the computer for long stretches of time and be productive. I need to take plenty of breaks. Some ideas have to be mulled in my mind before they can be written down. Just pushing the keys and making words on the screen does not produce meaningful writing. The process of writing down the words is easy. The difficult part is determining what to say. This particular project is writing biblical commentary and sermon preparation notes for use in the spring of 2010. I have to think ahead to the end of Easter and the Celebration of Pentecost that is about 18 months in the future. Preaching is the task of connecting the scripture with the everyday lives of the people. I don't know what historical events will unfold and what the issues in the lives of the people might be so far in the future. But the process of preparing and printing journals demands that we work ahead. So a significant amount of imagination is required in order to write words that have any chance of being meaningful in May and June of 2010.

By 2010, the new riser will be in place on our septic system. The hole will be filled in and the grass will have grown back. When the tank needs to be pumped, the job will be easy and the work of digging the hole will be forgotten. Some other chore of home maintenance will occupy my attention and require me to flex my muscles.

I went to bed tired. I slept well. I usually do. One of the rewards of hard work is good sleep. I do not seem to be stiff or any worse for the wear this morning. The rocks that seemed so large yesterday were not too large for me to handle. I'm even considering digging the rest of the hole myself. My thinking is different when I'm sitting at my desk in

front of the computer than it is when I am standing in a hole in the ground, with the sun beating down on me, digging out rocks.

Today doesn't afford time for either project. I have a rehearsal and a meeting after church and then three nursing home services this afternoon. The work, like yesterday's projects, will be varied and interesting. I'll be tired by the time I get to the end of the day and ready for my bed. One thing about the vocation of a pastor: the work is varied. I rarely have any problems with boredom and any routines I develop are filled with interruptions.

Looking back, I wish the people who installed the septic tank had put a large riser on it at the time, it would have saved a lot of work now. Looking ahead, I wonder what I am forgetting as I write articles that will appear in a journal for use in 2010. One small thing remembered today might prevent a lot of extra work in the future - if I knew what that small thing might be. We live our lives with imperfect vision for the future. We try hard, but there are details that escape our best efforts.

The people who installed the septic system for our house did good work. They installed a system that has functioned without problem for over twenty years and, with a little maintenance now, will be good for many more. Their work yielded great benefits. I wonder if the work I do these days will be producing benefits twenty years from now. Time will be the best judge of the quality of my work.

In the meantime, I'm grateful to have both physical labor and mental labor that are meaningful. The 90th Psalm ends with the line, "Prosper the work of our hands, O Lord. Prosper the work of our hands."

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## September 15, 2008 – Grandparents



Susan has been working on a study guide for a book published by Pilgrim Press about grandparents. So, around the edges of our lives we have been talking about grandparents and their relationships with grandchildren. When we look through old family photographs, we find that many show multi-generational gatherings. Grandparents were a part of the lives of our parents' growing up years. I suspect that much of what we know about the role of grandparents in family life is learned from generations of experience.

I know from my work at the church that our family's patterns are not the only patterns. There are many models of grandparents and how they relate to their grandchildren. Some grandparents are actively raising their grandchildren, others live in distant locations and see their grandchildren only infrequently. There are many different patterns of what it might mean to be a grandparent.

My parents both grew up with their grandparents in the same community. We lived in different towns from our grandparents, but they were close enough for regular visits. My maternal grandmother died before I was born and my grandfather on that side died when I was very young. My paternal grandparents lived to my adult years, my grandmother outliving my father by several years. Still, I don't think that my grandparents are the primary models for how to be a grandparent. Closer to my mind and my consciousness is the model of how my mother and Susan's parents were grandparents to our children and their cousins. Something about being a parent made

me more aware of the unique relationship of grandparents and grandchildren than I had been when I was a child.

All parenting, including grand parenting is primarily about investing in the future. In most cases the span of the lives of our children reaches beyond our own. This is more dramatically true of grandchildren. We participate in their lives as children knowing that their adult lives will be lived in part after our lives have ended. Investing in the future is one way of passing on a legacy of love and knowledge and living that we received from our parents and grandparents.

Grandchildren are unavoidable evidence that the world is changing. Things are different for them. They will go places and do things that are beyond our imaginations. At the same time we had experiences in our childhood that they will never know. Some elders worry about the changes and are vocal in complaining about them. Others are more accepting, or at least less vocal in their views about how the world is changing. But I suspect that every grandparent has had a moment of thinking about how much things have changed since they were a child.

In our country one of the big changes is the prevalence of material goods. We just have more things than did our parents and grandparents. Our children have more toys, more electronics and many more consumer goods than we had when we were children. The expansion of big box stores means that more things are available to the masses at lower prices. Individual toys or items have decreased value because of the abundance of toys and other consumer goods. Scarcity creates value. When there were few toys, they were treasured in different ways. Susan's father has a toy horse that was his father's. His grandchildren have played with a toy that was designed for a child who lived three generations before them. I'm not sure that any of our children's toys will be kept for such a long time. On the other hand, we have kept many toys that were meaningful. We do so in part in anticipation of another generation.

Compared to some other families, the generations of our family are spread out. Our local newspaper routinely prints pictures of family gatherings with four or five generations all together. We have children in our church who regularly attend with their great grandparents.

In our family, we have a legacy of photographs of previous generations. When we take the time to get them out they produce stories about our family and the people who came before us. In fact, I think that one of the roles for grandparents is to share the old stories and pictures with their grandchildren. I have been investing some of my time in efforts to preserve the old photographs so that they will be available for future generations.

But at this point in my life, being a grandparent is a matter of pure speculation. Like many other things in this life, patience is required. We do not control the timing of our lives. Still, I have a deep appreciation for the grandparents in my life and in our

community. How lucky we are to have a church where many generations gather and people are allowed to spend time with those of different ages.

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## September 16, 2008 – Dairy Queen



Back in the 1950's Susan's parents owned and operated a Dairy Queen store in Libby, Montana. It had been a dramatic change for them to leave the small North Dakota town where Keith had grown up and his parents had farmed. Soft ice cream was a new sensation and new franchises were being opened across the country. There were less than 100 Dairy Queen stores at the end of World War II. By 1955, there were 2,600. Keith was an electrician so he could find work in the off season to support the family. And it was pretty cool for their daughters to be the children of the people who ran the Dairy Queen.

By the time I became a part of the family the Dairy Queen had been sold and the family had moved to Billings, but there was a well-established family tradition of going out to Dairy Queen for a special treat from time to time. That tradition continued into our family and our children have fond memories of stopping at the Dairy Queen on summer evenings.

Our children are raised and the tradition continues. Last night we took our parents out for ice cream at the Dairy Queen after supper. Keith always orders the same thing: a hot fudge sundae. Having tasted most of the exotic specialty desserts from time to time, I'm more likely to order a plain sundae as well these days.

The excursion provides an opportunity to converse and reminisce in a different context than our home. The outing provides a little exercise and a change of scenery for folks

who no longer are able to drive themselves from place to place. And the ice cream treats are delicious.

It is fun for me to think of my in-laws in the days when they were establishing their family. They were young and adventurous and willing to take a calculated risk. They were hard working and capable and able to make their way in times that were different than ours. They were in love with each other and with their daughters and they figured out how to make family life work. I think I would have enjoyed being around the people they were back then. I know I have enjoyed being with the people they later became.

Modern Dairy Queen Stores use a bit of nostalgia in their marketing. It is common for them to display photographs from the 1950's as an illustration of the history of the company. Those pictures of the kids on their bikes and the cars with the big fins and the Dairy Queen employees dressed all in white remind us of a different chapter in our family's story and a different chapter in the story of our country.

Going to a fast food restaurant for a meal is hardly a rare treat for many children growing up today. We have convinced ourselves that we have a great shortage of time and we eat too many meals on the run. An event that is repeated too many times loses its sense of specialness. It becomes routine. Our children remember going out for Dairy Queen in part because we didn't do it every day. It was often a surprise and always a bit out of the ordinary.

But it is one of those joys of family life that continues through many different phases of being together.

This life affords us many simple pleasures and when we pause to savor them, they are wonderful. One of the keys to happiness is taking the time to enjoy simple pleasures.

It is evident from reading the news that our country and our world are going through some hard times. The headlines about bank failures are reminiscent of the great depression. While we haven't reached that level of national distress, it is true that there are many families who have or who will lose their homes to foreclosure. Others will lose their jobs as the economy readjusts. There will be some hard times for lots of folks. We may need to re-think our expectations and re-order our priorities.

Learning to live with less will be a difficult adjustment for folk who have grown to expect an ever-increasing supply of consumer goods and products. As our society adjusts to the new realities of new times, there will be many changes. I'm sure that the increase in the cost of fuel and food has already resulted in less meals out for some folks. We are not immune to the changes in our culture. We, too, will need to make adjustments in our lifestyle.

But I suspect that we'll find ways to occasionally stop for Dairy Queen even after we've adjusted to the new realities of new times.

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## September 17, 2008 – Uncertain Times



I was raised with stories of the Great Depression. My parents were young enough during the depression that the memories were not particularly painful for them. Grandparents and great aunts and uncles had more painful memories of that time. And when I got into school, we studied the “dirty thirties” in our lesson books and learned of the stock market crash, the despair of the unemployed and some more details about that time in our nation’s history. The stories that were told in our home, however, often were stories about how that time added positive qualities to life such as thrift, savings, not purchasing unnecessary items, etc. There are stories of making one’s own entertainment, of families getting together and of survival.

Those stories, were, however, always about a time in the past that was over. I don’t know if I ever quite believed that some kind of financial hard times would be a part of my adult story. Sure, like all of our peers, we had very little disposable cash during the years of our education. And we have never been large salary earners, having chosen a path of service rather than a path that might lead towards wealth. But we have not lacked for the basics, and we have been well cared-for and treated fairly by the churches that have employed us.

But the headlines are unsettling these days. In early September the federal government seized control of the nation’s two largest mortgage lenders, Fannie Mae and Freddy Mac to prevent their failure. Banking giants Bear Sterns and Merrill Lynch were sold at bargain basement prices in order to avoid bankruptcy. Lehman Brothers Bank failed and there are rumors about financial instability in other major banks as well. The Federal Reserve stepped in with an \$85 billion rescue of the insurance company AIG fearing that the failure of that company would leave the financial market without essential

insurance products. Every day seems to bring a new crisis and a new series of problems. The pundits are not hopeful that this is the end of a major shift in world financial markets. And the rescues by the federal government are backed by an ever-increasing federal deficit and increase borrowing from investors outside of the country.

With unemployment on the rise and foreclosure rates at record levels and rising, the effects are real for individuals and families across the nation. The stock market tries to react to each new piece of financial news and near record-setting shifts in the value of stocks is enough to give investors indigestion, if not panic.

These are uncertain times. And I do not have the ability to predict what is going to happen. What I do know is that the anxiety level of the people that I meet is raised, that there is fear that hard times are ahead and that we don't know yet what those hard times will mean.

Politicians are still loath to use words like "sacrifice" or "cutback," but there are lessons that can be learned from hard times.

What I do know is that the church is a community that is called to be in our world no matter what the conditions. If our people are experiencing financial difficulties, our income will fall, and we will learn to live in hard times just like the members of our church. But even if we need to learn to run the church with less income, we are called to be the church. We still will need to find a significant portion of our budget for mission and outreach. We still will need to provide pastoral care and concern not only for our members, but for our community as well. We still will need to meet for worship and prayer. We still will need to provide education for people of all ages. We will still be the church regardless of the ups and downs of the markets.

This week our weather has been clear and the moon is nearly full. We have been treated to dramatic and beautiful moon rises each evening. Despite our entry into uncertain times, God's gifts continue to surround us. There is much beauty in this world and many sources of joy that do not fluctuate with the markets. The world is not ending just because there are hard times ahead. In fact there may be opportunities to grow in faith and service in these uncertain times. The Gospels report Jesus call to consider the beauty of nature in uncertain times. "Consider the lilies of the field," he said. Trust that God will provide what is necessary. Do not live in fear of the future.

So we will continue to read the headlines and try to respond to a world in uncertain times, but we will also continue to look at the beauty of this world and remember the stories of our people and God who provides what is necessary. We will remain faithful in these uncertain times.

## September 18, 2008 – Coffee



I read a brief online story this morning about coffee shops in Houston and Galveston Texas being gathering places for people following the devastating hurricanes. The shops are relatively small and as soon as they have power and water they can be back in business. The air-conditioned spaces provide a refuge for those who are working to clear the rubble from their homes and businesses. And they have become a gathering place.

Maybe \$4 a cup coffee doesn't seem extravagant when there is very little order in the chaos of life. Maybe the price is worth it to be able to sit in an air-conditioned place and discuss plans with others.

I confess that I indulge in the expensive specialty coffee drinks from area coffee shops from time to time and I often arrange meetings in coffee shops. I have a decent espresso machine at home and I make most of my own coffee, so I am well aware of the difference between the cost of making a laté and the retail price of the same drink in a coffee shop. There is no question that one is paying for more than coffee beans and milk in the coffee shops. There is a certain ambiance and culture that are a part of coffee shops with music and comfortable seating, but there is enough cushion in the price of the coffee to provide for significant profits for owners and investors.

It is a luxury that we could do without. But I don't know if we will. At least the experience in the storm-ravaged cities, people will flock to the coffee shops even when they are under considerable stress and facing significant financial uncertainty. The only coffee

story that I can remember from the aftermath of Katrina had to do with the rise in the price of coffee caused by the destruction of gigantic coffee warehouses on the New Orleans waterfront.

We've had several discussions, some with a bit of emotional energy, about coffee at the church. We serve coffee and tea after worship each week and at many other occasions. The preferred method of brewing coffee for larger gatherings are electric percolators. We have several that will brew up to 100 cups of coffee. Proposals surface, from time to time, to replace these with drip coffee systems. On the one side of the argument convenience, speed of brewing and better taste are cited. On the other side, costs is usually the major objection, with a sense of "we've always done it this way" thrown in for good measure. I don't think that this is a major problem in our life together, but it does occasional get named as one of the places where the "old guard" retains power in the institution.

I suspect that it is not very much about the coffee at all.

I think that the patterns of socializing are shifting in our community and in the world. Not too long ago, coming to church an hour early to brew the coffee wasn't a big disruption in the lives of our members. People were eager to linger for a significant time after worship to chat and share a cup of coffee. These days our families seem to be very pressed for time. Although we know it is just a matter of establishing priorities, there are many who don't want to give up any of the activities that fill waking hours. So they rush from one activity to another. To them it seems efficient to do all of their church activities in one stop, with meetings following worship and grabbing a cup of coffee on the run between one thing and the next. They would prefer to not have to make multiple trips to the church in a week and they don't want to have to slow down and wait for the coffee to brew and they would prefer to have it served in a disposable cup so that they can take it with them on their way out of the door.

Maybe the storm in Texas has slowed people down a bit. Instead of getting their coffee at the drive through window, they're coming inside for the air conditioning and because so many activities have been suspended in the wake of the storm. Schools aren't open and after they open it will take weeks before the universe of extra curricular activities ramp up. Soccer and football leagues are far down on the list of activities to be re-started. The storm has meant that people have to wait for all kinds of goods and services. Sitting in a cool space sipping a beverage and talking with others seems to be worth their time.

Who knows what it will take to get our people to slow down a bit. If a really good cup of specialty coffee is what it takes, I'm all in favor of making changes in the church so that we might dispense leisure and fellowship along with the beverages. If I were sure that people would slow down and linger, I'd probably be out raising money for the fanciest espresso machine in the business. Something tells me, however, that it will take more

than a new coffee machine to really get people to slow down enough to take time for one another and for themselves.

Perhaps hard times are what it takes. The storm seems to have slowed people in Texas down a bit. Maybe what we have to offer is not the fancy ambience or the quality of our brewing system, but the reality of a free cup of coffee. If we are facing harder financial times, perhaps the simple fact that we can provide coffee at a very low cost will be recognized as a virtue. Maybe the price of gas will slow people down from their rushing from one place to another enough that they will pause to talk to one another and really get to know what is most important in each other's lives.

What I do know is that coffee shops are not the only places coastal Texans are gathering. The churches are full, too. They've been providing services for people who have significant needs. They've been giving shelter to folks whose homes are uninhabitable and food to those who have no other place to get it. They've become centers for the distribution of ice and clean-up supplies.

As we weather the storms of this life, whatever they may be, our churches need to become deeply aware of what we can do to meet the real needs of the people we serve.

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September 19, 2008 – Patience



On the wall of our kitchen there is a picture that once was in Susan's parents' house and before that in her grandparents' house. We don't know the history of the painting or the artist. It has a title painted at the bottom: The Passing of Winter. It shows two human figures, perhaps women, and a dog sitting on the bank of a river watching the ice break up. It is reminiscent of the Missouri River the way it used to be, before the dams. It could be near Garrison, North Dakota, where Susan's grandparents lived. The women in the picture could be Dakota.

The picture doesn't have any significant monetary value. It hangs in our home because it evokes memories of other homes and of the family members who lived there. It also evokes memories of another place that has been a significant part of our life's story. Many members of our family, on both sides, have spent much of their lives along the banks of the Missouri River in several different locations. We come from people who have seen their share of snow and ice and who learned to be patient as they waited for spring.

For me, the picture is a reminder of a way of life that has now passed. When people traveled on foot, or perhaps with a horse, the river was a significant barrier. Before the dams and the bridges, it took considerable planning and effort to cross the river. Winter afforded thick ice and an easy passage across. But when the ice broke up, one needed to be on the right side of the river or remain stranded. Winter in this country was harsh. Thirty degrees below zero and winds that could whip across the prairie as fast as an antelope could run. Blizzard days when the whole world turned white and one could not

tell up from down, let alone where one was. Food could be scarce and hard to obtain. The passing of winter brought the promise of the return of the ducks and geese and of the birth of fawns and calves and the return of the prairie flowers that showed where the edible bulbs were located beneath the soil.

We don't wait for much of anything these days. If we have to wait five minutes at the supermarket check out, we complain. Our culture places great value on instant gratification. Fast food, drive-through pharmacies, automatic bank teller machines, credit cards and stores full of furniture with no down payment and now payments for two years. We remember the saying "patience is a virtue" but we don't live our lives as if we believed that it were true. We expect our political leaders to give us results right away and show little interest in projects that might take a decade or more to complete.

We don't know the future much, if any, better than did those who lived in this region hundreds of years ago. We anticipate what might happen, but our stories unfold in surprising and unpredictable ways. We need to learn to adjust to new realities as they unfold. And there are many times when what we need most is patience.

We find ourselves on the opposite side of the calendar from the people in the picture on our kitchen wall. The earliest signs of autumn are in the air. We don't know what kind of winter we will have and we don't know how things will be by spring. There is a sense that great changes are underway. The markets are jittery, the news headlines are filled with signs of panic and worry, the political scene is confusing at best. Like the women watching the river, we are aware that there are forces in our lives that are beyond our power to control. Like them we need to find paths for our lives that respect the things we cannot control.

Sometimes the wisest course of action is to sit and wait to see what will happen next.

Patience is not my natural state. I like to do things, to engage in action, to get to work. I'm not good at waiting. But I think I'm improving a bit with the passing of time. Perhaps patience, like wisdom, is a virtue that develops slowly over time.

So it is good for me to have the painting in the kitchen, where I look at it each day. It links me with the folks who have gone before me. And it reminds me that not everything in this world occurs on my time schedule.

God grand me patience sufficient for graceful living in this world.

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## September 20, 2008 – The Right Tools



After losing patience with digging in my yard, I hired some folks to come out with a digger to help me finish the project. They unloaded their machine and completed the digging in about a half hour. The crew installed new baffles on both sides of the tank and placed an extension on the riser to bring the cover up another foot so it will be level with the ground. No blisters, no more struggling with the rocks, no big problem. They had the right tools to do the job.

I probably could have finished the digging today or sometime on Monday if I had persisted in digging by hand. But the truth is that each scoop of the machine represented about a half hour's work digging by hand. With the right tools, the work was easily completed.

There was no harm in the digging that I did. I got some much-needed exercise. But it didn't really contribute much to the project. The machine is so much more powerful and in the hands of a trained operator, the digging is just as precise as one can do with a shovel. And the rocks are much less a challenge for the machine than they are for a single guy with a shovel and a spud bar.

More importantly, the machine reduces the risk of injury and extends the working lives of the people who do that kind of digging every day to earn their living.

Sometimes it pays to have the right tools.

I've been thinking about tools in a different way lately, as I reflect on what seems to me to be a dramatic shift in the ministry. More and more congregations are choosing pastors who have not attended theological seminary and have not completed the education that was, until recently, considered a basic requirement for ministry. The ability to express faith and to exhibit a passion for the tasks of ministry seems to be sufficient for some congregations to hire a person and to call that person a minister.

For years, I have thought that the shortage in educated ministers was the reason that congregations were switching from fully educated and authorized ministers to lay persons for leadership. Many conferences and other judicatory bodies have instituted lay ministry education programs, which provide a level of quality education, but a few weekend courses is hardly a substitute for three years of graduate education.

I can't help but wonder if we are sending people into our churches who are poorly equipped for the challenges of ministry. It is not a matter of whether or not we have good people. I'm convinced that we do have good people. The question is do they have the tools to do the job that the church requires?

This probably sounds like jealousy on the part of an old pastor who worked hard to achieve an education and continues to pursue challenging (and expensive) continuing education. "If I had to spend four years of my life in seminary . . ." But I think that there is something more going on. I have witnessed, over the years, many crises in the life of the church that have been the result of poorly educated and poorly equipped ministers. There is more to providing for the overall health of a congregation than preaching an interesting and entertaining sermon.

Discerning when and how to make a referral when counseling people who come to a pastor with personal problems is a difficult choice. No amount of being nice and listening carefully will substitute from a proper medical diagnosis and appropriate treatment of a brain disorder. Courses in psychology, pastoral counseling in addition to clinical pastoral education can provide the tools for pastoral counselors to be effective and to prevent dangerous mistakes.

Committees on Ministry spend inordinate amounts of their time dealing with misconduct allegations. While I realize that properly trained and authorized ministers are not exempt from misconduct, proper boundary training has been shown to be an effective preventive measure.

Knowing the history and governance of the church is critical precisely because so much of the work of the church requires generations to unfold. Our calling is not only about a job to sustain us for our lifetime - it is about participating in the unfolding mission and ministry of the church. Too often people who do not know the history of the church end up making the same mistakes over and over again.

The skills of interpreting scripture and learning to think theologically are difficult to master. Systematic theology is a discipline of organizing one's thoughts about God and faith into patterns that make sense and that can be communicated. Learning to identify the presence of the Holy Spirit requires disciplined discernment and trained judgment. There is more to helping people make connections with God than just a feeling.

Worship is more than a random selection of events or an imitation of what has already happened. There is more to selecting appropriate hymns than determining what songs one likes.

Education is not about status or making distinctions between Christians. But it can be about equipping leaders for demanding and difficult tasks. It can be about providing the tools that are required to do the job right.

I'm sure that there are many changes that will be a part of the church as our history unfolds. Some of my worrying will be misplaced. God will provide the leaders we need and we will find ways to equip leaders for appropriate service. But I am saddened by the trend, in our times, toward simple solutions and poorly-equipped pastors. I hope that I will be able to inspire a few more people who are called to the ministry to make the sacrifices required to obtain the education they need. I pray that I will be a patient enough teacher to share the skills and experience that I have gained. And I know I will need to trust God as the church moves into a future that belongs not to us, but to God.

It is amazing how difficult a job can be when one doesn't have the right tools - and how easy it can be when one is properly equipped.

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September 21, 2008 – Vocation



This fall our church family is engaging the story of the Exodus on as many levels as possible. I am preaching a long series of sermons on the exodus and the church school is teaching the exodus through a series of scenes and dramatic opportunities. The preaching and the church school are coordinated but we are not quite in the same place in the story because the sermon series started before church school began this fall. So today the church school will be exploring the call of Moses in the burning bush.

Like all biblical lessons, there is a lot going on in this story. And there is a lot to teach our children. For some time, our church schools have not placed the same emphasis on vocation as we once did. The choice of a job is left to the public education process, with factors such as income, enjoyment and aptitude being most important. Our society does not sort out the children quite as soon as some, but teachers get a sense for the children who have the drive and family support to pursue careers that require a lot of difficult education and those who are more likely to end up in jobs that require less expensive and complex education.

But there is a religious perspective on vocation that is different from the way in which public school assist children in selecting a career. From our point of view God has a calling for each person. There are many ways to serve God and one of those avenues of service is right for each person. A person's vocation may or may not be the means by which that person earns income to support themselves. From a financial point of view, Moses would have been better off to stick to shepherding for his father in law. Leading

an unruly bunch of exiles through the desert didn't prove to be a lucrative profession. Moses never got to share in the promised land.

But he had a vocation. God called him to pursue the freedom of the people with a fiery passion.

Part of the lesson today is that God continues to call individuals to avenues of service to the people and to the great cause of human freedom. Every child is a child of God and there is a calling for each one.

It is not a perspective that is common. Many professionals see their vocation in terms of the earnings it can produce. They are aware of their brilliant minds and carefully practiced skills and the high cost of their education and they have convinced themselves that they deserve high paychecks and that they are paid much more than other people because they are somehow better than other people. A profession is always a statement of faith. The word profession comes from profess: "to state or claim openly one's religious belief." Unfortunately, in our times, that which is professed by some is their love of money. They aren't the first people in history to be so misled. The people of Israel made a calf out of gold in the wilderness and developed a cult of worshiping the golden calf before God's anger changed their ways.

So we feel a calling to be more careful in teaching the children of this generation about vocation and calling from God. Because they have real choices. It isn't difficult in this world to be led astray and to end up serving false gods. Our freedom, however, depends on our ability to serve the one true God. The ancient stories of our people are excellent lessons for every generation and we must teach them well to our children and grandchildren, lest they continue down a path that leads them away from God - a path that also leads them away from freedom.

A lot of work has gone into preparing the lessons. The one factor that is beyond our control is whether or not the parents bring their children to the church. There are many who do not understand the role of the church in their children's lives. But we are not in control of all of the factors of this world, nor should we be. Our vocation is to bring fresh energy and passion to the teaching of the stories and the service of the people that God gives to our care.

The burning bush is prepared. The drama is set for action just a little later today. May we be ready to teach with a passion as deep as Moses love of freedom. Our calling is no less important in God's world.

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## September 22, 2008 – Brass



Yesterday was one of those long days that occur from time to time in the ministry. I am in the pattern of going to the church early on Sunday to prepare notes for the lay reader and to set up for worship. Yesterday had a few additional tasks because we had added a baptism to the service on Saturday and had not set up for the baptism on Friday as we would usually do. The service was full, with reception of members, the baptism, and a dramatic presentation of scripture by the worship arts group. The new young adults group was meeting after worship, so I took responsibility for getting my mother and Susan's father lunch and back to their homes after church. Then it was rush back to the church to set up for an arts conversation in the afternoon, conduct that meeting, then take down the things we had set up for that meeting to be ready for the brass concert in the evening. A quick trip home for supper with the family and I was back at the church for the brass concert. I was on lock-up duty for the evening, so I stayed until everyone had left. Except for two meal breaks, I had been at the church from 6:30 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. I had no trouble getting to sleep when I got home.

As a part of the Black Hills Chamber Music Society's concert series, our congregation was the sponsor of last night's concert. The University of Nebraska Brass Quintet performed major works by Leonard Bernstein and John Cheetham as well as several other selections. They played a fresh arrangement of Amazing Grace early in the program and ended with a New Orleans-style arrangement of Just a Closer Walk with Thee. It was a delightful concert. Being a trumpet player, I enjoy opportunities to be in the audience when brass players are allowed to open up and play their instruments without holding back.

The ensemble, composed of faculty members of the University of Nebraska, plays together extremely well and their presentations were outstanding. How fortunate we are to have such accomplished musicians to perform in our community.

For me, the evening was topped with the joy of talking with friends after the concert. One of my friends had, earlier in the day, been canoeing in a 1942 Old Town that I re-canvassed a few years ago. He still had the canoe on the roof of his car and it was good to see the beautiful boat and even better to know that it is being paddled and enjoyed. We got to talking about canoes and found that one of the musicians in the group had recently been on a canoe trip in Wisconsin.

Like many of my days, yesterday was not filled with dramatic events, but rather with simple pleasures. The delight of sharing worship leadership with children, the joy of sharing meals with my family, the interplay of minds in a meeting, the pleasure of listening to music together, conversation with friends on topics that interest me. Nothing dramatic or earth-shattering. Nothing worthy of the newspaper. But life is good. Friends are a blessing. Music is a delight. And worship is filled with meaning.

Life has plenty of long days. When they are full, the length doesn't sap my energy as much as when the long days are filled with waiting or anxieties. When I have plenty of tasks and keep busy the days don't seem as long as when I need to wait and worry. And I find days with a wide variety of different activities to be more pleasant than days where I get too focused on just a few tasks. Yesterday's activities were varied. Yesterday definitely ends up in the category of good days.

So today is a day to rest and to catch up with household chores. The weather promises to be good for outdoor tasks. It's time to pull up the corn stalks and till that end of the garden. I've got plans to expand the garden. There is a bit of dirt work and clean-up from last week's digging projects. And there are always home repair tasks that attract my attention. I'll find time for a nap as well, I'm sure.

For the joys of long days and the energy to sustain them, for the pleasures of music and those who perform, for the life of the church with its many activities, I give thanks. May each day end with a sense of having invested our time wisely.

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## September 23, 2008 – Transcending Space



Since 1974, we have had a wonderful friendship with a family who live in Australia. We met in Chicago, when we were students at theological seminary and the connections we made have lasted. Over the years, they have managed a trip to the United States about once a decade. They have visited in each of the parishes we have served. We've made one trip to Australia, in 2006. But our relationship has not, for the most part, been one that afforded regular conversation. There are now technologies that make telephone calls more practical, but our relationship has often taken the form of a very few words for long periods of time with occasional opportunities for face to face conversation.

Tony and Shirley have been in the United States for the past week, visiting in California. This trip did not provide an opportunity for us to visit face to face, but we have arranged two significant blocks of time for telephone conversations while they are in the United States.

Each time we talk, we are surprised and pleased at how easy it is to pick up the conversation. Though our lives have been lived on separate continents, our lives and ministries have been remarkably similar. We share similar passions for the church and its work in the world. We have been inspired by similar senses of the artistic. We have similar concerns for mission, outreach, and multi-cultural ministries. And we have watched each other's children grow into adulthood and become friends.

In seminary we learned and spoke of the love of Christ that transcends time and distance. We spoke and thought about a community of faith that reaches beyond the

normal human limits. We pondered the meaning of belonging to something that is bigger than the span of our lives and the scope of our experiences. But we didn't understand these things except in a theoretical way. It has taken years of experience - now over thirty years of living - to really understand that there are relationships that thrive despite barriers of time and space.

Talking to Tony and Shirley on the telephone yesterday was such a joy. It was a part of a conversation that we began in 1974 and continues as if we had never been apart. We do the usual catching up on our children and parents and mutual friends and relatives. But before too long we are talking about the church and the work we are doing. Our conversations never fail to stir new ideas for me and I get fresh insights into better ways to introduce ideas and engage people in the church. I leave our conversations with a renewed commitment to ministry and a fresh sense of what is possible. I know, from years of experience, that our talks have a similar effect on Tony and the work that he does.

Currently Tony serves as the Minister for Multi-Cultural Ministries of the Uniting Church of Australia in its national setting. His work takes him all across Australia and to neighboring countries as well. He works with immigrant populations in Australia and forges connections and relationships with the history and culture that they bring with them. I can't help but think that his experience with long-distance relationships with seminary classmates helps him as he works with others who have traveled long distances and now live far away from people that they love.

Like many other dear friends, Tony and Shirley are people we would have never met except for the church. The world-wide community of believers gives us a starting point for our relationship and a way of making connections with others. And we have friends around the world in countries that we have visited and others we have never visited. These friends have come to us because of our participation in the life of the church.

Over and over I tell people that we belong to something that is much bigger than ourselves. Time and time again, my experiences and relationships with others proves this conviction to be true. We do not have to live on the same continent to be the closest of friends. We do not have to share the same culture or politics. We do not have to agree on every topic. We can be deeply committed to each other in ways that transcend distance and difference.

Of course with Tony and Shirley we have the advantage of sharing a common language. Well, perhaps not everything said with an Australian accent is immediately understood. And we are a similar age though our children are more than a decade apart in age. The spans of our careers have seen similar changes in the church and in its educational institutions. But there have been many differences as well.

Over the years of our life in the church we have collected a lot of deep and meaningful relationships. We have developed genuine care and concern for people who live in distant locations. But our faith transcends the space that is between us. And as certainly as we can declare that surely Christ is in this place we know that Christ is present in distant places as well.

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## September 24, 2008 – A Violent World



Yesterday was a busy day for law enforcement officers in our area. A report of a man carrying a rifle near one of the area high schools sent two high schools into lock down and required a careful search of the facilities. Fortunately the searches turned up nothing wrong in the schools and the normal schedule was resumed after some disruption. Pennington County Sheriff's officers were investigating multiple suspicious deaths during the day and late in the afternoon deputies were at the difficult task of informing family members of the deaths of a loved ones. Charges were filed after a two-week investigation of an after-school fight that left one student paralyzed. It wasn't difficult to find evidence that we live in a sometimes violent world and that the children of our community do not escape the violence that is a part of our society. Some days our usually safe little semi-rural corner of the world doesn't feel quite so safe as we want it to feel.

I know, from growing up in a small town that violence does not by-pass rural areas. Tempers flare and people make bad decisions. Domestic and child abuse are as common in rural areas as they are in the cities. As hard as we work to create safe places for all of the citizens of our communities, we live in a violent culture. Television and movies portray violence in ways that often fail to show the consequences of violence. Car accidents, shootings, and other events are shown without attention being paid to the pain and suffering of the victims and the grief and loss of the survivors. Violence is often shown as the solution to problems without an accurate depiction of the real costs of violence.

In the real world, when a law enforcement officer is forced to discharge a weapon, weeks of investigation and agony go into examining the situation to discover if there were any alternatives. On television the officer is shown as back at work with no negative effects of having shot another human being.

But it is simplistic to blame television or the movies for the violence in our society. The elimination of television and movie violence would not eliminate violence from our society. Middle school youth would still get into fights and they would still not know their own strength and people would still get hurt. People would still employ violence in domestic disputes. Anger would still erupt into violent behavior and poor decisions. Brain diseases would continue to have devastating effects on families.

The problem is much deeper than our choices in entertainment.

The potential for violence lies within each of us. Deep in our evolutionary past, we developed violent means of survival. Fighting was a survival skill and ending the life of other creatures was a part of providing food for a family. Anyone who has watched nature films knows that violence is not reserved to human beings. Life in the open wilds is often a terror-filled rush to safety that sometimes ends in death that might be quick and might be not so quick. The animal kingdom on earth and in the seas is filled with violent acts. The world can be cruel when viewed through human eyes.

But as humans, we have the ability to consider our choices and to make alternative decisions. We don't have to resort to violence to resolve our differences. And often violence makes difficulties worse instead of solving problems. Non-violent means of dispute resolution are more effective than physical fighting. There are often non-violent solutions to situations where our first instinct is to resort to violence.

The ability to make choices is something that makes us human. We do not have to be the victims of our own violent thoughts. We do not have to act on every idea that comes to our heads. We are capable of turning the other cheek, of finding alternative methods of resolving disputes, and of inspiring others to lay aside violent behaviors. We have years of research and psychological knowledge to assist us in making better choices.

The choice remains. The decisions we make have significant consequences. Choosing to live a non-violent life in a violent world can transform the culture. Mohandas Gandhi, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Nelson Mandela are among the world leaders who have shown us a better way. And we are followers of Jesus who confronted the violent powers of imperial Rome and demonstrated that life is stronger than death.

May we be leaders in decreasing the violence in our community and in our world.

## September 25, 2008 – Autumn



The trees in the hills are starting to turn color. And we have had some cool mornings. So far we have avoided a heavy frost. We're still picking tomatoes, but most of the garden has played out. The mule deer are on the move. We're seeing animals in our yard and out on the roads that we haven't seen all summer. Our year-round deer are white tail, but there are plenty of mule deer in the hills. We just don't see them as often. The seasons are changing and we know that winter is coming.

We've lived here long enough to know that there are various degrees of intensity in our winters. Winter can be a very pleasant time around here, and there can be some severe weather. Some of the locals are predicting a hard winter this year. For some of us that doesn't seem like much of a hardship. Staying at home and watching the snow fall on the trees sounds inviting this time of the year.

We've had a good year, with a bit more moisture. Our summer wasn't too hot. Perhaps we didn't have the best weather for gardening, but it was good enough for our gardens to produce some good food.

The official start of autumn came this week without much fanfare around here. The newspaper has been distracted by the financial crisis and the debates in Washington over various plans to bail out the financial markets. And the political campaigns are heading into the final stretch with about five weeks to go before the election.

All of which is to say that things are pretty much normal and there isn't much news to write about today.

In the life of the church, there is a kind of routine that set in. Those of us whose lives follow the Revised Common Lectionary are in a cycle of texts that is very familiar and more everyday. The stories of the Exodus are supplemented by some theologically brilliant and very meaningful texts from Philippians and the Gospel texts are more of Jesus' parables. The season of Pentecost is the longest season in the Christian year and the days are often referred to as "ordinary time." There are no special festivals or holidays until we celebrate the reign of Christ just before Advent begins. Like my colleagues, I have to work a bit harder on my sermons during this time of year because of the danger of repetition and boredom.

We seem to have a problem with ordinary time. We love the festivals and special occasions, we even respond fairly well in times of crisis. But the everyday, ordinary tasks of our life of faith together sometimes fail to generate excitement. But there are incredible opportunities for meaning and faith in the midst of ordinary times. Covenant and promise are lived out in the everyday moments of our lives and in the ordinary times, we are able to develop a sense of gratitude.

Increasingly, I am coming to see Thanksgiving as a season and not just a day. I know a bit of the history of the Thanksgiving holiday and I know that we've developed quite a bit of mythology around the event that is not quite rooted in the absolute truth. But there is something beyond our stories of early immigrants to this continent - of Pilgrims and Puritans and their relationships with Native Americans. Gratitude is not just an emotion reserved for a particular day, but rather an attitude with which to approach life. There are so many things for which we can be grateful - even in hard times.

All we have is a gift of God. And the important things - life, health, family, friends - come to us in ways that we do not fully understand. We are so fortunate to have these gifts and they are things that we often take for granted.

So today I resolve to be more aware of the goodness that surrounds me in the every day and to be more expressive with my gratitude. I thank God for this day and for the good people with whom I will share it. I thank God for the beauty that surrounds us in the everyday events of our lives. For all the blessings of this life today is a good day for giving thanks.

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## September 26, 2008 – Crabapples



The crabapple trees in the church yard are filled with fruit this year. The trees were planted for ornamental purposes and since I've been involved in the church, no one has harvest the tiny apples for food. Crabapples have a lot of natural pectin and can be made into jams and jellies. I've also heard of them being mixed with other apple varieties to add flavor to cider. They're pretty tart just to eat off of the tree. And it is a lot of work to prepare crabapples. There is a relatively small amount of fruit and a lot of stems and seeds.

There are many varieties of apple trees. The ones that get the name crabapple are trees that produce fruit that is less than two inches in diameter. Crabapple trees are cultivated for the beauty of their blossoms and as ornamental trees, not for the taste of their fruit. Some orchardists plant crabapple trees among the regular apple trees as pollinators for the other trees, but most crabapple trees are cultivated for their beauty as landscape trees. I'm sure that is why we have them around the church. Their beautiful blossoms add to the brilliance of spring and the trees provide a nice shade canopy in summer. The ripening fruit makes the trees beautiful again in the early fall.

We had crabapple trees in our yard when we lived in Idaho and while they were beautiful trees, it was a lot of work to clean up after them. After the blossoms are past their prime, they fall to the ground where they need to be raked off of the grass. The fruit starts to rot after it falls to the ground and is difficult to rake and the leaves are small enough to provide a challenge in raking as well.

Crabapples are tempting for older children. The trees are short and the fruit on the bottoms of the trees is easy to pick. The tiny apples are just the right size for throwing or use as ammunition for a slingshot.

The birds love the crabapples. And the wild turkeys are among the most efficient harvesters of the crab apples. We don't have the job of cleaning up after the trees here in South Dakota because the turkeys come into the yard and eat all of the apples. When they are ready to eat the apples, one or two of the awkward birds flies up into the tree. They attempt to eat a few of the apples off of the branches, but mostly their presence in the tree causes the ripe fruit to fall to the ground where a host of other turkeys are waiting to eat the apples. The turkeys haven't discovered the crabapples in the church yard yet this year, but once they do, the fruit will be all gone in a couple of days.

The trees are really loaded this year. I suspect it is the product of a wet spring and a summer that had a fair amount of moisture as well, but some say that the loaded trees are a sign of a hard winter ahead. If that is the case, the turkeys will be ready to head into winter, having had an abundant supply of the tiny apples for their fall feasting.

For a few days now, until the turkeys discover them, the fruit-laden trees are brilliantly beautiful. The bright red apples provide a rich contrast with the green leaves and the nicely shaped trees are a joy to view.

Although fruit trees thrive with proper care in our climatic zone, they are not native species. The most abundant fruit producers of the area are chokecherry bushes, with their dark, tart fruit. Chokecherries are featured in a variety of Lakota recipes including wasna, which is filled with pounded berries. Chokecherries were also mixed with buffalo in making pemmican. Crab apples can be mixed with the chokecherries in making either of the foods, but there were no crab apples in the original recipes of the plains. The trees arrived after the settlers came.

Once again I am struck by the bounty of nature. There is no particular need for such a tiny tree to be so beautiful and to produce fruit so abundantly. There are enough seeds in one year's crop of apples to insure the propagation of the species. The brilliant blossoms attract the bees that are necessary for pollination, but they also give a lot of pleasure to humans who grow the trees primarily for their visual appearance. We get pleasure just from looking at the trees. Much of this world is like that. There is more food than is required, more beauty than we can take in. Trees growing in remote and isolated locations still produce beautiful blossoms and abundant fruit whether or not there is a human to enjoy their bounty. They just are beautiful for the sake of beauty.

Indeed God is abundant with gifts for all creatures. The bible isn't specific about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that was growing at the center of the Garden of Eden. Tradition often holds that it was an apple tree. The story reports that the fruit was good to eat, so I'm thinking it probably wasn't a crabapple tree, unless our tastes have

evolved a great deal over the years. But I suspect that all fruit trees have a lot to teach us about the nature of life and the value of goodness if we would open our eyes to see and our imaginations to think.

I wonder which day the turkeys will discover the apples this year.

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## September 27, 2008 – Faith and Service



I visited a 99 year-old woman in the hospital yesterday. She greeted me warmly. We've known each other since I came to be a pastor here in Rapid City. But she was in her mid eighties then. Her mind has always been quick and she has been a very pleasant person through a series of illnesses and changes in her life. She now lives in an assisted living facility that is a part of Westhills retirement community, where she and her husband were the first to move in when the facility opened in 1984.

Like so many people, I know only a slice of her life - the part that I have witnessed is the end of her retirement years. Even though I was introduced to her before I came to be her pastor, as she was friends with a relative, I did not know her for the first 75 years of her life. She was retired before I met her and was well settled into retirement living when I moved to Rapid City.

She is not one to talk about her past too much. Yesterday she was using her nurse's training to keep her mind alert. During my visit, she reviewed with me the usual questions that nurses ask to determine if someone is cognitively present: what day it is, where we are, etc. She had all of the right answers. And she knew me as soon as I entered the room. She was troubled that she couldn't remember the events that brought her to the hospital, but then commented that people often don't remember trauma and that is perhaps a good thing. She seemed alert, aware, and in control of her situation.

What I have witnessed most in her life is her life of faith. She has weathered the death of many of her friends and peers. The people she worked with and the circle of friends

that she and her husband shared are now gone. Since she moved into Westhills when it was brand new, she has met a lot of people who have moved into the facility and then passed away. When I first started leading worship at Westhills, she would play the piano for the nursing home services. She knew most of the residents. None of the people who lived in the nursing facility when I moved here are still living. She has seen a lot of loss and grief in these years.

It is clear that loss and grief has not broken her spirit. She still finds joy in the simple beauties and pleasures of this life and she maintains a cheerful attitude even in the midst of trying circumstances. If I could just maintain a level of pleasantness like hers, I would consider it to be a major accomplishment. Everyone who works with her or helps to provide for her care enjoys her.

But there is another slice of her life that I know only from stories - and those stories have come from others. A few years ago, in preparation for the 30th anniversary of the flood, I was reading the official documents that had been gathered together by the federal emergency management people following the 1972 Rapid City Flood. I was interested to find a whole section of reports that were written by members of our congregation. Members of our church served as a county commissioner, members of the team that determined which houses could be re-occupied and which areas would become greenway. There were engineers who helped with the clean-up and members of law enforcement who worked throughout the night with the rescue. There were everyday citizens caught up in the trauma and helping where they could.

And there was a nurse, working in a hospital with the waters rising - a hospital that eventually would have to be abandoned. The generators went out. Nurses were drowned in the parking lot during a shift change. Patients were moved to the upper floors. And through that long, dark night and into the coming days the nurse worked around the clock providing care and organizing others to put the concerns of the patients ahead of their own. Her written reports of the time are compelling reading.

She trained as a nurse in a time when there weren't many professional choices for women. But it is clear that nursing was much more than a job for her. It was a vocation - a life's calling. And her life was one of service. Over the years she met people in some of the worst circumstances of their lives. They were injured and vulnerable - sick and recovering - ailing and dying. And she was there for each one. She served a cross section of our community: rich and poor, from all walks of life.

It is a bit hard to get her to talk about those days. She is more interested in the changes in the modern hospital and the roles of the current nurses. She doesn't dwell on her past. But from the evidence I can garner from old reports and with interviews with folk who knew her during her active career, she was as remarkable when she was a woman of action as she is now that her life is more focused on her faith.

Faith and action working together. The choice of one or the other seems to me to be false. Faith expressed in service to others is an active adventure. And, in the end, we can trust the grace of God with the process of our ultimate salvation. While we live this life, we can express our faith in God by serving others. Certainly that is the model that has been set in the life of a nurse, who at 99 years of age is still able to cheer up the people around her.

As I was leaving the hospital yesterday, I ran into an employee of the hospital. She was rushed and running a bit late and didn't have much time to chat. She had been frowning and I could tell that her life, like mine, gets a bit overwhelming at times. When I mentioned who I had just visited, a smile came to her face and she relaxed visibly. She commented on what a remarkable woman she is.

Even though she is nearly 100 years old, even though she is in the hospital, she continues to bring healing to others - that's someone who has integrated her faith and action into a single package and we are all better for knowing her.

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## September 28, 2008 – Down Time



The airlines have figured out that the most popular night for travelers to be at home is Saturday. People will pay extra to have their weekends at home. Therefore, the deepest discounts on airline travel are trips that involve staying over a Saturday night. I am in Cleveland for meetings that begin this evening and continue through Tuesday. It is technically possible for me to leave home after church on Sunday and make it to Cleveland that same evening. But for this particular trip traveling on Saturday was less than one third of the cost of traveling on Sunday. Since the church is paying for the trip, it simply is not wise stewardship of the limited resources we have to pay so much for the convenience of traveling on Sunday.

The result is that I have down time here in Cleveland at precisely the same time that things are very busy for the folks at home. I've brought a bunch of work with me and I hope to catch up with some reports, correspondence and other things that I can do while on the road, but the truth is that I'm feeling a bit guilty sitting in a hotel in Cleveland while folks at home are working so hard to cover for my absence.

A couple of decades ago, our church's national offices moved from New York to Cleveland. In New York we didn't have a single address for all of our offices and various parts of the church were spread out in various settings. In addition, we owned no building in New York, so we had to pay very expensive rents in order to conduct our business. The move to Cleveland involved purchasing an office building. It has been a good move for the church. By having all of our offices in church house, the work of our church in its national setting can be more prayerful and more efficient. By owning our

building instead of renting, our overall costs of doing business have dropped. And for those of us who live in the west, Cleveland isn't quit so far from home as New York.

Shortly after moving to Cleveland a property adjacent to church house became available and our church became owners of a new hotel. The hotel, managed by Radisson, functions as a downtown hotel and is open to the public. But being owners of the hotel allows us to give ourselves discounts when church meetings bring us to Cleveland. The convenience of having a hotel connected to church house is great and the location of the hotel, across from downtown Cleveland's major sports venues, assures that occupancy is high. It is a short walk from Tower City, a shopping area with direct train access to the airport. Since I have two or three meetings in Cleveland every year I've learned the routine of life at church house and the Radisson Gateway. The rooms have high speed Internet access and I can do work on the computer from my room here as easily as any other place.

But it is still a city. Although there is a local congregation of the United Church of Christ about two miles from the hotel, I'll have to take a cab to get there today because the arrangement of the Interstate highways through the city makes walking difficult, if not impossible. Although there is a restaurant in the hotel and many others that are close by, the costs of meals in the city is pretty high and I try to plan my time so that I don't have to buy too much restaurant food. Of course finding a place to purchase a few groceries or convenience foods is a challenge that I have not mastered.

But the biggest challenge for me is to use the time that I have wisely. I feel an obligation to not waste the time that others are working so hard to make possible. I've brought a couple of writing projects that need my attention and I have some reading to do as well. I'll take time to walk and get some exercise, and the slower pace of my life her will allow me to adjust to the two-hour difference in time zones and to be fully prepared for the meetings this evening and over the next two days.

Back at home, there will be a lot of hard work today, getting everyone ready to get to the church early. We usually share the work of providing care for my mother, but Susan is doing all of that care this weekend as well as taking leadership for worship at church. Her regular job as director of the church school continues as well, so she has double or triple duty this morning. After church, she will have both her father and my mother for which to provide lunch and transportation. Whenever one of us is out of town the other realizes how much of our everyday living is shared work and how much we depend on each other to get things done.

But it is important for me to be in Cleveland this week. Our church is not like a major corporation, with ample staff to accomplish the work in its national headquarters. We are the church in all of its settings. Volunteers are as critical in the Conference and National settings of the church as they are in local church settings. The consultations on education that will be taking place in the next few days will provide significant direction

for a major new educational resource as well as coordinate the work of our conferences in educational ministries. We will be planning a national educational event and making the connections and developing the relationships that allow us to accomplish work over great distances. And, just as is true of a church meeting in my home church, this meeting is a gathering of friends. I am eager to see my colleagues and to hear of their lives and adventures since we were last face-to-face. We are in regular contact via e-mail and other distance connections, but I'm looking forward to catching up in ways that are only possible with face-to-face meetings.

So today I will have a little down time. But I hope that the rest can be used to refresh me for the activities of the coming week. And I hope that I will find appropriate ways to express my gratitude for the extra work people are doing at home to enable me to be here for these meetings.

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## September 29, 2008 – Dressing



I suspect that I have spent a great deal of my life inappropriately dressed for the occasion. I have never paid a whole lot of attention to clothes and so have occasionally arrived at an occasion with the wrong clothes. My friends and acquaintances are, for the most part, tolerant people and they are polite, so often they keep their opinions about how I am dressed to themselves.

Traveling presents its own sort of problems in regards to dress. This is especially true of business travel for a man my age. There was a time when gray slacks, a white shirt and tie and a blue blazer were appropriate for any occasion. Now there will be people in the meetings attended dressed in every possible way from safari gear to suits. You'd think that this would make things easy for me, because no particular style or fashion is dominant. It just confuses me. I am often at a loss when it comes to packing and planning for a trip.

In recent years I have taken to wearing bow ties. They are simple. The knot is the same as the one with which I tie my shoes, so there is nothing to remember. And when you have a belly the size of mine, a pointed strip of cloth aimed at your widest point doesn't seem like a good idea. The bow ties are a sort of private tribute to my father, who often wore a bow tie when dressing up. And they have a sort of comical appearance that brings a smile to the faces of those I meet. It doesn't have the serious and sometimes intimidating look that is too often achieved by men of my age.

Twice each year I travel to meetings in Cleveland where I attend formal corporate board meetings. At such meetings I am used to dressing up a little. Suits or slacks and jackets are my usual attire. It seems to me that I can show respect for the process and the other participants by dressing carefully and presenting myself as prepared and ready for business. So, without meaning to, I have distinguished myself in that group as someone who dresses up more than the others. "The guy with the bow tie" identifies me to those who can't remember my name. I've taken some gentle ribbing about being over dressed for the occasion, but that doesn't bother me.

This week's meetings are not board meetings, but a gathering of educators. I know, if I stop to think about it, that educators' meetings are casual affairs, but I was packing the same suitcase for a trip to Cleveland and I put in the same clothes. And the airlines encourage everyone to travel light. So I don't have casual shirts with me on this trip. I wore a pair of jeans for traveling, but they don't go with anything else that I've brought. So, if I am a bit over dressed at board meetings, I'm going to be really over dressed for this week's gathering.

But the truth is that the meeting isn't about how I'm dressed. It isn't about me at all. And if, when it is all over, the only thing people remember about me is how I was dressed, my contributions to the meeting won't have been worth the airfare. If the manner in which I have dressed and the way that I present myself demonstrates respect for my colleagues and the process in which we are engaged, that will be sufficient. And my mind can lay aside whatever insecurities I have about my appearance and focus on the content of the meeting.

These are challenging times for church educators. The challenge comes, in part, from the simple fact that much that passes for Christian education in contemporary America is all about appearances, and little about substance. Church schools rise and fall in popularity because of the painting and decorating of facilities and the number of cars in the parking lot instead of the contribution they are making to the future of our faith. Educators are judged not by the substance of their lessons, but by the popularity of their programs. Fun is often a substitute for faith. Parents ask their children whether or not they enjoyed activities. And church schools compete with sports and a thousand other activities. We celebrate "soccer moms," but rarely notice the volunteers in our church schools. Church has become one activity among many in the lives and priorities of our people.

Of course this sort of whining adds nothing to the quality of our culture or to the state of religion in our time. Churches and church schools need to adjust to a new reality and the need for faith is heightened by the pressures on families. Moses complained about the people of Israel when they were wandering in the wilderness. Elijah was a consummate whiner hiding in his cave. Jesus gave thanks to God for the people and wept over the lost potential in the city of Jerusalem.

We stand in the heritage and tradition of Moses and Elijah, but we are disciples of Jesus. If we are to be faithful in our time, we will continue to look for new ways to celebrate the gifts of the people with whom we work and to enhance their growth in faith. The task is not easy, and there will be tears and frustrations, and maybe even some moments of doubt and despair, but now is not the time to sit and sulk in our caves.

That is what is so invigorating about these meetings of educators. Today I gather with some of the finest and most dedicated Christians I know. We will be spending our time developing new resources, some of which will be years in the making. We will be working to figure out how to make the biggest contributions with very few financial resources.

It is our tradition, in recent years, to begin our time together with a bare table in our worship center. Each of us brings a small gift or symbol to the table as an offering of ourselves. By the end of the meeting, we always have a glorious and beautifully decorated worship center. It is a symbol for our work. Some of us have been at this work for decades. We have seen the fruits of our labor rise and fall. We have seen curricula come and go. We have seen our colleagues travel through the stages of their careers. We have welcomed new members to our circle and mourned the passing of dear friends.

We gather with the commitment to education in the church. We value the power of learning and teaching in the life of faith. We won't make any headlines.

And no one is going to remember how we dressed.

And that, my friends, is a very good thing.

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## September 30, 2008 – In Cleveland



In Cleveland yesterday, construction workers labored on elaborate and expensive repairs to the outside of tower city, one of the landmarks of the skyscraper. The construction crane in street outside the building took up two lanes normally reserved for traffic and created a bit of a bottleneck. Workers hooked up safety harnesses and worked on scaffolding hundreds of feet above the streets below.

In Cleveland yesterday, bankers and investment advisors paced in their offices and watched televisions and computer screens as news of the failure of the House of Representatives to pass a financial bailout bill became apparent. They worried and pondered their options as the markets fell. The greatest single-day drop in the Dow Jones Industrial Average saw billions of dollars wiped of the books. In Cleveland yesterday, the owners of significant amounts of those stocks wondered how their futures were being altered with their new drop in net worth.

In Cleveland yesterday, multi-million renovation projects were transforming industrial space into retail space and upscale apartments in a trendy part of the town that a few decades was the kind of place where no one would want to live.

In Cleveland yesterday, at 700 Prospect Avenue, leaders of the United Church of Christ hosted meetings, planned projects, directed ministries, booked trips and envisioned events. In Cleveland yesterday the Council of Conference Ministers began the second stage of intensive training in Financial Development for conference ministers and leaders of conference boards of directors. Important church business was conducted

and the church's leaders toiled at their desks to produce resources and develop strategies for the future of the church and its ministries.

In Cleveland yesterday, a small group of dedicated church educators gathered and engaged in significant discussions around the development of a new system of resources for teaching and learning faith practices. We spoke of the future of the church and of the passion that they have for faith and for the process of teaching faith in ways that enable it to blossom. We wondered at the needs of seekers and new church members, the challenges of young adulthood, the resources that parents and children and teens might need. We wrestled with emerging technologies and imagined what settings and circumstances the church might develop and discover as we enter a new generation.

In Cleveland yesterday, our work wasn't the most noticed. The newspaper headlines don't carry stories of what we did and did not accomplish. Ours wasn't even the most important work going on in church house. We are a small part of a much bigger process. But for those of us who are involved, the work is immensely significant.

Some of us are "old salts." We've been involved in multiple curriculum development projects. We know that no single set of curriculum will prove to be the key to the future of the church. We are skeptical of the power of learning resources to stimulate genuine transformation. Some of our team are newer to the process of developing educational resources. There is a fire and excitement and energy in the room when they speak of what is possible and how they envision these resources being used in the church. Their enthusiasm is contagious and even those of us who have seen other projects come and go have significant energy for this project.

In Cleveland yesterday it seemed as if we were doing something new. It is a part of an old story - our people have been passing down our faith for thousands of years. For hundreds of generations we have told the stories of our God's passion for human freedom and his dramatic actions to lead us not only from the land of slavery, but through the wilderness of our own actions that threatened to enslave us. We have remembered the words and actions of prophets who boldly spoke the truth to those who were not ready to hear the truth. And we have never failed to transmit to the next generation the basic truth that love is stronger than death and that the powers and principalities of this world do not hold the final verdict on the beauty, the meaning and the worth of human life. We have treasured the letters of ancient church leaders and poured over them for new meanings for our day. So what we were doing in Cleveland yesterday was, in a sense, as old as our faith itself. But it felt brand new.

Practices of faith is a new way of engaging ancient stories in the context of a rapidly changing world. We are aware that we live in uncertain times. We know that institutions that once seemed stable and permanent are in the process of being re-formed. We can't ignore the shifts in budgets and priorities in the church as it tries to discover the

new forms that are emerging and the future to which God is calling us. We know that beloved leaders will retire and others will be called to new ministries. We know that our time as leaders of the church is limited and that we are prone to making mistakes. We have not been deluded into thinking that our role in the life of the church is somehow more important than the roles of others. But we are engaged in meaningful work.

We have discovered a project that is bigger than ourselves. And we know that the resources we are envisioning and beginning to develop will be shaped by hands and minds other than our own.

In Cleveland yesterday, we made a beginning. We took a few steps down a road whose destination is not yet apparent. Within a year writers and editors will be selected. Development conferences will be held. Faith practices will be explored and experienced. Within a few years congregations will begin to use the resources. There will be successes and failures. Tempers will flare and reconciliation will be brokered. We are passionate people and we care about the church. Perhaps within a decade we might be able to see evidence of the successes and failures of our work.

But we also know that much of the results of what happened in Cleveland yesterday are beyond the scope of our lives. The results are not something that we will witness. We can only imagine that people of faith will gather centuries from now to tell the stories that come from centuries ago and that the thread of faith will have been faithfully cherished in our time and connected to the faith of those who have gone before and the faith of those yet to come.

In Cleveland yesterday we invested our time, our passion, and our lives in a cause in which we believe - one that is far greater than we are. It might have been in any other city. But yesterday we were in Cleveland. And the times, it seemed to us, were momentous.

Somewhere near the beginnings of our understanding of God's nature, Abram and Sarai set forth from the land of their parents and grandparents in search of the land that God had promised to show them. They discovered that God, who had guided their lives in the old place was also present in the new place. More importantly, they discovered that God was with them throughout the journey. It was a very important discovery and one our people have never forgotten. In Cleveland yesterday most of us were not at home, we were on a journey and anticipating our return to the places of our families. But surely God was in Cleveland yesterday, sharing the journey of faithful people.

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## October 1, 2008 – Above the Clouds



It is 1257 miles from Cleveland, Ohio to Rapid City, South Dakota. It takes two very long days to drive the distance. Despite the inconveniences of airline travel and our tendency to complain about it, it is still amazing to me that I can get up in Cleveland, accomplish almost a full day's work, and then travel home to sleep in my own bed that night. We haven't yet devised the technology for the nearly instant travel depicted in Star Trek adventures, but the amount of people who are moved great distances in relatively short times is impressive. Last night there were folk on the airplane with me who had gotten up in London, England and would be sleeping in Rapid City the same day.

There was a lot of rain in the eastern part of the United States yesterday and we took off in the rain and traveled above the clouds for most of the trip. I spent quite a bit of the first leg of my journey, from Cleveland to Minneapolis, watching and attempting to photograph the sunset over the clouds through the window of the airplane. The bright sunlight revealed all of the scratches in the window and most of my photographs fail to capture the beautiful view that I had on the trip.

Coming into Minneapolis, we descended through several layers of clouds as the sunset in the mostly clear Western sky turned from gold to yellow to orange to red. Coming down through the layers of clouds was a gentle ride and when we touched down on the tarmac in Minneapolis it was as if we had entered another world. Soon we were inside a bustling terminal filled with weary travelers, hundreds of shops and food vendors, moving walkways and trams running from one end of the terminal to the other.

Descending through the clouds is a good metaphor for the changes that need to take place in my life today. I need to be firmly planted in Rapid City, dealing with the demands of a busy church that is preparing for Worldwide Communion Sunday, Neighbors in Need, getting its monthly newsletter in the mail, planning firewood deliveries, engaging children and adults in fall programs and much more. I have eight days at home before heading back to Cleveland for a Board of Directors meeting that will turn my energies in a different direction.

One of the costs of rapid travel is that we have less time for our bodies and our brains to adjust to the new realities of the many different places we visit and work. The physical aspects of travel from one city to another may be less challenging than the psychological shifts that need to take place to allow me to be fully present to the people with whom I work. The two-hour shift in time zones means I will be tired today and probably sleepy in the mid day, but that doesn't change the amount of work that I need to accomplish in the next couple of days.

It is good and pleasant to get one's head above the clouds from time to time, but the demands of this life call me to keep my feet firmly planted on the earth much of the time. One of the transitions for me is from meetings where we were envisioning future resources to work where we are executing ministries in the present. It is good to dream and plan, but the everyday life of the congregation I serve goes on. There are members of my congregation who will not be alive when the new educational resources are available for use. There are other people who are not presently a part of the congregation to whom those resources will be addressed. Our congregation will change in the time that it takes for the resources to be developed and produced. The church will change in that time. We have to maintain a delicate balance of attentiveness to the present while we have our eyes on the future. Neither can be ignored if we are to be faithful to the calling of God for our lives. We serve a God who transcends all time and space.

So today I will set aside the images of Cleveland and of the trip home and focus on the place where I am called to live and serve. I'll try to pay attention to the things in this place that might inform the work that will continue on the development of the resources. And I'll be in touch with my colleagues over the Internet every few days as we proceed with the project. But I need to keep my focus on this place and these people because it is real ministry in real congregations that best informs the resources we are trying to produce. A group of people in an office building in Cleveland cannot develop the resources that our churches need. Only by truly immersing ourselves in the lives of our congregations in their different locations can we remain connected to the life and needs of the church.

There are meetings to attend, worship to plan, people to visit, phone calls to return, planning and office work to complete. And today is a new month, with bills to be paid and work to be accomplished at home as well.

It's good to be home, but I can still tell that there is a part of me that is in motion that will need to slow down to the pace of this place so I can truly be here with all of my heart and mind and soul and strength.

The sky is clear and the stars are bright as I begin my day. The forecast calls for sunny skies and temperatures into the seventies. It is a great way to start a new month. Our autumns are so beautiful here. The air is clear and it is good to be in this place. I've descended through the clouds and now I am at home.

It is time to get to work.

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## October 2, 2008 – Where There is Smoke



There has been a bit of smoke in our neighborhood the last few days. The Forest Service is conducting controlled burns as a part of its forest management strategy. After decades of total fire suppression, scientists have learned the value of fire in the life cycle of the forest. Without fire or extensive cleaning operations the fuels build upon the forest floor and when fires do occur they are much more intense and devastating than if some fires had been allowed to burn naturally. Of course no one wants to have their home threatened by fire and no one wants to have their view of a wooded hillside turned into a view of a fire scar with acres of dead and falling trees. The Black Hills are a tight ecological system and it is possible that there were periodic catastrophic fires even before modern forest management techniques. Photographs taken over a hundred years ago reveal that there were a lot fewer trees in the hills.

Yesterday I could smell the smoke as soon as I stepped out of the house and even when I know that there are controlled burns, there is a hint of alarm in that first smell of smoke. We are trained and keyed to a bit of panic when we smell smoke. Smoke means fire and fire means danger. As the day warmed, the column of smoke became more vertical and it was easy to see that the fire was not near our home at all.

Controlled burns are always a bit of a risk. Even with careful management, there is always the possibility that fire could spread outside of the prescribed burn area. In fact the official notices from the Forest Service no call such events “prescribed burns” instead of “controlled burns.” I think it demonstrates that fire behavior is always a bit out of control, even with the best techniques and information.

I've known firefighters all of my life and there are many who are fascinated by fire behavior. Fires seem to take on a life of their own and they are capable of traveling and spreading in many different directions and many different ways. Controlling a major fire is a bit of an illusion. The fire burns as it will. Fire suppression with helicopters and airplanes can sometimes slow the advance of a fire, but the most successful technique involves fighting fire with fire. Fire fighters burn out the fuels in advance of the fire to starve it of fuel.

Despite many advances in forest management technique. Despite a better understanding of the role of fire in the cycles of the forest. Despite modern scientific gear with ways of testing moisture in the air and even in the wood itself. Despite weather prediction experts who can estimate when high winds may come. Despite all of the things we know, fire is still unpredictable and dangerous. After the prescribed burns are completed, forest managers will assess what happened. The exact amount of fuel that remains after the fire is still a bit of a surprise to the experts and the pattern of the fire's mosaic also is uncertain.

Our lives are filled with uncertainties. There are times when our vision is clouded by smoke or by other things that keep us from seeing things in a normal way. The future is not always clear and the results of our actions are not always fully understood. We make decisions in specific contexts and learn to live with the consequences of our decisions.

Making major changes in established institutions is sometimes like playing with fire. We don't always know the consequences and the consequences are not always what we might predict. What we are learning, however, is that sometimes it takes bold initiatives and big changes in order to provide for the future of an institution. Staying the same without any changes can result in stagnation and decline. There are times when big changes and bold moves are required. More often there are times when small changes are the intention and things somehow get a bit out of hand and the changes start to occur without a distinct sense of management. All we can do is observe and try to minimize the damage.

Fire is not a complete analogy for change inside an institution, but it gives us one way of thinking about our actions and decisions.

Forest managers know, every time they ignite a prescribed burn, that there will be some critics of their actions. There will be some who argue that the excess fuel could have been cleared by logging and that burning the fuel is wasteful. There are others who believe that the forest should be allowed to follow a totally natural course without any management by humans. There are others who think prescribed burns are fine when they are far away from their properties or interests but who oppose a specific burn because of its location in relationship to their home or another favorite place.

Leadership invites criticism. We don't always think the same. And that is a good thing. By listening to opinions and information that are different from our own, we gain important information that can enable us to make better decisions. Our own experiences can help us become better at managing change the next time we have the opportunity.

What we know is that things will not remain static - in the forest or in the institutions we love. Change is inevitable. How we respond to the change makes a difference. And when the smoke lifts we must be prepared to continue our work and clean up the messes we have made.

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## October 3, 2008 – Farewell Adventurer



For more than a year, most of the aviation community in the United States has believed that Steve Fossett died in an accident of his Bellanca Decathlon somewhere in the remote area of Nevada or California. He had taken off for a pleasure flight in the two-seat airplane on September 3, 2007 and has been missing since. We all knew what must have happened. Mountain flying in small aircraft is exhilarating and fun, but there are inherent dangers. A 180-horsepower airplane will not perform at altitude well enough to climb over the highest mountains, and although nimble, steep turns result in significant altitude loss. The higher the plane goes, the more the performance deteriorates. Pilots get used to using mountain wave action to ride up the side of a mountain, but weather is unpredictable and winds are notably squirrely in the mountains. Another competent pilot had become the victim of conditions that exceeded the limits of pilot ability and aircraft performance.

Some of us secretly wished that the wreckage would never be found - that his life had ended in a corner of the mountains so remote that his final resting place would be undisturbed until no evidence remained. But they have found the wreckage and made the identification and the world now knows the final chapter in the story.

Steve lived a life that many dream about. He was a record-holder in aviation, sailing, cross-country skiing, mountain climbing, and several other sports. He had the money and the ability to keep trying at a circumnavigation of the globe in a balloon until he succeeded. He topped that adventure by flying around the world solo and un-refueled in a fixed wing airplane. Prior to Steve, no pilot held aircraft records in more than one class

of aircraft. Steve holds records in four classes of aircraft. He had the financial resources to purchase any airplane that he wanted, but he enjoyed flying a simple, small airplane, based on a decades-old design. The super decathlon was designed for aerobatic performance and flying low and slow.

I followed the career and the adventures of Steve Fossett because he lived a life that I knew I would never live. He was financially successful and became a friend of even more wealthy Richard Branson, who financed many of Steve's adventures. He took risks I would not take. He had a competitive streak that I do not possess. He wanted to set records - to be first, to be best, to do things no one else had ever done. And he did what he set out to do. Sometimes we admire people who are very much like ourselves. Sometimes it is the difference that catches our eyes.

He knew the risks he was taking. Although he sought to manage risks in his life as an investor and as an aviation adventurer, he knew that there were risks that could not be managed. And he had survived some pretty dramatic accidents. In one ballooning accident, his canopy caught fire and he plunged into the Coral Sea. But there are risks that cannot be managed. The wind is only predictable to a certain extent. Making a steep turn on the edge of a stall works in many circumstances, but that close to the edge leaves no room for even the slightest error.

And even if he had survived this accident, none of us lives forever.

Steve died as he had faced most of his adventures: alone. He and Peggy never had children and she wasn't inclined to go off on his adventures. For almost forty years she developed her own way of dealing with the risks he took and somehow learned to live with the knowledge that each adventure could be his last.

Then one day a simple flight was his last. He was headed out for the morning. With a handful of paper aviation charts and a bottle of water he intended to look at the world from above, ride the wind, look at the mountains and be back in time for lunch.

So the news has come in with details in the last chapter of Steve's last adventure. There will be more pictures of the wreckage and the NTSB will publish a final report of the accident. I used to read all of the aviation accident reports as a way of managing risks and avoiding similar circumstances. Now, no longer a pilot, I have stopped reading the reports. I have no need to read this one.

I choose to remember the man who set records for the distance traveled in 24 hours in a sailboat, altitude records in balloons, airships and gliders, and who rigged himself up in a carbon-fiber one-of-a-kind airplane and flew it around the world fueled by high energy shakes and frequent radio conversations with his friends on the ground, fighting sleep and testing the limits of human endurance. I choose to remember the man who climbed the highest mountain on all but one of the continents. He simply didn't have

patience to climb Everest. I choose to remember the man who loved to simply go up in a tube and fabric airplane with the windows open on a crisp fall day and look down at the world to see what it looked like from above.

There will be plenty of eulogies for Steve Fossett. He doesn't need mine. But there are people in this world that you never meet for which you develop a sense of connection nevertheless. Steve Fossett was one of those people. I'm glad I lived in his generation and witnessed some of his adventures, if from a great distance. I'm glad that my life has taken a different path and have no aspirations to become the kind of person that he was. True adventurers reveal a part of the human spirit that is engaging and inspiring.

Steve Fossett was a true adventurer.

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## October 4, 2008 – The Drum



October is a month to observe Native American ministries in the United Church of Christ. In some part of the country, the annual Neighbors in Need all church offering is an opportunity to think of the work of the Council of American Indian Ministries, which receives part of its funding from that offering. In our church, thinking of Native American Ministries brings to mind a wide variety of things. Our Woodchuck Society projects have helped us forge partnerships with congregations and church leaders on the Cheyenne River and Pine Ridge reservations. What started out as a few people delivering firewood has grown to include a system for delivering hand-knitted clothing and blankets from a congregation in Florida, and annual picnic, and many other projects.

Native American ministries brings to mind the work of Emma and Percy Tibbetts, whose lives and ministry spanned cultures and generations. We remember their relatives, including Philip Frazier, who among other things participated in the arrangement of the Dakota Hymn, "Many and Great," which is in our hymnal.

Christianity came to Indian country in South Dakota in the midst of a clash of cultures. Many traditional ways of Lakota, Dakota and Nakota people were ending because of the demise of the buffalo herds. Ill-informed missionaries sought to eliminate native languages and ways of belief, without truly understanding the culture and practices they were resisting. There arose among the people a sense that there had to be a hard distinction and a definite choice between the religion and practices of the elders and Christianity. For the first few generations of Christian practice, traditional ceremonies and practices were banned from churches. There are still elders who think it is wrong to

bring a drum into a church, or to burn sage, or for Christians to participate in inipi ceremonies.

Others, however, see the traditional practices and ceremonies as having elements to offer to Christian practice and see places where the two systems of belief complement each other. The tension between the two ways of thinking is evident in many reservation congregations to this day.

Out of respect for the memory and the work of Emma Tibbetts, we have been slow to bring native symbols into our church. Even though our congregation is predominantly non-native, we have, over the years, acquired some gifts and symbols. A large star quilt was a gift from partners in the Woodchuck project. A couple of drums were part of a youth ministry project. Sweetgrass and sage and an owl feather came from a series of talking circles on the topic of suicide prevention with elders and youth from Rosebud.

Tomorrow we will be using the drum in the opening of our worship as a prelude to the singing of a native hymn. It seems appropriate for the worship service that we have planned. The people who will be playing the drum spent a week at Bridger this summer, sharing in a cross-cultural camp, listening to the stories of elders, participating in inipi, and learning about Dakota traditions.

There is no disrespect intended for those who see a rigid divide between traditional and Christian practices. At the same time we acknowledge that sharing our Christian faith does not have to involve the rejection of the history, traditions, culture and language of other people. And we acknowledge that there is wisdom in traditional practices. Most importantly, we understand that there is only one God and whether one prays to the Great Spirit or to the God of Creation, it is the same God who hears and answers our prayers.

So we do not take this action lightly. We have no need to be members of the “wannabe” tribe. We do, however, celebrate our connections with our partner congregations of the Dakota Conference and their gifts to our understanding of Christ’s mission in this world.

The beat of the drum is a relatively new sound for a traditional congregation. New sounds can help us grow into fresh understandings of God’s work in the world. Change, when arising from the context of genuine relationships, is a positive force in the life of the church.

Emma might have been distressed to see the drum in church. And I will be thinking of her tomorrow as we participate in our worship. But now, years after the end of her life, I think that she would be more pleased to see the relationships growing and proud to hear the Dakota hymn sung.

May the beat of the drum echo the heartbeat of our people as we seek to grow in understanding and respect.

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## October 5, 2008 – Bread



I have fond memories of my mother baking bread. The kitchen in the house where I grew up had a section of counter that was lower than the standard height, so that there was a good place for mom to knead the bread. We had a small electric flour mill and she ground the flour freshly for baking. The wheat was hard red winter wheat from my uncle's farm. We had a large metal garbage can that had never been used for garbage. We would bring back wheat from the farm when we would visit. We knew here our bread came from.

And the smell of baking bread brings back so many memories. I used to love it when there was fresh, warm bread at lunchtime. We'd know it by the smell of the house when we came in the back door. There was enough family that we went through quite a bit of bread but there always seemed to be enough. For special occasions, mom would bake rolls and one of my favorite memories of Thanksgiving is having turkey sandwiches on fresh rolls for supper.

I know how to bake bread. During our years in seminary, I used to bake on Saturdays. I'd make bread for the house where we lived and often made a special loaf for a communion service. I would mix up a batch of whole wheat dough and another with bleached flour then braid the two colors of bread into a large loaf.

My life doesn't have the discipline for baking that it once had. I will bake bread for special occasions, but we will go weeks between occasions when we eat bread that we have bought at the store.

Today is a day to celebrate bread. It is a tradition at our church to have many different kinds of bread for the celebration of World Communion Sunday. We sometimes have chosen specific breads to represent different parts of the world: rice cakes and tortillas, pita and lefse and fry bread, matza and dark rye. We have served cornbread for communion. The many different kinds of bread remind us of the scope of the community of which we are a part. People in many different lands with many different traditions share in a common meal today.

Eating together is a way of making significant connections. When we share a meal, we share a part of ourselves. When we eat together we acknowledge our common humanity. Each of us needs food to sustain our bodies and to continue living. Sharing a meal is a way of getting to know others better.

The meal of our faith community, communion, is not about filling bellies or quenching thirst. In communion we have a taste and a sip - enough that all may share - enough to leave a sense of anticipation for things that are yet to come. At the same time, we celebrate the abundance of gifts we have received. So today there will be an abundance of loaves of bread for our communion. There will be baskets and baskets of bread and after our worship we will share in a brunch with more special bread and rolls.

The psalmist invites us to “taste and see that the Lord is good.” Our worship invites us to participate with all of our senses. We will be baking rolls in the kitchen as people arrive so that they can smell. Our service offers opportunities to taste. There is special music to hear. The communion table is filled with things to see. And when we pass the peace, we will touch one another and feel. All of our senses will be engaged as we worship together.

World Communion Sunday is a special time to remember our connections to others. The table cloth that our team brought home from Costa Rica will be on the communion table. Another table will have the special cloth that came from Uluru in central Australia. We will be thinking of friends around the world who also will be sharing in this special day.

And communion also brings to mind faithful people in other times who have shared this meal. Jesus instruction to share this meal “in remembrance,” invites us to remember all of the people who have shared it throughout generations of the church as well as those who are yet to come who will remember our time when they share.

When I smelled the bread baking as I came into our house for lunch, I knew it was going to be a good day. Today will be a good day as well. For my memories will be combined with the memories of a congregation of beloved friends and the memories of a world full of faithful Christians as together we celebrate World Communion Sunday.

We pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." Today we celebrate the bread that we have been given.

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October 6, 2008 – Time



There are three mechanical clocks in our home. One was a gift from the first congregation we served and now is about twenty years old. It chimes on the quarter hour and is supposed to run eight days on a winding, but I find it will run down if I try to let it go a full week. I try to wind it about every five days. Another is in at least its third generation of the family. It strikes the half hour and the hour and would probably go ten days between windings. The third clock has been in the family for at least four generations. It has a 24-hour mechanism and strikes the hour.

Somehow, I have ended up being the one to wind the clocks most of the time. It is a chore that I like and I enjoy watching the mechanisms of the clocks go around. I marvel at the ingenuity of inventors who could create a mechanism that not only works, but which will continue to work for more than a century with only minor repairs.

It is a bit of a personal challenge to get the clocks timed so that they all strike on the hour together. I started out with a goal of getting them to strike within five minutes of each other. That was easily achieved, as was 2 minutes. Getting them to all strike within one minute is achievable, but I have to pay attention. Two of the clocks, driven by springs, tend to run a little faster just after they have been wound, and a little slower later in the week. The oldest clock is driven by weights and runs at the same speed no matter where it is in the cycle of winding.

For a very small price one can obtain a digital clock that is accurate to the second and uses radio waves to check its accuracy and correct itself if it gets off. We have a clock

like that in our kitchen. It belongs to my mother and it is easy for her to read. It tells us exactly what time it is. The chiming clocks tell us about what time it is.

For most of life, knowing about what time it is is good enough. There are some things that require precision in timekeeping, but not very many. Because the amount of time it takes to drive into town varies by conditions and time of day, we are used to allowing a couple of extra minutes when the event needs to start at a precise time.

Time is an arbitrary invention anyway. It is helpful for planning meetings and gatherings, and we have all gotten used to allowing time to govern our lives. We set clocks to wake us and to remind us of important meetings. We check our watches frequently. But who says a day should be divided into 24 hours or an hour into 60 minutes? Why not have a digital system with ten hours in a day, 100 minutes in an hour and 100 seconds in a minute. What is it about 60 that makes it the right division of time? Except of course convention. We have been doing it this way for a long time. The units of time are the same now as they were when a craftsman assembled Susan's great grandfather's clock over a century ago. And they will be the same when the clocks have been handed down to another generation. Our system of measuring time has been agreed upon around the world. Our watches work in Australia and China and Zaire and Iceland as well as at home. And, there would be little to be gained in changing the system of measuring time.

So I have fallen into a routine of winding the clocks. Sometimes, if I forget to wind a clock, I will wake when it does not strike. I've been known to get up in the middle of the night to wind the clocks because I have trouble sleeping without the familiar sounds and I like the striking to tell me the hour when I wake in the middle of the night. I don't have to open my eyes to count the chimes.

While we count the hours and measure the passage of time, we all know that not every minute seems the same length as another. Not every hour feels the same. An hour waiting for the phone to ring with news of a loved one can last forever. An hour's conversation with friends flies by so quickly that it seems like a minute. A day of working is shorter than a day of waiting. Our perception of time has a big effect on how it feels.

What the ticking of the clocks reminds us is that for humans time is a finite commodity. We only have so much of it. Our time will come to an end. We do not know precisely how long we have to live, but the actuarial tables give us an estimate. Even if by strength or genetics or luck or a combination of them we do live for more than a century, the span of a human life is limited. Far more important than the length of a life is what we do with the time that we have. Can we make contributions to others with the time we have? Will we waste time in ways that we will later regret? Do we have more to offer than simply to occupy space and time?

Today is a new day with hours ahead in which to work and play and be in relationship with others. When I think of it, the gift of time is a precious one. May I value and treasure the time that I have been given.

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## October 7, 2008 – Moonlight



The first quarter moon officially occurs tonight, but last night's moon was close enough for a casual observer. It looked like exactly half of the sphere was lit as we watched it through the tree branches from our deck. I've never gotten good at photographing the moon. I suppose that it is partly that one needs a good telephoto lens to make the moon a significant portion of the picture. Part of the problem with photographing the moon is that it requires an understanding of light. The light of the sun reflecting off of the moon is not too bright, even on those evenings when the earth seems bathed in moonlight.

A clear view of the moon meant that the clouds that had filled the sky earlier in the day had blown off to the east and the sky was clearing. The temperatures drop more quickly in the evening when there are no clouds.

Another week and we'll have a full moon. It will be the hunter's moon. Some folks call the full moons of September and October harvest moons, but I think that technically the harvest moon is the one closest to the equinox, which this year was about a week before the equinox. Hunter's or Harvest, the moonrise on a clear fall evening is a beautiful sight. Over the next week, the moonrise will be earlier and earlier until at full moon it will occur just as the sun sets.

Because the days are longer, I tend to pay less attention to the moon during the summer. I think that this practice was shared by the ancients as well. The cycles of work in an agricultural community leave little time for contemplation during the summer. As harvest is completed and the crops are in there is more time for recreation. The shorter

days mean that there are more wakeful hours when it is dark out as well. Therefore, much of the observation of the heavens and contemplation of their meanings took place in the autumn and winter.

The regular patterns of the phases of the moon meant that most ancient societies measured the passage of the year by counting full moons. Most ancient calendars were based on the lunar cycles. The division of the year into months has its origins in the cycles of the moon. As time progressed, and tools of observation were refined, we learned to measure the year by earth's relationship to the sun. Many religious calendars are lunar calendars. The modern Christian calendar is a hybrid with some events and holidays set according to the solar calendar and others set by the lunar calendar. Christmas is always on the same day each year, though we now know that December 25 isn't quite the right day for the winter solstice. Easter, however can occur over a wide range of dates, falling on the first Sunday after the Paschal full moon. And there are discrepancies between the assigning of a date to the Paschal full moon as opposed to the astronomical full moon. Due to changes in time zones, the astronomical full moon does not land on the same day worldwide, whereas the Paschal moon does. Very few of us are aware of the precise formula for determining the date of Easter. We look up the dates on calendars or charts. And Christians do not all agree on the method of computing Easter. Because of differences in the Julian and Gregorian calendars, Easter is celebrated on a different Sunday in orthodox churches than in western churches.

The moon, being the closest celestial object, is easy to observe. It is the brightest object in the night sky and one doesn't need a telescope or any special equipment to observe the phases of the moon. The ancients didn't fully understand all of the effects that the moon had upon the earth, but they did recognize a relationship between the tides and the moon. They attributed many powers to the moon that are not real. The moon does not control our emotions or dictate our relationships, but those who work in law enforcement and psychiatric hospitals know that there is some influence of the full moon on human behavior.

Mostly, for people like me, it is simply beautiful. I watch the moon because it is one of the objects in the world that is easy to observe and that gives me pleasure. The contrast between the moon and the night sky is worth taking time to view. Like the mountains, the moon has a sense of permanence. The views of the moon that we see are not that different from the views that people had thousands of years ago. And they are not too different from how the moon will look, when observed from the earth, thousands of years from now. I can imagine others who look to the night sky and exclaim, "Wow! Isn't that beautiful!"

Autumn affords some warm evenings and good times to observe the moon. It is just another of the wonders of life on earth. The vastness of the universe and the beauty of the night sky is enough to give us pause about the importance of our lives in the context of a broader perspective. People have felt insignificant under the vastness of the

heavens for as long as we have been looking at the sky. Psalm 8 asks what are humans in the vastness of God's creation and how is it that God has come to care for us so. The psalm doesn't answer the question, but concludes that we are loved and cared for by God in spite of the vastness of the universe and the scope of God's realm.

So we continue to lift our eyes to the heavens. We know that God is present no matter which direction we look. We know that God doesn't dwell in some physical place that is somehow above us. But looking up at the sky reminds us of the vastness of God's realm and the incredible size of the entire universe.

And here, on our little planet, we look out at the rest of the universe and marvel at its beauty and vastness. Here, in this one little corner of creation, are creatures who are aware and who appreciate the beauty and vastness of the universe. And we keep looking up.

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## October 8, 2008 – Abundance



I have always lived in a home where there were plenty of books. Growing up, we had access to encyclopedias, dictionaries and a wide variety of books. My parents enjoyed books and read a great deal. Our town's library was only a block away and we were able to borrow additional books and read about the things that captured our interests.

As an adult, I have surrounded myself with books. My office has two walls of bookshelves and they are both full, with additional books piled on counters and in other places. My bookshelves at home are filled to brimming, and there is usually a pile of books in the picture window next to my favorite chair. If the event of a blizzard that snows us in, we'd run out of food before we ran out of things to read.

Bookstores and libraries have always held fascination for me and now, with Amazon dot com and other online booksellers, searching for rare and exotic books is as easy as turning on the computer.

I enjoy reading about a wide range of subjects. In addition to my love for theology and Bible study, I enjoy reading philosophy and history. I've made a study of education over the years and add a few books on that subject each year. I seem to go in streaks with fiction. There have been times when I've always had a work of fiction that I was reading, sometimes keeping a couple of spare novels in reserve just in case. At other times my attention is more captured by nonfiction. As I have aged, I have developed a deepening appreciation for poetry and now always have a volume of poetry in progress for "slow reading." I'm not too bad at speed reading, especially if I am reading a textbook, but

there are some volumes that beg to be read with plenty of time for contemplation and processing of the information.

All of these books constitute a luxury beyond the imagination of some folks. I am aware that I am surrounded by abundance and grateful that I am allowed to live in such a way that we are surrounded by the ideas and insights of other people.

Over the years a few great books and a few great authors have emerged to be favorites. I read every title that humanist, holocaust survivor, and nobel prize winner Elie Wiesel writes. I keep up with the prolific output of psychologist Robert Coles and educator Parker Palmer. I have a long list of favorite theologians and preachers whose works I read. There are several volumes in my possession that are worth reading a second or third time. And there are a few great authors and a few great books that have come to have common meaning for Susan and me. Having read those books and discussed their meaning has deepened our relationship and our appreciation for each other's minds.

I suppose that one might wonder where the line between abundance and excess lies. In the eyes of many, we probably crossed that line long ago. When we have made a move from one home to another, we have shipped a lot of books. Books are heavy and expensive to move. There are surely books in our home that we could get rid of and ones that we will never again read. I have no interest in collecting books for the sake of collecting. Rare and collectable books are the province of others. I enjoy books for reading. I enjoy being surrounded by the ideas of others. But we are finite beings. I can read only so many books each week. I have other activities that occupy my time and when I do have leisure time, I rarely read all day long, but seek out other activities as well. I am certain that when my time comes to die, there will be a list of books that I have been meaning to read that I never got around to reading.

I have a program on my computer that helps me catalogue and organize my books, but I have many books that I haven't gotten around to entering. I write periodic book reviews for my blog, but I am so far behind in writing those that I know I'll forget what I have read. I keep thinking I'll have more time for those activities later, but I know that the truth is that I have always lived with time as a scarce commodity and I will always need to prioritize my use of time. Not every task will be completed. Not every project will be neatly tied up.

In the balance, however, I think that I'm fortunate to have more books than time. The thought of having more time than books is not pleasant. But that reality is so unlikely that I don't feel any sense of threat. If I have less money, I will buy less books. But my savings of books is significant. I won't run out even if I have to go through a period with less money. And, of course I have access to libraries that are filled with books that can be borrowed for free. There is no limit to what I can read, except time itself.

How fortunate we are to be surrounded by such abundance. How rich to live in a world of ideas. How grateful I am for the gift of vision to see and read. How delightful to live in this time of history where books are relatively inexpensive and readily available. I suppose I could have learned to survive in the days before the printing press. In those days all books were rare and very expensive. And I suppose that emerging technologies will replace words printed on paper as the method of conveying ideas. In the future electronic readers or perhaps even more advanced methods of communicating will replace some books. It seems to me to be wonderful to live in this time where we can feel the heft of a book as we lift it to read it and turn the pages ourselves, marking our progress with a bookmark.

May you discover at least one good book this week. And may you make time to read with joy. I know I'll have at least two books in my briefcase at all times. I live in a time of abundance.

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## October 9, 2008 – Markets



One of the things about writing a daily blog that doesn't have a specific topical focus is that I allow myself to range widely when it comes to the subject for the day. And I am often tempted to write about things that are well outside of my area of expertise. The old joke is that you should never go to your pastor for medical, legal, or financial advice. They all are outside the range of a pastor's expertise and a pastor is likely to give you advice even when he (or she) doesn't know what he is talking about.

So I need to begin today's blog with a disclaimer. I don't know much about the financial markets.

But the markets have dominated the news this week. Most of the news has been bad. The markets continue to fall even after the passing of the federal bailout plan.

We received our quarterly pension statements this week. The losses were significant. The newsletter that comes with the statements warned us not to panic. The markets produce a profit over the long haul and pension investments are long-term investments. We have years to wait out the markets. And I am not inclined to panic about my pension in the first place. It is something that the church does to take care of us. The church has always taken care of us. And it makes sense to me that if the members of our congregations have less money the pastors should share in their losses.

Everything that I have been taught about financial markets says that we should not panic, but should wait and see what happens. Investment professionals always speak of

down markets as opportunities for investments. Buy low, sell high is the standard prescription for profit in the markets.

But it seems to me that the investment professionals are the ones who are panicking. The New York Stock Exchange seems to respond to each little bit of news from the legislature and the department of treasury. The professionals seem to be the most inclined to rash actions in response to the market. I wouldn't recommend turning to Wall Street for the voice of calm in the midst of the crisis.

I don't mean to make light of the problems we face as a nation. The very structure of our financial system is at risk. Banks and other seemingly stable institutions are going to fail. People will lose money. Bad things will happen to good people. People will have their futures threatened through no fault of their own. We are going to have to re-examine the way that we do business.

But, to be honest, I am not losing sleep over the markets.

It is only money.

The story that is often told about Joe Albertson, the founder of the grocery store chain, is that once when Joe was in his seventies the chain was moving toward rapid expansion and taking significant financial risks. One of Joe's advisors warned Joe about the risk, saying, "If this doesn't work out, we could go broke." Joe's response was, "I've been broke before."

It is not money that is the problem. It is our attitude toward money. Not that I have any experience or expertise living without money. I've always been well supported by the congregations that I serve. And we have always figured out how to have a place to live and food to eat. The groceries for breakfast are in the house and prospects look good for lunch and dinner today as well. This isn't the case for some people.

In a way I worry more about those who will lose nothing in the current financial crisis. Those who have nothing to lose. The people who gather for a daily meal at Cornerstone Rescue Mission, the folks on the waiting list for Habitat for Humanity homes, the residents of the transitional apartments, the children who are fed breakfast and lunch at school so that they will have enough energy to learn. I worry about the people who are living at the margins of our society.

Charitable giving is down all across the United States. When people are fearful, it becomes more difficult to give. Churches are feeling a bit of the pinch, but they are not alone. Missions, the Salvation Army, the Red Cross, Scouting programs, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, United Way - all are receiving less donations than in recent years. It is true that their donors have less to give. But it is even more true that fear inhibits giving.

Calming fears was a big theme for Jesus: “Consider the lilies of the field.”

I think that calming fears will be a big task for faithful people in the weeks and months and years to come. The future is uncertain. But the future is in God’s hands.

As for Wall Street. It is an interesting place to visit, but I sure wouldn’t want to work there.

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## October 10, 2008 – Burning the Midnight Oil



I am a morning person. My mind is clearer and my work more productive in the morning. I've known this about myself for a long time. Susan and I shared the same typewriter during our last year of undergraduate school and four years of seminary. We did so without conflict, because I wanted to use it in the morning and she in the evening. In most groups of people I am among the first to rise in the morning. I do most of my writing before noon each day. This schedule works well in the church, where more activities and programs occur in the evenings or later in the day. Visitation is an afternoon activity for the most part.

But if you shift me a couple of time zones to the east for a short meeting, I move my schedule later in the day. I'm in Eastern time zone but my schedule is closer to Central time zone, which means I'm still up before most of my colleagues. But making the shift last night, I had trouble going to sleep at what might be considered a normal hour in this time zone. Our room is on the side of the hotel that faces church house, the home of the national offices of the United Church of Christ. Last night as I peered out of my hotel window not quite ready to go to sleep, I noticed that there were lights on in church house and people moving about. The people who work for the church in this setting often have schedules that differ from the rest of the world. Some of them have limited time in their offices, traveling nearly constantly to serve the church in its various settings. Some of them have extra work to accomplish to prepare for this weekend's board meeting. And the church is a diverse body of people, who stretch the days in different directions. Over the years, I've identified many of the staff at church house

who are morning people. I know which offices will be occupied at 6 a.m. and which will have someone there at 10 p.m.

We've switched to electricity these days, but there will be plenty of "burning the midnight oil" this weekend. Our days are full of meetings and the agenda is heavy with items that require additional reading, study, and deliberation. The proposal for restructure is 36 pages long and has generated as many pages of comment from board members. I have been in e-mail contact with a variety of people across South Dakota in an attempt to get a sense of the people I represent. I go into the meeting with an open mind, but I know that the deliberations will not be easy. I also know that in order to reach agreement, some of our board will need to be up late at night working on changes to the proposal, finding the right language to shift things one way or another as we work out a bit of the vision of the future of the church.

Change is inevitable, but it does not always come easy. In our conversations this weekend, it is interesting to note that some of the reminders of our history and heritage have come from youth and young adults. Some of the spokespersons who are resisting the proposal come from groups within the church that have been underrepresented in some settings of our church. These are voices that we can ill afford to ignore. And I am a bit confused to hear resistance to change from those quarters. So I will need to listen more carefully to what is being said.

There are two distinct versions of the parable of the wedding feast in our Gospels. In Luke, the story is gentle. The host sends out invitations and people choose not to come, so the invitation goes out to the highways and byways and the celebration is full. Matthew's version is much more harsh. In that version of the parable, the slaves who go out with the invitation are beaten and some are killed. The host sends out the additional invitations in a rage. Then there is a curious scene at the wedding feast itself. One man enters the hall without appropriate clothing. This is a strange thing because in any such event, there would be greeters at the door with additional robes for those who arrive without proper attire and they would be given a robe to wear. So the man who has no robe has refused that offer. He is thrown out of the feast. Jesus tells the parable as a parable of God's kingdom: "The kingdom of God may be compared to . . ." We don't like to think of God's realm as a place where those who bring the invitation would be killed and we certainly do not want to think of it as a place where someone would be thrown out. The parable is disturbing and harsh.

I have decided that my role in the story is to be one of the slaves that goes out with the message that there is a great feast and celebration to be had in relationship with God. Sometimes I encounter people who don't want to respond to that invitation. Sometimes I even encounter hostility. And there are times when I feel that I find the most positive response to the invitation on the margins of society, away from those who one might expect to be most responsive.

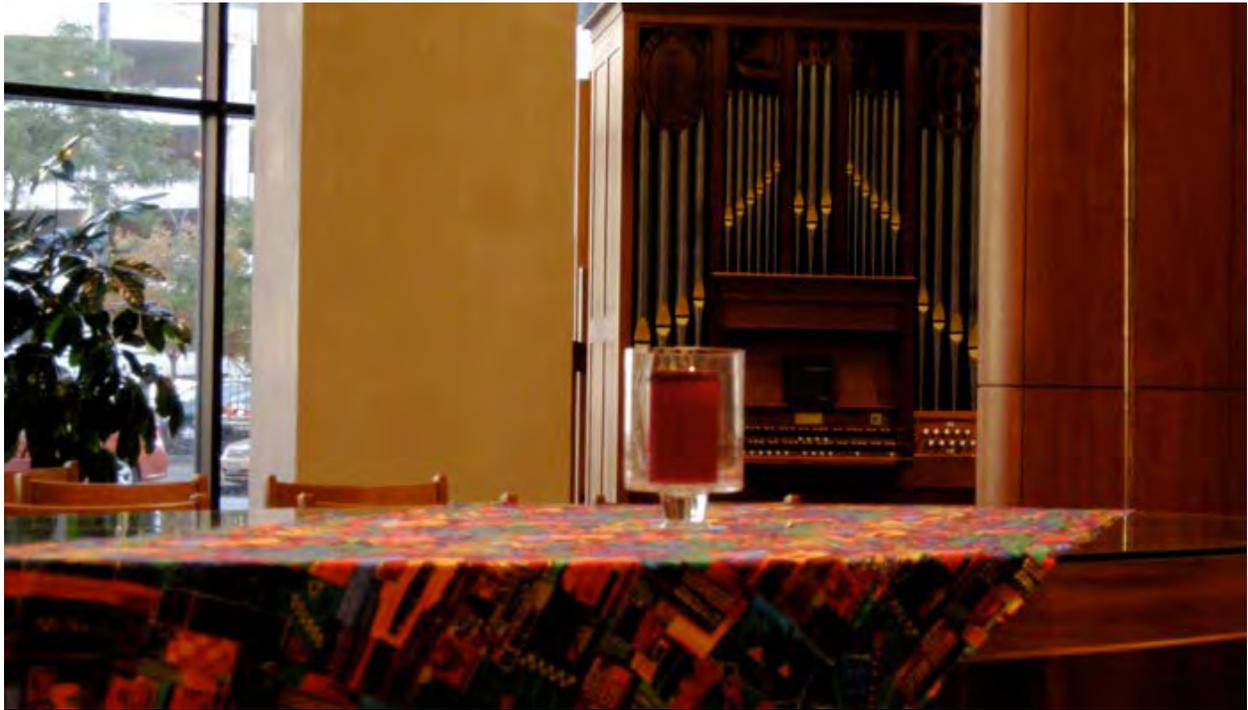
But I struggle with the one who comes to the feast and refuses the robe. Who, in my experience of the family of God might that be? Are there times when it is I? Do I show up but refuse to fully participate?

The parable will be in my mind as we go through the meetings of this weekend. We are about the business of forming structure for a church that is welcoming to all - our vision of church is of a great banquet where "no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome." Some of our people have indicated that the welcome may be less than complete. Or is there also a degree of refusing to accept the wedding robe? Certainly it is not my place to judge others. But I must be careful to examine my own motives and be sure that I am responsible in carrying the message of welcome.

I suspect that I will be burning the midnight oil a bit as I seek to discern how to be fully present in this moment of the history of our church.

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## October 11, 2008 – In the Chapel



One of the most important rooms at church house is Amistad Chapel. In the early days, when we first moved our church home to this address, our building was an office building. It took a few years for us to transform it into the home for our church's national setting that it now is. Amistad Chapel is on the first floor of the building, right off of the lobby. It's name recalls an important chapter in our church's story when the courage of the slaves on that ship met with defenders in New England Congregational churches and together they fought a battle for the freedom. In 1998, work began on a replica of the Amistad Freedom Schooner as a living educational and cultural exhibit. After construction was completed at Mystic Seaport in Connecticut, some of the wood that was left over from the project made its way to Cleveland and the Amistad Chapel.

The Chapel has two walls of glass windows, one facing busy Prospect Avenue, the other facing a quiet courtyard between church house and the hotel. The inside, finished with the dark wood and a stunning glass ceiling is relatively sparse, with the font and communion table being the most striking features.

We have brought much music into the room as well. There is a piano and a Hammond electronic organ, complete with a Leslie amplifier and rotating speaker. But there is also a beautiful little tracker organ, with the cabinetry matched to the themes and woods of the chapel. It is not a large instrument, but it is well suited to the setting and gives voice to some of the classical sounds that are a part of our tradition and present worship. The instruments, combined with the voices of church leaders, makes the music of the place moving.

But there are moments when sitting in the chapel in the silence demonstrates one of the chapel's most important features: quiet.

The chapel is essential to the life of our church. Church leaders are in need of regular communal worship. The work of the church needs to be surrounded with prayer and careful attention to scripture. The great traditions of preaching and interpretation need to be actively practiced in order to be transmitted to a new generation. The people who work daily at Church House all belong to congregations throughout the city, but their participation in local churches is only part of the picture of a well-rounded life of worship and service. Those of us who work here in short periods of time and then return to distant homes and congregations also are in need of worship to surround our often long and usually hectic meeting schedules.

Part of my routine when I go to Church House is to find moments to go to the chapel for quiet prayer. I need to remember and stay connected with the concerns of the congregation I serve in South Dakota. I need to keep in my mind my family and the extra work that so many do to make it possible for me to be in this place. I need a break from the sometimes loud and often intense meetings for which I try to be fully present.

I go to a lot of meetings. But meetings are not my natural habitat. I am a bit of a recluse really. I enjoy a significant amount of time alone to think and pray and sort out my head. In meetings, my thoughts often lag behind the conversation. I get ideas long after the time to express them has passed. I tend to speak infrequently and then wonder if I have really offered meaningful words for the process. In order to stay connected with the process, I need to be attentive to my prayer life. Amistad Chapel provides a setting for my prayers.

The baptismal font in the chapel has a pump so that the water is constantly running. The sound of the running water provides a simple connection with the natural world that often seems so distant in Cleveland. I am used to living in the outdoors with birds and animals around me. When visiting the city I miss the connections with the natural. Everywhere I look things are constructed. Even the live plants are carefully placed in their locations by decorators and planners. The wildness that is left in the city is of human devising and much more threatening and scary to me than the empty places where I prefer to wander. The sound of running water reminds me of home.

But Amistad Chapel is more. It is a place that reminds me not only of my connections to other places, but of my connections to other times. This church for which we work and whose life we so passionately care for is not an invention of our generation. It is a process that has been going on for a long time. Generations of dedicated leaders have struggled with the identity of our church. Generations of faithful people have wrestled with covenant and the connections that bind us together. There has been no small amount of sacrifice and heroism in our story. The saints of our church, like the saints of

other churches, are people we remember for their contributions. Their lives are now defined by what they gave, not by what they got.

It is humbling to sit with these people in the chapel. My part of the story can seem very significant to me in other times and places. In a meeting I might feel the urge to speak up to represent my people to have my voice heard, feeling that my point of view is so important. In the chapel, I am reminded that my voice is only one in a long line of people whose service and sacrifice, struggle and faith have brought us to this place. The future promises and equal parade of church leaders. This story does not end with my concerns. It's conclusion is not about my generation.

So I think of the slaves aboard the Amistad. They focused their attention on going home. Brutally and wrongfully seized from their native land they were transported in conditions that no human being should have to endure. But the shackles and chains could not bind their spirits. The trickery and treachery of the crew could not still the cry of freedom in their throats. The indignities and ponderousness of the court system could not stifle their love of home and family. We know so little of their stories. Their lives were forever altered by their capture and voyage aboard the ship. Even those who returned to Africa, couldn't truly go home because they returned as different people than the ones who had left.

But they gave to all of history their story of faith that can conquer all odds. They have shown us the indomitable human spirit. It is an amazing thing. In the chapel alone, all I have is some wood - not from the original, but only from a replica - and a story.

And the story is enough. Their story is enough to remind me that I am called to serve a cause that is greater than myself. My hopes, my dreams, my wishes, my desires - these are only a tiny piece of the story. God has something bigger going on. Perhaps I can live this day in such a way that long after our time has passed there will be a story of faithfulness and courage. And if there isn't, perhaps it will have been enough to have held and treasured the stories of previous generations and passed them on to the next generation.

The chapel is near to my heart even when I am far from Cleveland. When I am here, it is essential to my life. It is not the place, but the stories that live in the place that inspires me for the work to which I am called.

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## October 12, 2008 – Governing the Church



In the hallway between Church House and the hotel is a print of an artist's rendering of the signing of the Mayflower Compact. It is a stylized picture, probably quite unlike the reality that it depicts, but it is a part of the collections of the United Church of Christ because it is one of the ways that we remember our history. The picture shows light streaming in through the skylight hatch. One signer is raising his hand toward the light, appealing to heaven perhaps. Others are in deep contemplation. The women and children are present, but not engaged in the process of making an agreement about how the collection of pilgrims will govern themselves in the new land.

It seems that our church has, throughout its history, been obsessed with governance. How will we make joint decisions? Who will be in charge? Who controls the purse strings? We have cabinets and cabinets full of documents. We have reams of paper filled with words. We have tried a wide variety of structures. In the late 1950's, when the United Church of Christ was formed in a union of the Congregational Christian and Evangelical Reformed churches, the governance of the congregationalists held sway in many ways. In place of a strong, coherent national structure we perpetuated the more loosely confederation of diverse national structures, with different missions and vision. The United Church Board for Homeland Ministries was not beholden to the office of the president. The United Church Board for World Ministries had its own board, its own budget, and its own endowments with their historic mandates. The newly created Pension Boards would be an independent corporation. The church's national setting was not a single entity. There were different corporations, different addresses, different settings for ministry.

In 2000, we underwent a major change in our structure that was consistent with our new church home in Cleveland and the new realities of a shrinking church. Less money and less staff forced us to think about efficiency and stewardship of resources. The world had changed and we needed to change as well. Our church was smaller, yet even more diverse. A collegium of five officers in four different national entities was formed. The system was still essentially congregational and independent boards continued to assume responsibility for different areas of the church's life.

The designed review and evaluation of that new form of governance on the national level in 2003 revealed a need for further revisions in how we do business. Through a long process of review and evaluation a possible new structure emerged. We would have a unified single board to govern the church's operations in its national setting.

I was inclined to support the new structure from the beginning. I am not a fan of bureaucracies. I know that the heart and the passion of the church always dwells in local congregations, not in the structures we devise to govern ourselves. I am not a fan of meetings, and I saw great efficiencies and cost savings in a smaller, more nimble single board.

But there were problems. There were people who feared that their voice would be lost in the downsizing. They feared that the governance of the church would take place at a table where there was no room for their particular constituency to be represented. This was especially evident among groups in the church that has been historically underrepresented in our governance such as African Americans, youth, Native Americans, women, and others. Different plans to insure reasonable representation were put forward and rejected. In the conversations, the nimble and responsive board became unwieldy and large and then was downsized again. Each possible configuration has its advantages and disadvantages.

Throughout these conversations, I have been mostly an observer. As a member of the Board of Directors of Local Church Ministries, I have had voice in many of the conversations and vote. My passion, however, has not been with the structures of governance. Mission, proclamation, worship and education have evoked more energy from me. In April, I voted with the majority of our board to affirm the concept of a single governing body. In consultation with other Boards, the proposal put forward in April needed to be revised and a new governance task force was empowered to bring new proposals forward this fall.

When we received the report of that group and the revised proposal, protests sprang up from a variety of corners of the church. By the time I left for this meeting, I had a long list of documents, e-mails, and even a petition on my computer. I have read all of these communications diligently and considered prayerfully the concerns. I was not persuaded by the voices of the protestors. I continued to favor the concept of a single board.

Despite its problems, it seems to me that smaller is better in the government of the church.

Throughout the weekend, and especially yesterday afternoon, there was an emerging consensus in our Board. Although we are just one of many who need to vote on these changes, it was clear that our board would approve them and pass them on to the other boards. It seemed possible that the vote could be nearly unanimous. The one hold out on our board was a member of PAAM, the Pacific Islander and Asian-American Ministries. She was a quiet person, but had a prepared statement listing the many languages and cultural groups represented by PAAM, who would have the guarantee of only two votes in the new Board. It is likely that they would have more, but the guarantee seemed small in proportion to the great diversity and numbers of congregations represented.

Among my e-mails was a short note from Louie Bluecoat, a friend and partner in ministry in South Dakota. He had offered his opposition to the proposed new governance structure, saying that the process needed to be slowed in order to re-think the representation of PAAM. He is Native American, not Pacific Islander. He simply added his name to their protest, saying, "I stand with my brothers and sisters."

When the vote was taken, two of us voted "no," the representative from PAAM and myself. I actually voted against my own personal opinion. I did not want to disrupt the process. I did not want to delay it. I did not want to enlarge the proposed board. I did not want to draw attention to myself. I simply chose to stand with the minority in a process that was going to succeed, but which needed to continue to have ways of understanding that our governance is imperfect, and our actions are imperfect, and our decisions are imperfect. Like Louie, I decided to stand with my sisters and brothers. I know that the vote does not reflect the majority of the people I represent. I know that it will be hard to defend when I get home.

But my vote is a small thing in the big processes of the church. The motion passed with an overwhelming majority. But the record will show that we were not unanimous. There were two who said "no." Our votes express the doubt that cannot be ignored. Perfection is in the realm of God, not in the governance of the church.

My prayer is that as we live our way into this new governance, a way of living that will be better than our old way of living, we don't forget the quiet voices of the minorities in our midst. There will continue to be people at the margins of our processes. They may not be distinguished by racial or ethnic heritage. They may not be distinguished by features that others recognize.

And, for now, I will stand with the quiet minority at the fringes of our church. I am no less committed to its ministries. I am no less supportive of this wonderful church. But I am a bit less confident of governance, and a bit less certain about the actions that we take.

Whatever good we do, we do by the grace of God not by the strength of our own decisions.

I have the luxury of being able to choose. I have not been excluded. I have not been pushed out. I do not lack representation or voice. But there are times when my quietness may allow another to speak. And when the time comes for my actions and decisions to be judged, I hope that I will be judged for how much I gave, rather than how much I gained. I pray that I will be remembered for the moments when I stood with the minority instead of went along with the majority. I trust that there is grace sufficient in the church and in God's realm to understand the hint of doubt in my mind and in my voice as we go forward into this new day.

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## October 13, 2008 – Ceilings



The weather was beautiful in Cleveland yesterday. We walked a few blocks from the hotel to Tower City, where we caught the train for the airport. As we took off, the view of Lake Erie was beautiful and the skies remained clear as we flew across Michigan. We could see from Chicago to Milwaukee as we crossed Lake Michigan. A few clouds came into sight as we neared Minneapolis and we descended through a cloud layer to land. The flight from Minneapolis to Rapid City was a quick trip up through the cloud ceiling. We were on top of clouds until our descent into the Rapid City Area, where the weather was described to us as “windy under a high cloud ceiling.”

I had ceilings in my mind, because we had worshiped in Amistad Chapel in the morning. The ceiling in Amistad chapel is made of frosted glass with lights behind the glass. The various layers of glass give the chapel a sense of ascension. Although the room is a rectangle, the communion table the seating arrangement and the ceiling all have oval shapes that give a sense of sitting in a circle as we worship.

Prayers and other moments in worship offer opportunities to allow one’s eyes to travel to the ceiling which doesn’t present itself as an absolute barrier, but a series of layers.

Not all glass ceilings are seen as good things. I think that I first heard the term glass ceiling used in reference to barriers that prevented women from being promoted beyond certain levels in the business world. It is often used to refer to barriers that also exist for minorities and others as well, including persons with disabilities and sexual minorities. In that context, the glass is clear - an invisible barrier that people know

exists, but which is not officially acknowledged. The policies that prevent upward advancement in the organization are usually unofficial and unwritten and therefore are more difficult to change, because the corporation or organization does not acknowledge that the barriers exist.

The United Church of Christ doesn't really exist as a hierarchy. The jobs in the national setting of the church are not necessarily "higher" than those in Conference or local church settings. Pay and benefits may be higher in certain large local churches than in other settings of the church. But it is in the church's national setting where the most work has been done to remove barriers to advancement. 700 Prospect Avenue in Cleveland is probably the church's most diverse setting. The United Church of Christ has been recognized among Cleveland employers as being one of the most diverse work forces and one of the most friendly employers of persons with disabilities.

There may be a glass ceiling in the chapel, but there are intentional policies in place to prevent a glass ceiling in employment practices.

I'm not sure the analogy works fully anyway. At least it doesn't if we consider the diverse ways we use the term ceiling in other contexts. A cloud ceiling used to be perceived as a barrier for airplanes because of the lack of visual clues as one flies through a cloud. Early aviators avoided flying through clouds not because of the threat of hitting a barrier, but because of the inability to know where they were. Flying in the clouds means getting lost when one is navigating by visual references only. In the world of modern aviation, with a variety of navigational instruments, clouds are no barrier at all. Airplanes fly through them every day without any problems. What once seemed like a barrier is no barrier at all.

Limits in employment based on ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, and other categories may have a similar quality. They exist because we think they exist. We have created a set of rules that are based on a limit that is not real. If only we had the vision to imagine workplaces where everyone was welcome, they could exist. Over the weekend, as I sat in personnel meetings and listened to church human relations and equal opportunity employment officers, I realized that the diverse workforce in our church's national setting is the result of vision and leadership.

The people of the church want the church to be a place that is multi-racial, multi-cultural, open and affirming and accessible to all. But it took leadership in order for the vision to become a reality.

Sometimes I feel like leadership is in short supply in the church. We have trouble filling all of the pulpits in our Conference, especially ones in smaller, rural and isolated congregations. About one third of our Conferences are in search for new leadership for Conference offices. And there are active searches for new leadership in the church's national setting, including a search committee that will name a new General Minister

and President to lead the church after our next General Synod. This is a time of transition in the life of the church.

Amistad Chapel is on the first floor of Church House, a nine-story office building. There are eight floors of offices above the chapel. The ceiling is solid. One has to go to an elevator or stairway to ascend. Above the chapel, the offices are arranged by mission and ministry, not in some form of hierarchy. Senior administrative officers do not occupy the highest floors.

Symbolically all of the work is supported and sustained by the prayer and worship of the chapel. Without a doubt the glass ceiling in the chapel is no barrier for prayers to ascend and support those who work above. As I travel from my local congregation to the church's national setting and back home again, I pray that the distinctions and barriers between the various settings of the church will continue to be problems of perception that can be easily overcome and not barriers which prevent complete communication.

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## October 14, 2008 – Thanksgiving



Most human societies have developed some form of fall festival. As winter approaches, there is a sense of gratitude for the abundance of the summer's harvest. In places where winters are severe, autumn is a time of storing up foods that don't perish too quickly and figuring out how to store enough to make it through the long dark days of winter. With the modern transportation systems and the convenience of grocery shopping in most parts of our country, we are less attuned to the cycles of the year. But there is a sense of autumnal abundance. The farmers' market is beginning to wind down, with squash and pumpkins replacing corn and tomatoes as the main crops available. We've had a good, hard frost and picked the final tomatoes from the garden and it is waiting its fall tilling. There are plenty of fall chores in the yard and garden that remain.

Different cultures have different celebrations of harvest and thanksgiving. With a slightly more temperate climate, ancient Israel developed festivities around the first harvest, offering a portion of the first crops to God in thanksgiving. This early summer festival was an acknowledgment of the bounty of the land and the goodness of God in providing the foods needed for sustenance.

The tradition of our national holiday has roots in the celebrations of the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock in 1621. Some scholars dispute the stories of the "first thanksgiving," at Plymouth colony and the stories that are often taught in school are probably not accurate. There was a Thanksgiving celebration held at Saint Augustine, Florida, on September 8, 1565, more than a half century before the arrival of the Pilgrims.

Our neighbors to the North, in Canada, celebrated their national thanksgiving yesterday. The holiday is the second Monday of October in Canada, where it is celebrated with family dinners, a day off, and many trappings that are similar to the United States version, but without all of the myths and exaggerated stories of events at Plymouth Colony.

Our holiday yesterday was celebrated as Columbus Day in some states and as Native American Day here in South Dakota. In recent years, Native American Day activities in western South Dakota have focused on events at the Crazy Horse memorial. Chilly weather forced activities indoors yesterday, but there was plenty of enthusiasm. Billy Mills was the keynote speaker. Many people who had spent the weekend at the Pow Wow in Rapid City journeyed to Crazy Horse to participate in the recognition at the mountain carving site.

All of our fall celebrations have a sense of remembrance of our heritage. There are different interpretations of the significance and meaning of particular historical events, but there is a common sense that we are who we are in part because of events that happened before we were born. Our contemporary celebrations have also acknowledged that earlier celebrations of the exploits of Columbus and the landing of Pilgrims at Plymouth contained inaccurate or at least incomplete telling of the stories. There are other interpretations of the events and not all of our stories recall the greed and destruction that came with European explorers to this continent.

Nonetheless, I believe that autumn is an appropriate time for a season of thanksgiving and remembrance. A single day is insufficient to express our gratitude to God for all of the goodness we experience in our lives and for all of the goodness that has come from our history. Even when our history contains tragedy and oppression, accurate telling of the stories of our people become ways of learning from our past. The span of time between the Canadian Thanksgiving and the celebration of Thanksgiving in the United States seems an appropriate season of thanks for those of us living on this continent. Autumnal bounty is evident all around us and there are many different ways to express our gratitude.

So welcome to a season of thanksgiving. Perhaps it can become a way of life that we adopt all year round. For surely our gratitude is appropriate in any season of the year.

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## October 15, 2008 – Silvery Moon



There was a bank of clouds off to the East in the evening last night. The rise of the “hunter’s moon” wasn’t particularly dramatic. We didn’t see it at the horizon, where it should have appeared as large and orange, similar to last month’s harvest moon. Instead, there was a bit of a glow on the horizon and then, a little later, a series of silvery glimpses of the moon through the clouds. It was relatively high and appeared a little smaller by the time it emerged from the clouds. The color was silver. It brought to mind the old Edward Madden song, “By the Light of the Silvery Moon.” Not that last night was an evening for spooning. We had meetings and activities at the church and there were other items of business to distract us. And it is a long way from June, the month that rhymes with the moon in the spooning tune.

The moon was dramatic, when viewed from the church at about 6:30 p.m. Our cross is the subject of countless sunrise photos. Because it sits to the East of the building, I often see it as the sun rises. Last night’s moonrise gave another perspective of our cross.

The hunter’s moon got its name from an earlier time, when fall hunting was an essential survival skill. The full moon that followed the harvest moon provided an opportunity for tracking animals all night and the opportunity for successful hunting. And hunting was a key to survival. If there wasn’t enough meat, some folks wouldn’t make it through the winter. The hunter’s moon was very little about romance, and a whole lot about reality. In order to survive, one has to eat. In certain societies and locations around the globe, in order to eat, one had to have meat. The moon gave the hunters the advantage required to harvest the game they needed.

Hunting has become a sport in our time. And night hunting is not legal in many areas. The hunter's moon is a matter of convenience and beauty more than an essential element of survival. It is similar to the harvest moon. Modern agricultural practices do not need to rely on the moon to accomplish the work. When harvest extends into the hours of darkness, there are plenty of lights to illuminate the combine's path.

But we can remember the time when the cycles of the moon were directly related to the practices of our people. And the Old Farmer's Almanac still prints the moon tables and offers advice on the timing of certain farm practices based on the phases of the moon.

My own reaction to last night's beautiful full moon was more of a sense of the passage of time: "How did it get to be the middle of October already?" We have much planning and work to accomplish as we prepare for the end of the church's year, which lands in Thanksgiving week this year. November 30 is the first Sunday of Advent, a new year in the life of the church. Between now and then, there is the annual fall stewardship campaign, some budget work to be accomplished, planning to complete, and a long list of other activities that need to be finished. So the full moons remain for me a way of measuring the passage of time.

Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve's book, "Lana's Lakota Moons," tells a story of a young girl growing up at the intersection of different cultures, remembering the old ways and traditions of her people as she works through the seasons of grief after the death of her cousin, who was a close to her as a sister. The different moons marked the passage of time for her as she went through the seasons of sadness and recovery following her loss.

Sometimes the passage of time is a good thing - a healing thing - a life-giving thing. Watching the moon rise behind the cross last night it was impossible to ignore the simple fact that the years have turned that symbol from a hated sign of Roman imperialism and cruel execution into the primary symbol of resurrection and new life, recognized around the world as a sign of safety, sanctuary, and hope.

There are many meanings that we have given to the moon. And many meanings that have come to be associated with the cross.

We'll get a few more dramatic moonrises while the hunter's moon remains. May we bask in the beauty of its silvery light and may that light help us to find our path in an often confusing world. The times in which we live require more than simple rhymes. But we would do well to pause and appreciate the deep beauty of the world as the days pass.

## October 16, 2008 – High Prices



Church World Service photograph.

For the first time in a long time, I paid less than \$3/gallon for gasoline yesterday. We have been watching the prices drop as world markets have been in turmoil. Crude oil is trading at much lower levels than six months ago and the downward swing in the price of gasoline in our corner of the world is dramatic.

One of the realities of unstable markets is that the swings in prices are more dramatic. Changes of price of 25% and more in very short periods of time are not uncommon.

I haven't noticed a decrease in the price of food. High food prices can mean that farmers are getting a fair price for their work, but because the higher prices have been driven by increased costs in fuel and fertilizer, many farmers expenses increased at a greater rate than the price of their produce.

Reports indicate that high food costs are still a major problem in many parts of the world. According to BBC world news, while high food prices are affecting the entire world, the rise in prices has been most severe in some of the world's poorest countries. The Philippines is one of the worst hit countries, with prices spiraling upward as food supplies dwindle below what is needed. According to the International hunger relief agency Oxfam, nearly 900 million people worldwide face starvation - up 119 million in the last year. Oxfam reports that many people in the developing world have simply been forced to eat less this year because of the high cost of food.

In the Philippines and in Panama as many as 63% of the population is eating less food than a year ago. Kenya also is reporting decreased food consumption by more than 60% of its population, and Nigeria is not far behind.

Lower fuel and fertilizer prices are expected to help food prices begin to drop by the end of the year according to some analysts.

We have noticed the increase in prices without a corresponding increase in income, but we have many other items in our family budget that can be cut before we start eating less food. It is hard to imagine, from our perspective of plenty, what such a desperate need might feel like. The sense of failure for parents who are unable to feed their children must be overwhelming.

Economist Robert Reich has offered interesting commentary on what he is calling the myth of living beyond means. While it is technically correct that many families are spending more than their income, the concept of living beyond one's means, with its sense of moral failure, assumes that people are spending extravagantly and this extravagance is the source of their misery. The truth is that median family incomes, adjusted for inflation, have been steadily falling for the last fifteen years. The crisis is not that people are spending more, but that they are earning less. This is true across the middle and lower income spectrums worldwide.

The increase in the price of food means that the world's poorest people, those whose only spending is for food, simply have to eat less. There are no other items to remove from their family's expenses.

We often are quick to blame poor people for their poverty and hungry people for their hunger, but there is little evidence to support such an argument. Furthermore, I have little patience for extensive arguments about why people are hungry in a world where nearly a billion people face starvation. In one sense, it doesn't matter whose fault it is. The truth is that I am able to share more than I have been. I can't solve the problem, but I can share. The truth is that I do not lack for enough food to eat. I'll be having a healthy breakfast and prospects look good for lunch and dinner today as well.

Our annual support of Church World Service through our church is one of the ways that we help to alleviate a small part of the world's hunger. It is insufficient in this time of critical need. Increased generosity is required. In our own community, reserves at Cornerstone Rescue Mission are dangerously low. Our church has responded to this crisis with significant increases in giving, but we know that more will be asked of us.

The drop in the price of gasoline meant that filling up the tank in my pickup cost nearly \$24 less than it would have when the price was \$4 per gallon. That's \$24 that I could use to decrease my family's debt, or put in my pocket for discretionary spending. It's \$24 that I could spend on prepared foods instead of making everything from scratch.

But it is also \$24 that I could choose to give. \$24 won't feed 900 million hungry people. But it would provide groceries for a family in our town for a couple of days. It would provide dinner for several people at the mission.

The \$24 is still in my pocket today. I know I'll sleep better tonight if I take the time and make the effort to invest it in food for others before day's end.

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## October 17, 2008 – The Sacred Hoop is Broken



I am not an expert on Lakota spirituality. I have read “Black Elk Speaks,” and Joseph Marshall’s “The Lakota Way.” I have listened to the stories of some of the elders and participated in a few ceremonies. But my observations have been those of an outsider. I belong to a different heritage and a different spiritual tradition. I have been privileged to be included in some of the events and ceremonies of my neighbors and I have entered into those events and ceremonies with appreciation and respect. But I have not forgotten who I am and I have never presented myself as an expert in Lakota ways. So I make the today’s observations with a bit of caution. I do not understand what is going on. And I may be speaking of things beyond my knowledge.

The book “Black Elk Speaks,” mentions the broken Sacred Hoop. The process of colonization of Lakota lands by settlers, the rapid destruction of the buffalo culture, the move to reservations and the cultural violence of boarding schools resulted in a destruction of the extended family system and the entire way of life for many Lakota, Dakota and Nakota peoples. They were not unique among plains tribes. And the destruction of existing cultures in the face of the expansion of other cultures was not unique to this continent, Stores of Australian Aboriginal peoples and African tribal systems are remarkably similar.

Black Elk had witnessed the massacre at Wounded Knee. He had survived the transition to reservation life. He had lived with his childhood vision and its unfolding meanings through some of the worst acts of violence and destruction. But he did not

lose his vision. His spirit was not broken. He found a way to share his story and culture and insights with others and died as an old man with his identity and spirit intact.

But the Sacred Hoop is broken in this generation. Young men, of the generation of the great grandchildren of Black Elk are dying with broken spirits. Death by suicide is alarmingly high among all young men in South Dakota. Tragically, the rate of death by suicide among Native American youth in South Dakota is nearly double the rate of the rest of the state. Suicides have occurred in clusters. Beginning in the fall of 2001, nine youth from the Cheyenne River Reservation died by suicide in eleven months. A similar cluster of suicides of youth with connections to the Rosebud Reservation appears to be on-going.

Two young men died by suicide in our community this week. One of them had close connections to a young man who died by suicide last month. The Sacred Hoop is broken. Suicide is not a part of Lakota, Dakota, or Nakota tradition. Accurate statistics do not exist of suicide rates of prior generations, but the stories of the people do not contain any memory of young men dying of suicide. There are stories of sacrificial death to save the people, but none of death that seems so senseless.

It makes me want to scream, though that would accomplish nothing. It makes me want to summon all of the leaders of our community: the governor, tribal leaders, mayors, ministers, members of councils and law enforcement, teachers and administrators and declare that we must make this our number one priority. We must stop indulging in our petty squabbles and business as usual until we figure out how to keep our people alive. I want to declare "no more!" and develop ways of making sure that this is the end of such dying.

But, of course, I do not have the power to prevent death by suicide. And there are good people who are working tirelessly in the area of suicide prevention in our state and on the reservations. And we understand so little about the human brain and the processes of mental illnesses. And there have been meetings and councils and even hearings before the United States Senate on suicide prevention among Native American youth. We have done some things. We have not done enough.

Yesterday a small group of us visited with Gerard Baker, Superintendent of the Mount Rushmore National Monument. He spoke to us of the role of the national monument in interpreting the stories of all of the people of this nation. A place that brings us together is an opportunity to learn more about each other and the many stories of this place. He spoke of his focus on reaching children and youth. His message was so filled with hope that we could not escape feeling a sense of excitement about the future.

Yes there will be controversy and disagreement. Yes, there will be those who resist change. Yes we can get set in our ways. But yes, we can teach our children a better way. Yes we can learn to respect one another. Yes we can live together.

But at the very moment that we were visiting, a team from our Local Outreach to Survivors of Suicide was meeting with a grieving family whose sense of hope was crushed by suicide. The stakes are incredibly high. We are struggling for no less than the sense of hope for our people. If we cannot find the means to keep our young people alive, we cannot discover the strength to continue to live for the future. If we cannot renew hope in our time, our future is cloudy indeed.

The sacred hoop is broken.

But I have been called to a resurrection faith. Death is not the end. Faith, hope, and love remain. I do not have the answers, but I know that they come from beyond myself.

So I will continue to give some of my time every week to grieving with those who have lost their loved ones. But I will also continue to give some of my time every week to prevention efforts on and off of the reservations.

In Lakota, “Mitakuye Oyasin” means “we are all related.” In the stories of my people, I am my brother’s keeper. Hope remains, but it must be nurtured and shared. We can do better by each other than we have been doing. With tears in our eyes and grief in our hearts we can work with our neighbors to restore the sacred hoop of family and faith. We do not have the answers. They will come from beyond ourselves. But we can seek them together.

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## October 18, 2008 – An Ordinary Day



I suppose that I write about the weather and the change of seasons more than any other topic, and I suspect that these blogs become repetitive for readers. I have my themes to which I return from time to time. I remember thinking a year or so ago, that I have probably written everything that I know about cats and that another blog about our cats would definitely enter the field of senseless repetition. The interesting thing to me about the topics is that because I put a photograph with each blog, my photographs run in themes as well. I don't take the same number of photos each day, but most days there are one or two new photographs. And most of my photographs are taken outdoors. My work is mostly relationships with people, but the camera seems intrusive in many settings. And even if I had pictures, not every story that I encounter in my work is mine to tell. Often the people I encounter and the lives I witness are not stories that it is appropriate for me to tell. Much of what I do remains undocumented.

But I am privileged to live and work in the wonderful setting of the Black Hills. It is no mistake that multiple cultures have found this place to be sacred, with its abundant resources, plentiful game, clear water, and mild weather. It is a good place to visit and it is a good place to live.

As is often the case in the hills we are enjoying lovely weather after having experienced our first light snowfall. Daytime temperatures have been in the sixties. Today will make it into the seventies or perhaps even eighty degrees with clear skies. Cooling temperatures and precipitation are forecast for mid week so this is a weekend to catch up on the outdoor chores and get the yard and garden ready for winter rest.

The deer are on the move throughout the hills. We are seeing different deer in our yard and some of the ones who we have been watching throughout the summer are less frequently seen. Mothers have weaned this year's fawns for the most part and the yearlings are starting to wander farther from their mothers. They seem to be eating everything. Even the plants that they normally leave alone have their tops nibbled off. There is plenty of forage for the deer, but they are spending a lot of time in the yard eating grass and flowers. Some of the locals see the appetites of the deer as a sign of a severe winter. The Old Farmer's Almanac is predicting a normal winter with a chance of precipitation a bit higher than usual. Things seem and feel about normal for this time of year.

Folks to the northwest were surprised with last weekend's snowfall. Areas in Montana had more than 40" and Billings was shut down with heavy snow and falling branches for about a half a day last Sunday. Churches canceled worship and folks stayed home, but the weather soon changed and most of the snow has melted.

But there is no denying that the seasons are changing. And the change of seasons is one of the joys of living in this place. Our days are not all the same. The weather, the scenery, the animals: all change and there are new discoveries every day.

I've got a long list of yard work for today. A bit of mowing, a load of topsoil to unload and spread, the garden to clear and till and I want to expand the garden for next year, so there are posts to set and fence to build. I won't get all of the chores on the list completed, but it will be good to get a little physical work outside in the warm weather. When one sits as much as I do, a little exercise and hard work is a blessing.

Maybe today will be a day without any wild adventures or emergencies to which I need to respond. It would be nice to have a day that is just normal. I'll be keeping my cell phone handy throughout the day because I need to be able to respond to some events that might unfold. But if I have a lucky day the phone won't ring and I'll come to the end of the day a bit more refreshed for tomorrow's activities and events.

So there isn't much of a blog today. No deep insights or radical new ideas. No dramatic news, just a prayer of gratitude for the blessing of living in this good place among these good people.

God of all times and places  
I thank you for ordinary days  
For the joys of chores to complete and routines to fulfill  
For the common conversations and everyday activities  
I thank you for a life that has meaning in on-going relationships  
And continuing commitments  
I thank you for work to do and for others to share the work

Thank you, God, for ordinary days  
Thank you, God, for today.

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October 19, 2008 – Seeing



There are many ways of knowing God and being in relationship with God. But the experiences of God, as reported by our people from the earliest days, are not primarily visual. Our Bible does not contain a description of what God looks like. The way we know the world in which we live is through our senses. We see, taste, feel, hear, and smell the world. Scientists are precise in their observations, recording what they have perceived and making careful comparisons between different observations. But we do not observe God in the same way that we observe the world.

There is a sense in which observing the world is observing the work of God. There has been much written about knowing the Creator through the creation. And many of the words that have been written about God are based on observation of the wonders and beauty of this world. What we see, however, is not the same as God. We can see the world with all of its beauties. We can see light that has traveled incredible distances from across the galaxy. We can see the beauty of a rainbow or a sunrise. But we cannot see God.

There are many things that are real that cannot be seen or directly observed. Higher mathematics and theoretical physics are human endeavors that are not based on direct observation. The human mind is capable of a series of logical extension based on observable realities. In order for the universe to behave the way that it does, there must be forces and realities that are beyond our capabilities for direct observation. Therefore we devise theories to explain what is going on and then test our theories through a

variety of different observations. We accept the existence of neutrinos and black holes and anti matter without the ability to see them.

God, however, is quite different from a scientific theory. Our experience of God is relational. We know God, in part, through the stories of our ancestors. God related to Moses through language. Moses heard a voice that directed him to return to Egypt and participate in the release of his people. When Moses acted in accord with God's instructions, the people found their way in the wilderness. Moses struck the rock with his staff, but it was God who provided the water. On many different occasions the people didn't know the presence of God until they had the perspective of looking back on their experiences. By studying the experiences of history, we have been able to recognize the presence of God in our lives and in the lives of our ancestors.

The relationship between God and language is embedded in the traditions and poetry of our people. The prologue to the Gospel of John uses word to describe God. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." Even in translation from the original Greek, the sense of a unique word, a unique form of language is conveyed. Some claim that the development of alphabetical languages, including ancient Hebrew was due to the inability of pictographic languages to express the concept of God. Since our experience of God isn't primarily visual, there is no way to draw a picture of God. Symbolic language is required in order to conceptualize and speak of God.

And we confess that our language is often inadequate. We use simile: God is like a rushing river, God is like the brilliant night sky. There are many things that God is like, but each of these is not the reality and we do not claim that it is. Even the most systematic of theologians has encountered the inability of language to fully convey the meaning of God. We know God. We experience God. But our knowledge and our experience is imperfect and incomplete. It is a hint of more that is to come, it is a shadow of a deeper reality.

God is more than the idea of God, though the idea of God is worthy of our attention and contemplation. So we have developed patterns of worship. We come into relationship with God in part through ritual and song, through repetition and creativity, through the process of gathering with others to think and speak of God. God is not contained by the services we hold in our churches. The reality of God is always beyond even our best efforts.

And yet, at the same time, we are certain that God is present when we gather. When we focus our attention on God, we discover that God is always present, never absent. And our relationship with God grows over the generations. What we know of God is more than can be learned in a single generation. How we perceive God is influenced by the experiences of those who have gone before and the knowledge that those who are yet to come will also gather to experience the same God.

So we do not see God. But what we do see reminds us of God's presence.

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## October 20, 2008 – A Few Drops of Rain



As I crawled into bed last night I could hear the sound of a few raindrops falling outside my window. It wasn't a storm, or even a shower, just a few drops dripping onto the grass outside of my window. The driveway isn't even very wet this morning. There were scattered showers throughout the hills yesterday. I guess a few places got enough rain to measure. We barely got enough to warrant turning on the windshield wipers. There was a little more wind and the day was cooler than Saturday had been. The forecast calls for a partly cloudy day today with a bigger chance of showers on Tuesday and Wednesday.

We've had a year with a bit more moisture and we aren't quite as worried about the rain as we have been some years. I can remember a time when even a few drops of rain were enough to make us pay attention. When the ground is parched and dry, even a few drops of rain can have a refreshing effect. Rain settles the dust and changes the smell of the air. We've lived in this country to be glad for precipitation in any form. Every drop of rain, every snowflake, is important and valued.

I've been working on a project to expand our vegetable garden this fall. I've got the retaining wall built and now I'm in the process of digging post holes for the fence. One needs a substantial fence in this country to keep the deer separated from our food. That means digging a couple of feet down with the post hole digger. I've been fortunate with the few holes that I have had to dig. There are fewer rocks than I expected. But when I get below about eight or ten inches, the soil is much dryer than I expected. The post hole digger can't penetrate the hard, dry soil. I have to break it up with the spud bar and

then lift it out. It isn't much different than encountering a rock in the digging. It's slow going. And this is the ground near the garden, where we water regularly. Part of the reason I had to build the retaining wall and will have to haul more topsoil in order to form a garden is to get the ground level enough so that the water doesn't all run off.

Down where the tree roots spread out, the soil is dry. We could use all of the rain and snow that we can get this winter.

Even a few drops of rain, even a small shower, feels like a blessing. There are few pleasures in the world that are greater than going to sleep next to an open window with the gentle sound of raindrops outside. The world smells fresh and clean and the next day is full of promise and possibility. We are surrounded by so many blessings.

Rain is so valuable in this area that there are scores of dams that have been built throughout the hills to store the water. There are no natural lakes in the Black Hills. Every lake is a reservoir. And there are plenty of reservoirs. Sylvan Lake, Center Lake, Sheridan Lake, Deerfield Lake, Pactola Lake, Canyon Lake, Roubaix Lake, Bismarck Lake, Legion Lake and Horsethief Lake are all relatively near by. There is a little reservoir near Bear Butte and the two larger reservoirs, Belle Fourche to the north and Angustoria to the south store water from the Belle Fourche and Cheyenne Rivers. The lakes provide beautiful places to paddle a canoe and excellent opportunities for other recreation as well. We've become so used to them that it is hard to imagine the hills without the lakes. Each of these reservoirs is a storage place for water, filled by the rain and snow that fall in the area.

It takes a lot of drops of rain to fill up a lake. But the gift of clean water is abundant in our part of the world. We do, however, experience enough drought to make us appreciate the water. We have seen enough dry countryside, enough fires, enough stressed trees to know the value of the rain.

All life is dependent upon water. We are made of water, for the most part. Without the rain all life comes to an end. The presence of water distinguishes our planet from our neighboring planets. The presence of water has allowed for the development of human beings with eyes and brains that are powerful enough to observe the universe and realize the uniqueness of this planet.

But I wasn't thinking of big issues last night. I wasn't contemplating the place of human beings in the universe or considering whether or not there might be sentient life on other planets. I was lying in my bed, listening to a few raindrops falling outside my window. And I was enjoying the beauty of the sound and the freshness of the smell. I was feeling grateful for a free gift of a few drops of water. It isn't the water I will drink today. It isn't the water on which I paddle my canoe, it is just a few drops of water that will soak into the grass and support life in the lawn.

And it is enough for me to feel grateful. Life so often offers extravagance that we forget to be grateful for sufficiency. But sometimes gratitude in the little things is as important to the joy we get from life as gratitude in the big things. The joy of living in a world that can deliver water one drop at a time, the joy of having the ability to smell the freshness of the evening rain, the joy of a comfortable bed at the end of a long day - these are treasures and worthy of our gratitude.

It is a good life that we have been given. Yes, there are stresses and challenges and problems that we cannot solve on our own. But there is the gift of peace in our rest and joy in our hearts, and love that surrounds us. It is a good life.

So I begin this day as I ended the last, with a prayer of gratitude for the blessings that are so freely offered. Thanks be unto God.

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October 21, 2008 – Vermillion



The soil in our area has a red color in many places. It isn't quite the same as the scoria which is found in a lot of places to the north of here. There are plenty of areas in the badlands of North Dakota where burning coal veins have baked the clay and it turns red. Our soil around here is tinged with pink dust similar in color to the limestone that we find in the ground. In our yard, one doesn't have to dig too deep to discover soil that is quite red. And the ground is full of rocks with a similar color.

Color is one of the joys of this life. And often it seems as if color occurs in places where it is not required. I suppose that there is some practical value in different soils having different colors. It gives a clue as to their productiveness for growing crops. But the texture of soil is as good an indicator of its productiveness and it would not be difficult to distinguish sand from loam, even if they were the same color.

The world is extravagant with its gifts of color.

French fur traders and explorers called the red hills "Vermillion." There are several place names in the West, including a city in South Dakota that bear the name. The word is from ancient French and its roots are in "vermis" the Latin term for worm. I guess that red earthworms were common in Europe and lent their name to a color that was similar to them.

Being a reader as a child, I often mispronounced words in my mind and later when I began to speak more freely, needed to be corrected from time to time for errors in

pronunciation. There weren't too many words whose meaning I got wrong. But vermillion is one of those words for which I had the wrong definition into my adulthood. Somehow I associated the name with the color green. And the cause of my error had nothing to do with color blindness. I can't explain why I had this mistaken notion in my head. Perhaps there is some sound similarity between the words verdant and vermillion. Or perhaps I simply make the wrong association in my mind at an early age and that incorrect definition stuck with me.

At any rate, there was a point in my life where I came face to face with the correct definition and I had to admit to others, and to myself, that I had been using the word incorrectly. Who knows how many times I had misused the word in public before I became aware of the correct definition.

Life is like that. From time to time we need to admit our mistakes and plant new meanings in our brains. Some of our thoughts and ideas need to be replaced with more accurate ones. When it is a simple definition of a word, the change is relatively easy. When it is a deeply held prejudice, change is much more difficult. In both cases, change requires an admission that the old way of thinking - the old way of seeing the world - is wrong.

I'm sure that those who are close to me can produce a long list of mistaken notions that I have embraced. Because it is easy for me to retain bits of what I have read and because I read a lot and a wide variety of subjects, I often have a small bit of information on a subject. As often the information I have is incomplete. I proceed into a conversation with a little bit of information, but lack the detail to use that information appropriately. Sometimes I've gotten quite a ways into a conversation before I admit that I really don't know what I'm talking about. Incomplete information can quickly lead to inaccurate information.

I think I've got the meaning of the word "vermillion" in my mind, finally. And I think that I've been using it appropriately in my conversation lately. But I'm sure there are other words and other ideas that I speak from time to time that are in need of correction.

We carry the wonders of this world in our imperfect, human, forms. We don't have all of the answers and we don't know all of the truth. And any sense that we have that we are supposed to have all of the answers is mistaken. None of us are required to know everything. And the ability to admit mistakes and make changes is essential to living in peace with others.

Knowing that makes me wonder how many times I've gone off on some tangent in this blog and left readers scratching their heads and wondering why I would write such a thing. The fact that I don't have an interactive blog, open to correction, is a function of laziness. I simply only have time to deal with the blog once a day. I don't want to have to

go back to it and respond to comments throughout the day. But perhaps I need to devise ways for readers to give feedback.

So if you catch a mistake, don't hesitate to send me an e-mail. I might not get it corrected right away, but perhaps I will learn enough to keep from making the same mistake in the future.

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**October 22, 2008 – Solitude**



One of the most advanced technologies of Native American and Alaskan Native peoples was boat building. When Europeans first arrived on the shores of north America they encountered bark canoes and skin-on-frame kayaks that were advanced beyond any technology that was available in Europe at the time. The boats were lighter, faster, more nimble, and better able to handle rough seas much better than the heavier dories, wherries and other rowing craft in common use in Europe at the time.

The primary method of teaching and advancing the technology was word of mouth with parents teaching children how to build boats. Skin-on-frame craft were primarily constructed during the long winter months. Construction was a communal activity with jobs of forming the framework, tying the pieces together, tanning and sewing the skins, and more. Each boat was custom built for the paddler or paddlers who would be using the boat. The boat was not so much a craft in which one sat, but an item of clothing that was put on in order to be able to travel on the water.

The Alutiiq, Aleut, and Yup'ik people in what is now Alaska believed that a properly made qayak (kayak) enabled the paddler to put on the spirit of the seal. These craft were for hunting and they enabled paddlers to enter into the environment of the seals and become a part of the movement of the seals without causing alarm to the seals.

When one slips into a properly-made kayak, and then slips into the water it is like slipping into the planet itself. One puts on the world. Out on the water it is as if you have truly become a part of the environment.

My skin-on-frame kayak is not of Alaskan design. It is based on a Greenland design. And it is not covered with the skin of a seal. It is covered with aircraft dacron. But I have a sense of the feeling of the natives who could put on the spirit of the seal when they slipped in their kayaks. I have paddled with the harbor seals enough to know that I am not threatening to them when I paddle quietly in their water. In the water, in my kayak, I am quicker and more graceful than I am on the land. My motions are fluid and smooth, like the water on which my kayak enables me to sit.

As winter approaches this year, I find that I did not do much paddling this summer. I allowed other activities to take the time that I normally spend in a kayak. Not that it is too late to paddle. A kayak is nice and warm. They were designed for areas where it is very cold. And as long as the water in the lakes is liquid, I can paddle without much danger. Even if I were to tip in my kayak, it is unlikely that I would get totally wet. And I have a good paddling jacket that keeps most of me warm and dry.

All the same, I have found that my mind has turned toward building. I do not need another boat. I have plenty, but there is something about the approach of fall weather that gets me to thinking about boats. I am tempted to build another skin-on-frame boat. I have access to more Black Hills Spruce, so I could get all of the wood I need without cost. And if I don't want to use expensive dacron, I could use canvas to cover the boat, making the price very inexpensive.

Mostly it is the sense of feeling the wood in my hands and the smell and feel of working with wood that is attractive to me. Each boat that I build is a lesson for me. I know about some of the mistakes that I made in the last boat and I know some ways that I might improve my technique. I know that the last boat was overbuilt. I can get by with less weight and a more nimble structure.

I think that I build for similar reasons that I paddle. I need time alone in order to maintain balance in my life. My life is joyously filled with people. It is the way that I like it and I don't want to become a recluse. I like the people in my life and I love my job of working with people in all different stages and circumstances of life. And I feel blessed to live in a multi-generation family. How wonderful it is to have a home that is a meeting place for friends and family of different generations.

But sometimes I need to be alone. Alone with God. Alone with my own thoughts. And the kayak is an invitation to solitude. Although there are kayaks designed for multiple paddlers, the basic design is for a solo boat. It is a way to enter into the environment with a minimum of structure between oneself and the world. When I am sitting on the water in the middle of a lake or along the edge of an ocean, I am separate from other people. But I don't feel lonely. I simply feel alone with God. When I am working in my garage, there is rarely another person with me, but I do not feel isolated. I simply feel that I have my own space. A kayak is a good vehicle for solitude.

I don't know whether or not I will start a boat project this year. Dreaming about it has its own value as well. And it is best not to rush into such a project, but to allow it to emerge in its own time. And even if I do start a boat project, I don't know if a kayak is the best boat for me to build next. Perhaps I should build a row boat. I could use the exercise of working the oars and it would be good to have a boat that is easy to share with others. There are many possibilities. Until I begin to cut wood, every design is possible. Once I make the commitment, I will be working on only one boat for many months. It is wise to consider which boat carefully.

Whatever I do, I know that my life is a balance of solitude and relationship. I need to continue to find places and vehicles for solitude as I live and grow in relationship with other people and with God.

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## October 23, 2008 – Stars Overhead



The rooms in our house have had a variety of different uses over the years. There are two bedrooms upstairs. When we had two children at home, the two rooms were their bedrooms. After they grew up and moved out, one became a guest room. The other is a sort of study, with a desk where I can set up my computer and do a little bit of work when I am at home. It is also a place where various items that don't have a proper storage place end up from time to time.

One of the leftovers from this room having been our daughter's bedroom is that the ceiling has a couple of dozen stars. The stars are made from a phosphorescent material and one does not notice them during the day or when the lights are turned on. But when I enter the room in the dark, the stars appear. I've never slept in this room, but the stars must have had a neat effect for our daughter as she went to sleep in the evening. They were a sort of night light, but not really bright enough to illuminate other items in the room, just a few points of light in an otherwise dark night.

The stars outdoors can be like that as well. One of the things we like about living where we do is that our neighborhood does not have street lights and we live far enough away from stores and other commercial properties that it gets dark at night. When we go out into our yard at night we can see the stars. The familiar constellations become friends and companions when we look into the night sky. We are more aware of the phases of the moon simply because we are used to looking up into the sky every evening and often in the morning before sunrise as well.

There is a sense of timelessness when one gazes into the night sky. The stars and planets that we see are the same ones that our ancestors saw long before our birth. And they will be there for future generations to see as well.

Different cultures have different stories about the stars and constellations. Many stories come from a time when there was no electricity and very few sources of light in the night. People learned to stay put during the night and there was time for storytelling each evening. Some of the stories about the night sky come from those who have made careful observations of the movement of the stars and planets. Persistent observation and complex mathematical formulas allowed scientists to track relative motion and to determine the place of the earth in our solar system. Original notions that the earth is the center of the universe gave way to different understandings. When Nicolaus Copernicus began to publish the theory that the sun is the center of our solar system, his ideas were controversial. His work was criticized by both philosophers and theologians. The new ideas that he brought forth took years to gain common acceptance.

Modern telescopes, space travel, and other tools have enhanced our ability to observe the lights in the night sky and our understanding has grown. One of the amazing discoveries of relatively recent times has to do with the vast distances of space. The universe is larger and more complex than humans had previously imagined and the distances are so vast that it is difficult to express. Our current system of light years gives us some big numbers with which to work. The distance that light can travel in the span of a year is just under ten trillion kilometers. That is a big distance. Multiply that distance by hundreds and even thousands and the numbers are mind-boggling large. Astronomers now use terms like kilolight years (one thousand light years) and parsecs ("parallax of one arcsecond" - about 3.26 light years) to indicate the distances between galaxies in the universe.

There are times, however, when we don't focus our attention on the astronomical details, but rather on the beauty of the night sky. Even the most serious of scientists must have moments when they pause and simply admire the beauty of the universe. The photographs from the Hubble telescope are amazing for their beauty. We live in a beautiful universe.

The artificial stars overhead in my study are nothing compared to the beauty of the world outside, but they are a reminder of the gift of light in this world. They are a reminder of the incredible complexity and beauty of this universe.

There have been some believers who have been threatened by the studies of astronomers and other scientists. Somehow they have come to the notion that studying the heavens will result in a diminishing of the role of religion in the lives of people. For the most part, however, new scientific discoveries have expanded our vision of God, not diminished it. Early humans were able to imagine only their own experiences of God.

Some believed that God was located in a specific place. Later people of faith realized that God is much more than had been previously imagined. It is my sense that what we know of God is so much less than the reality that each new discovery of the universe is a tiny discovery of more of God's glory.

Moses wasn't allowed to see God's glory. It was too much for him to take in. Even after generations of study we still cannot fully comprehend God's glory. But we know it is even greater than we previously imagined.

So I look at the stars and realize that I am a very small part of a very vast universe. To be so small and yet to be loved by God is an amazing bit of information. I give thanks for the light of the stars and for their beauty. And I give thanks for the awareness that is inside me of the light of God's love that is even more vast than the farthest star, yet present in the life of one human on one planet in a typical solar system on the edge of an average galaxy in the midst of a universe of incredible proportions. To be loved by God in the midst of the vastness of the universe is awesome indeed.

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## October 24, 2008 – Writing



Chagall, Marc (1887-1985). *Moses before the burning bush*, oil on paper. Musée National message biblique Marc Chagall, Nice, France, (c) 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris, Photo (c) Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY. From the Cover of *Having Words with God: The Bible as Conversation*.

We were enabled to take a wonderful sabbatical in 2006. The sabbatical was funded by the generosity of the congregation that we serve and by a grant from the Lilly Endowment. Many of the goals we set and results we anticipated were achieved. But there were also unanticipated results. This blog is one of the unanticipated results. It grew out of the journal I kept during the sabbatical and my commitment to write each day. I once heard an author say that if one wants to be a writer, one must write every day. Too many people think about writing, or dream about writing, without settling into the discipline of actually writing each day. Writing is partly formulating ideas. It is partly just plain hard work.

There has been a lot of writing that came forth from the sabbatical. The church brought in three guest scholars for one-month residencies during our sabbatical. All three of those scholars have published a book since their time as visiting scholar in our church. The first to publish was historian Barbara Brown Zikmund, whose *Hidden Histories 2* is her second collection of histories of the United Church of Christ. Novelist Lynn Hinton dedicated her newest mystery novel, published under the pen name, Jackie Lynn, to her friends in our congregation. The book is titled *Jacob's Ladder*. Biblical scholar and teacher Karl Kuhn has published *Having Words with God: The Bible as Conversation*. All three books have met a degree of success and are available from national booksellers.

In addition to this blog, I have a book outline and a little more than three chapters down, but I'm a long way from having a completed book. Nonetheless, I have managed to average more than 1,000 words a day on various projects since returning from the sabbatical.

I was impressed with the three scholars the congregation chose before they arrived in South Dakota. All three have achieved significant success and made significant contributions to the church. All deserve recognition for the good work that they have done.

Karl's book impressed me before I started to read it. First of all there is the simple fact that he is fifteen years younger than I and he has already completed this book and had it published by a major religious publishing house. Then there's the five-star review on Amazon.com. And the jacket note from one of the most respected Biblical scholars of our time, Walter Brueggemann, who wrote, "Kuhn's focus on 'dialogic' reading is exactly appropriate at the present moment." This book is no small accomplishment.

I had not met Karl face-to-face when he agreed to the residency in our congregation. I had gotten his name from a friend and colleague, David Greenhaw. As a seminary president, David keeps up with biblical scholars around the country and when our church was looking for a scholar for a residency, I appealed to David for names. The first name he gave me was Karl Kuhn. "Karl was an outstanding student," David wrote, "And I've been hearing good things about his teaching at Lakeland College." A few e-mails later, Karl had agreed to come to South Dakota for the first month-long residency in our congregation. He led worship, taught classes, and exceeded our expectations of the residency. But he also became involved in the wider life of the congregation and its mission and ministry. He participated in our Woodchuck Society projects and has since arranged for others to become involved. He met our members and became friends with them. He has since returned with his family on vacation to our community. He taught in our West River School of Lay Theology and has returned as a teacher in our Licensed Ministry Program. And he has become a friend of many in the United Church of Christ in South Dakota.

When I was just beginning my ministry a friend and colleague at another congregation, who had more experience than I, once gave me a piece of advice. "When you invite a guest preacher, always select one who isn't as good at preaching as you are. Then the congregation will appreciate you more when you return." The friend had some wisdom, but he was wrong with that piece of advice. Our 2006 Sabbatical taught me that when a pastor needs to be away from a congregation, one of the best things to do is to find the most competent, capable and respected persons available to fill in. They will raise the standard of preaching and teaching and create a challenge that inspires the regular pastor to better work.

We couldn't have selected better or more respected visiting scholars than Karl Kuhn, Barbara Brown Zikumnd, and Lynn Hinton. Their leadership during the sabbatical and their impressive body of work since the sabbatical continue to remind me of the power of the human spirit to create, to lead, and to inspire.

All three are part of the reason that I have continued to write. They have inspired me with their work. If you want to be a writer, you must write. Plenty of people dream about writing and think about writing. Writers do the work and write. I figure that I've written about 20% of the book project that is in my computer. I've got maybe 80,000 words to go. At the rate I write in this blog, that's less than three months. At the rate I'm writing the manuscript, it's about four or five more years. It is clearly a project that I am capable of finishing. And writing about it here in the blog makes it a little bit "public," something that I haven't done with previous writing projects before they were completed.

So I will keep writing. It may never produce anything that looks like a book, but it keeps me in company with some pretty impressive people.

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## October 25, 2008 – Phenomenological Photography



When I was in seminary I had the opportunity to take a class that was team taught by Ross Snyder, professor of Religious Education and Archie Lieberman, a free-lance photographer who had become famous for his work with Look Magazine. He worked exclusively for Look from 1952 to 1972, traveling the world. Archie had become well known for his photographs of Israel and he had just published *Farm Boy*, a collection of photographs of an Illinois family farm taken over a period of 25 years.

Ross was known for his work with teens. His book *Young People and Their Culture* was considered the standard for youth ministry at the time. Together with his wife, Martha, he had produced a book of poetry about love and commitment called *Inscape*, which had been published in a dozen languages. Ross was a demanding and sometimes frustrating teacher and I was determined to take as many classes from him as possible.

They called the class “Phenomenological Photography.” Phenomenology was a popular term in certain corners of the Chicago educational community at the time. It is a big word that essentially means the study of meanings. The challenge for the class was to use the tools of photography - cameras, film, darkroom, chemicals - to capture and document more than just scenes and events, but to reflect the meanings of our time.

After a short introductory session that described the process, each class meeting was a guided gallery walk through the photographs of the class. Once a week we had to produce two 11 x 14 black and white prints, matted and ready for display. There would be a topic assigned and then we went out to make photographs. Most of us used a

community dark room, and time was limited, so the darkroom ran pretty much around the clock. I had a steep learning curve at the beginning of the class. I had no darkroom experience and the camera that I used for the class had been purchased for the class, so was not yet familiar to me.

Once our photographs were displayed, the class would discuss what they meant. What meanings had been captured? Can a photograph capture the meaning of home? Can a picture capture the essence of community? What elements in a photo would induce someone to want to look at it again? In part our questions were the questions of Archie's life. He had spent two decades traveling around the world making photographs for a magazine, trying to document the essence of life in this world.

Half of the discussions went over my head. I was far from a master of the technical side of photography. I struggled with light and shadow and selection of lenses. Virtually all of my photographs had to be cropped in the darkroom because I was not good at framing an image. There were too many things to think about when I was making a picture. Both Archie and Ross were strict about our use of language. Archie bristled at the term "take a picture." He would tell us that there is no "taking" involved. A picture is made, not stolen. We were to make pictures and take nothing.

I learned a lot from that class. Some of what I learned was about photography. Most of what I learned was about observation.

The class took a weekend field trip to Archie's farm and the area where he had made the photographs for Farm Boy. I was simply delighted to be out of the city. Having grown up in the rural west, Chicago was a challenge for me. There were too many locks, too much traffic, too much time indoors and not enough space. At the farm we got to watch Archie and Ross make photographs. Archie used F-series Nikon camera bodies, and often had two cameras with him. His favorite lens was a 105 mm portrait lens. He also had a 28 mm lens that had a slightly wide angle view. He went through film like there was no limit. He would set up and frame a picture and then shoot five or seven frames in rapid succession. When photographing people he would take so many frames that they began to ignore the sound of the camera.

Ross had a Rolleiflex twin lens medium format camera. He spent most of his time imagining what his pictures might look like and took very few images, maybe five or six in an entire day.

Both produced incredible images, but of course we never got to see most of Archie's images, because he selected only one or two from each roll of film he used.

Archie urged us to choose a subject and to photograph that same subject over and over. "Sometimes it takes a decade or more for you to really see what you are doing." Ross, who was about 25 years older than Archie at the time, had more of a sense of

urgency. “You need to be fully present in this moment. Capture what is going on now. You may only experience this once in a lifetime.”

As a result of the class, I am not a professional photographer. But, as a result of the class, I keep a camera at hand most of the time. I try to share one picture a day with readers of my blog, but I really don't produce one meaningful photograph each day, so I sometimes use photographs of others when they fit the topic of the blog. And I often use a photograph taken at another time and place to go with the blog. This morning's photograph, however, is fresh for this blog. It was taken from my front porch this morning, though it is indistinguishable from a hundred other photos of the moon from my front porch that I have taken over the years.

When it comes to photographs, I am more like Archie than Ross. And digital photography hasn't decrease the number of pictures I make. The hard drive on my computer has 11,795 images on it at present. If I took the time, I could probably discard more than a quarter of them and lose nothing. I suspect that less than 10% have any lasting value. It takes a lot of pushing the shutter to get a few meaningful images.

But once in a while, a photograph does capture meaning for me and conveys that meaning for others. There are a few sunrise and sunset photos that evoke an appreciation of the glory of the natural beauty of this world. There are some waterfall and river pictures that say something about the miracle of water. There are images of people in the church that evoke faith and hope.

The meaning, of course, is not in the photograph, but rather in the mind of the one making the photograph and those who look at it. Sometimes a photograph can evoke a common meaning and the power of sharing that meaning can be intense.

So perhaps I'll make a little time today for looking at photographs. After all, I do need to sort out my hard drive and erase enough images so that I have room for those yet to be made.

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## October 26, 2008 – The Death of Moses



Our congregation has been focusing on the texts from the Hebrew scriptures all fall. We have followed the story of the Exodus from Egypt from the birth of Moses through his dramatic call with a burning bush, the arguments with Pharaoh, the crossing of the Red Sea, the wandering in the desert, the building of the golden calf, the granting of the ten commandments, and more. Today we read the description of the death of Moses. After all that he has been through with the people, his life comes to its end and the verge of entering the promised land. He is not to cross over. The next chapter of Israel's story will be with new leadership.

The story tells us that Moses was alone at the time of his death and that no one knows the exact spot. The character of Moses that is revealed through previous stories leads us to believe that he might have been up on a high place. He like to climb up to the high places when he was talking with God.

The people of Israel have yet another lesson to learn from Moses' death. And we need to learn that lesson as well. It isn't about Moses. All of the dramatic stories - the escape from death by being hidden in a basket in the reeds at the edge of the river, the encounter with God in the burning bush, the evoking of plagues, the hurried meal and marking of doorposts with the blood of lambs, the guiding pillar of fire and cloud, the miraculous opening of the sea, the destruction of Pharaoh's army, water from the rock, quail in the evening and manna in the morning, God's word delivered in fire on the mountain, the rebelliousness of the people and the gift of mercy when God was almost ready to give up and start with another people - these and a hundred other stories are

not about Moses though at first glance they seem to be. They are about God and God's love for the people and God's passion for human freedom and God's power to guide, protect, provide, nurture and save.

Had Moses been granted to live forever, the people would have become hopelessly confused. They would have thought that Moses was God. They would have come to believe that God was a man who looked like Moses. We are so quick to worship heroes, even when our heroes disappoint us.

Moses lifted his staff, but it was God who divided the waters. Moses struck the rock, but it was God who provided the water. Moses went up on the fiery mountain, but it was God who provided the word.

And the time came for Moses, like it will come for all of us, to die. I think, in a way, that it is better that we do not know the exact spot. If we knew, we'd probably make a shrine. By now there'd be someone selling cheap tourist souvenirs near the spot. But the way it is we can know that Moses died in the arms of God. With God is sufficient. He died as he had lived, in intense relationship with God. What more could we want from a leader? What more could we want for ourselves?

So Moses died, not having received the promised land.

It never was about the destination. It always was about the journey.

Our relationship with God is a process, not a product.

The Bible makes definite connections between our relationship with God and our relationships with each other and with the world that God has created. How we treat one another and how we treat this world reveal much about our relationship with God. God's love, care, concern and compassion extend not only to us, but to others as well and we are called to treat them as God would treat them. Similarly we are called to treat this world with the love and respect that is due every thing that has been touched by the hand of God. Which is everything in the entire universe. It is all holy.

We teach our children to show reverence and respect when visiting the burial places of others. The mood in the cemetery is often somber and silent. The range of activities that we tolerate in such a place is limited. Though somberness isn't always the correct mood, reverence is appropriate in every place that we visit. Since we know of no one place that is the burial place for Moses, we are freed to think of Moses in every place. His spirit is not confined to a single location. Wherever people are unjustly denied their freedom, Moses' spirit is present. Wherever people need to be called back into relationship with God, Moses' spirit is present.

It is all holy.

Next week we will turn our attention to Matthew's Gospel and to the stories and parables of Jesus. We'll be leaving Moses behind for a while. But if we are attentive we will recognize the power of God that was present in Moses continues in Jesus. So too with grace and love and the call to freedom.

We belong to the journey in this time and in all times.

The refrain of Julian Rush's hymn rings in my heart:

God of Rainbow, Fiery Pillar.  
Leading where the eagles soar.  
We the people, ours the journey,  
Now and ever, now and ever,  
Now and evermore.

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## October 27, 2008 – Sixty-five Years



We attended a sixty-fifth wedding anniversary party yesterday. It was a joyous celebration of family, friends, church and community. The family is practiced with celebrations. There was plenty of food. There were a few songs. But the main focus of the time was the joy of people being together. We sat and visited with friends and simply enjoyed each other.

A sixty-fifth wedding anniversary is a rare occasion. It always has been. Ours is not a time in history that will be remembered for long-term commitments. Relationships come and go and the statistics about divorce are impressive. But previous generations, even when divorce was not prevalent, did not see many sixty-fifth wedding anniversaries. Sixty-fifth anniversaries are a product of longevity. Both partners have to be blessed with long life. Even for a couple like Dick and Pearl, who married relatively young, both have to have been blessed with extraordinarily long lives in order for them to make a sixty-fifth anniversary.

She was twenty-one. He was twenty-two. The world was at war. And neither of them expected their lives to grant them so many years together. They were serious about their commitment, but they also knew that life is fragile. They were both ranch kids and they had seen the realities of life and death. He had just graduated from college, not that he had been able to attend the ceremony. He had been in the hospital. But he recovered enough to make his wedding ceremony the next week.

Over the years, there have been quite a few trips to the hospital. He was in the hospital when their oldest daughter was married. A substitute had to be recruited to walk her down the aisle. He has been in the hospital quite a bit in the past few years. His heart isn't as young as it once was and he needs to take medicine to keep it working properly. Sometimes he ends up in the hospital while the doctors adjust the medications.

A couple of years ago the situation was grave. The doctors were not sure that he would make it. They had done the things that were medically appropriate, but he still was not recovering. They thought that he may be nearing the end of his life. The family rallied around, as they always do. In addition to the visits of children and grand children they began to bring the great-grandchildren around for one more visit with grandpa. The little ones lifted his spirits like none of the rest of us could do. Dick began to recover and soon he was discharged from the hospital and returned to their home.

The family teases Pearl about her consumption of firewood. They have a good wood stove in the main room of their ranch house and Pearl likes to keep it warm in the winter. The joke is that Pearl starts a fire in October and doesn't let it go out until May, unless it is cool in May, or she decides to light the fire in September. Everyone knows that the reason they are able to stay in the ranch house is that there are other family members right there on the ranch. It is the place where Pearl grew up. She and Dick built a house there and some of their children and grandchildren have also built homes on the property. The close-by family members help to support Dick and Pearl so that they can remain in their home. It is a good system.

They've lived a healthy lifestyle, with lots of exercise and hard work. They raised a lot of their own food and hunted to supplement the family's needs. They have been blessed with a beautiful setting for their life together, surrounded by the pine trees and animals of the beautiful Black Hills of South Dakota. They have enough space to feel like the rest of the world isn't pressing in too much.

But they have been fortunate to have had so many years together. At eighty-six and eighty-seven and with their health not as robust as it once was, they are both aware that they don't have too many more anniversaries together. Still, they are surrounded by family and a life of love. Those great-grandchildren are close at hand and come to visit often. They have the joy of having four generations of their family together almost every day. Life is good and there could be a few more anniversaries yet in store for them.

But it wasn't difficult to see widows and widowers among the crowd that gathered to celebrate with them yesterday. We all know the stories of couples whose relationships were filled with love and who had every reason to live for more anniversaries yet one or the other of them became ill and died. None of us will live forever, and the number of years we are granted are not known in advance.

The occasion reminded us of how important it is for us to enjoy each moment we have with our families and loved ones. Each occasion is a precious joy. Each conversation is a valuable exchange. This life may grant us many anniversaries, or only a few. And even with healthy lifestyles and good medical care, life is not certain.

But love abides. And love endures. And love never ends.

However many years we are given, however many anniversaries we are allowed to celebrate, we continue to live in gratitude for the gifts of love that surround us each day.

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## October 28, 2008 – New Perspectives on Mental Health



There have been significant strides in the understanding and treatment of mental illness in our generation. Of the chronic illnesses that afflict humans, mental illnesses usually do not garner the public recognition, sympathy and support for expensive research. There is a stigma attached to mental illness that often results in the victims of the disease being blamed for its effects. Mental illnesses are sometimes judged by uneducated persons as being weaknesses or, even worse, moral failings. When a person develops cancer or heart disease or many other illnesses, the community rallies. Food is brought to the home, support is given and resources are offered. Such a positive community response is rare in the case of mental illness. Families often suffer in silence and isolation. People do not know how to behave or what to say.

The stigma of mental illness can be compounded by many other factors. The shortage of psychiatrists, especially in rural and isolate areas, often means that mental illnesses are not properly diagnosed. Effective treatment can be expensive and requires constant monitoring. Some of the symptoms of mental illness result in its victims resisting treatment. At other times those suffering from such illnesses may attempt to self-treat their illness with inappropriate drugs such as alcohol or street drugs.

Effective treatment of mental illness is even more challenged on the reservations. Reservations are rural areas, often distant from any effective medical treatment. The complexities of the Indian Health System and the remnants of treaties made and broken make it difficult to access health care for enrolled members of the tribe. Poverty adds another level of challenge to treatment. Many treatments are expensive. The history of

violence and attempts at cultural assimilation waged against Native Americans has meant that many people do not have the traditional sources of healing and support that were once assumed as a part of a very strong extended family system.

I am in the midst of a two day course on Lakota perspectives on mental health and suicide prevention, taught by Lyle Noisy Hawk, and brought to our community by a coalition of parties working to prevent suicide in South Dakota. We all know the statistics. And most of the participants in the course, like me, have seen some of the devastating results of untreated or poorly treated mental illness among Lakota families.

We have much to learn.

Most of the students in the class are involved in providing direct support services to Lakota victims of mental illness. Counselors, law enforcement officers, social workers and others have come to learn and to earn continuing education credits. I am the only minister in the class. Many of my colleagues do not see this as an important priority for the use of their time as they seek to serve their congregations. I am aware of some of the dynamics. The congregation I serve has very few Lakota members. There are plenty of needs inside of our community that demand my attention and time. There are opportunities to study and learn about preaching and Bible study and other aspects of ministry. Cross cultural and multi cultural work is time consuming and often does not produce measurable results in terms of new members and congregational growth.

But we are called to serve our community. And we are called to respond to the needs of others. And we have a vision of a multi-racial, multi-cultural congregation that is accessible to all. Ministry with partners outside of the congregation seems to be an important dynamic for our congregation. We do not exist for the sake of institutional maintenance, but rather for service. Following the example of Jesus as described in the Gospels, we see poverty and injustice as important issues, and we know that we are called to serve.

Over the years, I have met people with genuine needs who will never become members of our congregation. Some have come to our church for assistance with a meal or in need of some help with transportation to visit family or to search for a job. Some have come to our church because the big white cross is a sign for them of a place with compassionate people where one might appeal for help. Some have been the victims of mental illnesses.

Often my response to the need of those who come to the church asking for help is to offer short-term solutions. I refer people to the mission for meals, to Church Response for energy assistance and grocery help, to the Salvation Army or the Mission store for clothing needs. I give what assistance I am able in the form of food or assistance with a tank of gas or a ride across town. Sometimes I have a short-term job to offer that enables the person to earn a little money.

Usually I do not have the resources or time to offer any long-term assistance. So it is good to be engaging with other community leaders in envisioning systems of care and support that address long-term problems. Most mental illnesses are chronic conditions. The victims live with their illness for the rest of their lives. The response of the community needs to be investment in long-term care. Victims of mental illnesses who receive proper care can often live active, productive and engaged lives. Developing systems of care that understand the realities of culture are critical. Training community members can improve referral and treatment options.

All education is an investment in the future. It seems that these days are being well invested. The results of this investment are a long way down the road and there are results of such an investment that will never be seen and cannot be measured. Perhaps the most immediate effect of the time and energy I am investing comes in terms of the people I meet and the connections I make with other agencies in our community.

If we could prevent one suicide it would be worth all of our effort.

So I face today with a sense of hope. The two-day workshop is a partnership with my congregation. The cost is the time that I invest. I invested my day off yesterday. Today I invest a work day on behalf of the congregation I serve. We will need to be partners and to work together. And I pray that I can approach the day with an open mind and an eagerness to learn that will provide benefits for others. I am gaining new perspectives.

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## October 29, 2008 – The Day of the Crash



Crowds gather outside the New York Stock Exchange on October 29, 1929. From an old SSA poster.

I'm sure that some pundit will recognize today's date, but I haven't heard much about it in the news. Contemporary reporters seem to focus on October 24 as the anniversary of the stock market crash in 1929, but real panic took a few more days to settle in. Tuesday, October 29, 1929, sometimes called Black Tuesday, was the third day of the most devastating stock market crash in the history of America. Like the volatility in today's markets, the 1929 crash wasn't a single day's events. The market had experienced wide swings leading up to the crash and there were sharp declines on Thursday, October 24 and Monday, October 28, but it was on Tuesday that panic swept the markets. On that day it became undeniable that there was a major economic upheaval in progress.

Although there were some small recoveries made in 1930, the markets continued in decline through 1932, when prices reached levels that had not been seen since the 1800's. The recovery of the markets was slow. The Dow Jones Industrial average did not return to its pre-1929 levels until 1954. People who bought stocks in the 1929 market and held on to them saw most of their adult lives pass before they broke even on their purchase.

Almost as if in defiance of the history of this time of year, US markets rallied significantly yesterday. The markets turned in their second-biggest gain ever. Shares are trading slightly lower before the market opens this morning and futures are trading lower indicating that there is still a lot of suspicion and volatility in the markets.

There are all kinds of reasons why the current upheavals in world markets are not the same as the events in 1929 that led to the Great Depression. Still there is plenty of worry. The Pecora commission, which was established by the U.S. Senate to investigate the crash, concluded that the lack of distinction between commercial banks and investment banks contributed to the crash. The Glass-Steagall Act, passed in 1933, mandated separation between the two types of institutions. Most of the protections of the Glass-Steagall have eroded over time with changes in regulations of banks. By the late 1980's and 1990's most banks were engaged in commercial, investment and insurance products.

History does not repeat itself, but there are lessons to be learned from history.

I am not an economist and anyone would be ill-advised to take financial advice from me. But I was raised with a perspective on the Depression and its effects. My parents were teenagers during much of the Depression and the events of that time colored my upbringing. The stories that we heard from our family were of tough times, but they were not overly negative in character. Many of the virtues and values that we learned as children were based in depression-era thinking. We were taught the value of saving things, repairing items, and making do with what we have. We were taught that fun doesn't need to involve spending large amounts of money, that family is important, and that saving for the future is a positive value. Whatever levels of over-consumption we have developed in our lifestyles seem to be of our own making and not based in the stories and lessons of our family about the depression.

Both of my parents grew up in stable families and neither suffered extensively during the depression. There wasn't much money, but that was the norm for their communities.

As a result, I don't have much fear of the swings in the market. I know that drops in the value of stocks will affect my pension and that many members of the congregation will have their incomes and ability to give affected by the markets. But I have a sense that we, as a community are capable to learning to live with less if the times demand it. We're in this together and we can certainly remain a community of mission and ministry in the midst of the financial realities of our community and world.

It is probably the poorest of the poor, those who are currently experiencing hunger on a daily basis, that are most at risk in a world crisis. Dropping values in the markets can result in increases in the price of food and decreases in the ability of governments to provide food assistance. I suspect that we will experience increasing need and increasing calls to minister to and with those at the margins of our society.

The reality of this anniversary is that more than being an anniversary of a stock market crash, it is the anniversary of a time of panic. Fear became more dangerous than the realities of life. Perhaps in this time we can find ways for our faith to overcome fear and

reasons to avoid succumbing to panic. If worry can lead to productive action, we will all be better off than if we allow our fears to give way to out-of-control panic.

Perhaps we can learn from the lessons of history and help our people to chart a new course in these uncertain times.

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## October 30, 2008 – Getting the News Out



Today at work will be a day to focus attention on producing our monthly newsletter. A lot of staff time and effort goes into producing an attractive, news-filled production each month. We generally produce twelve pages and mail during the last week of the month. Until recently, the newsletter could be taken to the post office on a Friday and members would receive it on Saturday. Now there is about a three-day turn-around in the mailing process, so we try to avoid news of the coming weekend and focus on things that are a few days later in the month.

The truth is that print communication really isn't that much slower or difficult than it once was, but the expectations have gotten much higher. The advent of desktop publishing software and more sophisticated computers means that we are able to produce a more professional document than was the norm fifteen years ago. But our people are getting more and more of their everyday news from online and television sources and less from print sources. Still, there are plenty of members of the congregation who appreciate having a printed document that they can refer to from time to time throughout the month. I am reminded each issue that there are folks who sit down and read our newsletter from cover to cover. While we seek to maintain an active web presence and to improve our online communication, the newsletter is still important.

Communication is one of the major jobs of a congregation. We need to communicate with one another so that we can coordinate our mission and ministry. And we need to communicate with those outside of the church so that there is a constant invitation to participate and a sharing of the good news that God is at work in the world. But it is not

the only job of the church. If we get off balance, we can be tempted to spend too much time telling our story and not enough time doing the work of mission and ministry. Being human, we never get the balance quite right, but are always adjusting to changing circumstances.

I think that I am learning to relax a bit about the newsletter. For several years, when we lived in Idaho, I worked part-time for two small-town weekly newspapers. My employer was an old-school journalist who had classical training in page layout. She taught me a lot about what goes into making a newspaper attractive and how to get people to read stories. When I first came to this church, I began to manage all of the layout, headlines and other details myself. I probably drove the secretary up the wall. She was used to doing most of the production of the newsletter with the minister contributing a column. The norm was a stapled stack of letter-sized sheets of colored paper with text running the full width of the page. I switched to all white paper for the newsletter and then to tabloid sized sheets with a layout in columns. I had specific standards about headline placement and size, about font selection, column width and all sorts of other details of layout and production. The result was a pretty good looking newsletter and a document that consumed several days of my time.

I've invested quite a bit of time teaching others about page layout. And I've begun to release more of the production work to others. In an average newsletter I now lay out four or five pages of the twelve-page document. Although I developed the templates for all of the pages and the calendar format, and other details, I now allow the secretary to take charge of more of the newsletter. Sometimes I have to bite my tongue a bit when pages don't look the way I would lay them out. Often our headlines are not adjusted to the size of the article and there is a tendency to simply allow stories to run down one column and then flow into the next, instead of breaking up the page for individual stories. The use of pull quotes and graphics is often much less professionally done than I would like to see.

But there are only so many hours in a day and the role of the newsletter is decreasing as our world changes. And the gospel has nothing to teach about the details of page layout. In a world where there is never enough time for the ministries that we do, one has to learn to let some tasks go in order to focus attention on others.

I probably spend too much time on the church's web site. We haven't yet identified another worker who might take up that area of work and the congregation doesn't have complete ownership of the web as a media for church communications. There are many members of all ages who do pay attention to our web presence, but there are others who see no value in the time that is spent developing and maintaining our web presence.

Like so many other things in the church's life, the key is maintaining a balance. Time needs to be budgeted. And we need to learn to accept the realities of our imperfections.

We are human and we make mistakes. When we are attentive, we learn from our mistakes and move on in ways that enable us to improve.

But there are also days when we simply go through the motions to produce the product that needs to be done. We do our best, knowing that if we had planned more time for the project the product would be better. Today is one of those days. By the end of the day, the printer must be going. There will be volunteers in the building tomorrow morning to get the newsletter ready to mail. Like every newspaper, there are deadlines. Without the deadlines, we'd never finish and mail the newsletter.

And in the midst of all of the details and imperfections of our lives, the Spirit of God continues to work. Necessary information is communicated. The stories of ministry is told, people are informed of important events and activities. And our life as a church continues.

So i will strive to include prayers in my day and times of reflection and pause so that I can be about more than just producing words on paper. Perhaps this newsletter will bring a warm greeting to someone who cannot get out to attend church. Maybe someone else will decide that they might become involved in a new activity in the church. Maybe someone else will be inspired to attend worship more often. Maybe another person will read about what is going on in the church and find ways to tell those stories to others. It is clearly still worth the time we invest in the newsletter.

But if I had one more day it could be even better. Thank goodness I do not have one more day. Thank God for today.

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## October 31, 2008 – Halloween



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There are a few holidays that seem to be difficult to know how to celebrate. The church is never quite sure what to do with Halloween. Halloween arose as a derivative holiday from the Celtic Christian holiday, “All Saints Day.” All Saints Day is celebrated on the first of November in the contemporary calendar and it is a time of remembrance of those who have died. Unlike Memorial Day, when we focus on the sense of loss, All Saint’s Day is a day to celebrate the contributions of those who have gone before. The name Halloween comes from the old name of the day, All Hallow’s Day. The evening before was Hallo’s evening, shortened to Halloween.

All Hallow’s Day was moved from May to November in the time of Popes Gregory III and IV, in the middle of the eighth century. Perhaps the move of the date was in part inspired by harvest festivals that occurred outside of the scope and control of the church, but the exact reason for the move in the date is not clearly remembered. All Hallow’s Day was a feast day and, in accord with the traditions of the time, the day began at sunset on the previous day. Like all feast days of the time, the preceding day was a fast day, meaning that at sundown on October 31 the feasting began. The lives and contributions of all of the faithful people whose lives have ended were celebrated with feasts and special celebrations of the eucharist.

Over the years, the holiday has divided, with All Saint’s Day being a religious celebration, often moved to the first Sunday of November in protestant churches.

October 31 remains as the day of Halloween and many of the traditions of earlier harvest days remain, sometimes with strange twists.

The end of harvest in many northern climates came with a somber day of butchering animals for consumption during the winter. This day needed to occur when the temperatures were cooler to aid in the preservation of the meat. Slaughter was accomplished with certain rituals and traditions and people recognized that the taking of a life, even when the purpose of that death was sustenance for others, was in some aspect a holy act. The completion of the butchering was often accomplished with a bonfire in which the bones of the slaughtered animal were consumed.

Some believed that the line between the dead and the living was blurred at that moment and that there were particular risks for the living. Acts around the slaughter such as the bonfire became rituals thought to preserve health and life. Dancing in costume around the bonfire arose around the belief that certain acts were necessary to keep death from running rampant in the community. People dressed up as ghosts, skeletons and other representations of dead spirits and danced to ward off evil. One theory holds that the late fall was the beginning of the flu and cold season and that Halloween activities were intended, in part, to ward off illness.

The church resisted the superstitions that were associated with the holiday. The fears that arose in the pre-Christian celebrations were countered with faith. The rituals of slaughter were countered with the celebration of communion. Some believe that the Christian holiday was moved to the fall precisely to counter pre-Christian rituals and superstitions. The traditional Jack-o-lantern arose in part from an attempt to counter superstitions. Lanterns were made of various squash and other vegetables to bring light into the dark places and to remind believers that Jesus is the light of the world and that no darkness is dark to God. The tradition of carving a face in the pumpkin is said to be a reminder to bring thinking into the observation of the day. Rational thought dispels superstition. Use your head and think about it to separate the truth from the unfounded superstitions of the holiday.

In modern times the practice of trick-or-treat has really evolved away from many tricks. The pranks associated with the holiday still persist in some places, but most children engage in the practice with their intentions focused on treats not on tricks. And most people freely give out treats in celebration of children and appreciation of the fun costumes. Fears for the safety of children have resulted in most children practicing trick or treat close to home and many community parties have arisen in place of the tradition. Churches have become hosts to such parties and events.

But we still struggle with the distinctly non-Christian and sometimes superstitious aspects of the holiday. We don't believe that ghosts wander the earth. We do not fear the memories of those who have died in faith. We don't believe that witches have supernatural powers. And some feel that too much emphasis on playing and pretending

to be the devil or associated with the devil is not a healthy path for those who are growing in faith. Some evangelical congregations have developed “hell houses,” what are intended to scare visitors into dramatic conversions of faith. Other Christian churches have embraced Halloween traditions as part of the culture and a time of fun and host parties and other events in celebration of the holiday, giving the secular holiday a bit of religious flavor and making it an opportunity for people to gather in Christian community.

So I am wishing all of my readers a fun and healthy Halloween. In the spirit of the ancient tradition of combining feasting with fasting, may you not overindulge in the candy. In the spirit of the traditions of All Saints, may you find time to think of those who have gone before and lived lives of faith. In the spirit of God’s gift of children, may you enjoy the children who come into your life and treat them with respect as the treasures that they are. May faith dispel the fears that we experience. And may joy fill our community this evening, not as a brief moment of forced celebration, but as a deep spirit of thanksgiving for the abundance of God’s gifts to us.

Happy Halloween!

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November 1, 2008 – Curiosity Didn't Kill this Cat



AP Photo

There are people that I have never met face-to-face that I feel like are old friends. Studs Terkel had a voice that I could recognize immediately. Whenever he was being interviewed, or had a part in a radio drama, I could pick out that gravelly voice. It was a voice that I associated with Chicago. His radio program aired every weekday for forty-five years and anyone who listened to the radio in Chicago got to know that voice.

I'm a big fan of radio, but it wasn't through radio that I initially met Studs. It was through reading his books. He was a consummate story teller and documentarian of nearly a century of our nation's history. *Working*, the book about what people talk about when they work, tells the story of average Americans like no other book. If one could read only one book about the Great Depression, *Hard Times* would be my recommendation. His book about World War II, *The Good War*, reminds us that all wars are fought by real people, with thoughts, feelings, intentions and ideas that are unique to each individual. *Coming of Age*, *American Dreams Lost and Found*, *White Slaves*, and *Touch and Go* are all books that I would recommend without hesitation. Many of his books, especially his collections of interviews are worth reading over and over again.

He had an amazingly diverse set of interests. In addition to being an historian, he wrote books on Jazz, on ball parks, and a reflection on dying, *Will the Circle be Unbroken?* If you want to understand the people of this great land, *The Studs Terkel Reader* (originally published as *My American Century*) has eight outstanding interviews.

The CD, *Voices of Our Time*, not only introduces people that we all should know, but the incredible interview talents that Studs demonstrated daily for nearly half a century.

Studs was a hard worker and a prolific writer. He was born in New York, but his family made their way to Chicago by the time he was ten years old and ran a series of boarding houses. He credited his interest in people to the people who gathered in those boarding houses and in nearby Bughouse Square, a gathering place for dissidents, unemployed laborers, and religious fanatics where anyone with a soap box could gather an audience.

You can read an economist's analysis of the great depression, but you won't know it until you read Studs account of the ten-year-old boy who watched his father come home with his toolbox on his shoulder at 11 o'clock one morning and not go back to work for five years. There are plenty of books about World War II, but few capture the reality of that war like *The Good War*. "This neighbor told me that what we needed was a damn good war, and we'd solve our agricultural problems. And I said, 'Yes, but I'd hate to pay for it with my son. Which we did.' He weeps. 'It's too much of a price to pay.'" His straight talk about race in America remains a critical conversation for our times. "I think you become an adult when you reach a point where you don't need anyone underneath you. When you can look at yourself and say, 'I'm okay the way I am.'" One of the things that keeps my class of people from having any vision is race hatred. You're so busy hating somebody else, you're not going to realize how beautiful you are and how much you destroy all that 's good in the world."

Studs was 96 when he died yesterday. He is one of the iconic voices of our time and the kind of voice that we will miss. But his books remain. And the recordings of his interviews will last longer than my lifetime. And the ideals for which he stood are timeless. Hard work, honesty, and careful listening are sorely needed in our culture.

I heard an interview with Studs within the last few years when he was reflecting on his life. He said that he thought the thing that made his career was his curiosity. He graduated from the University of Chicago Law School, but never practiced law. "I was just too curious to settle down to a regular job," he said. "But curiosity has made my life what it is. I want my epitaph to read, 'Curiosity didn't kill this cat.'"

It does.

There are some old friends that I have never met face-to-face. Yet they are friends all the same. Not that I was ever a friend to these folk. Our relationship was based on my reading their books and listening to voices on the radio. But you miss an old friend when he dies. And his dying seems to be a moment of significance in your own life story. I felt said when I got the news of Studs' death yesterday. But I suspect that, like so many other parts of his life, the timing of his dying was nearly perfect. Ninety-six years he lived. He was a man of the twentieth century who lied long enough into the twenty-first

to have some perspective on his century. And he remained infinitely curious. And we knew that he was curious about death itself.

Time doesn't stand still. People don't last forever. History rolls on. But I will remember for the rest of my life one man who could tell the story of common people like no other.

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## November 2, 2008 – The Fellowship of Service



Several years ago, a group of people in our church started serving occasional Sunday brunches. The meals were great fun and people really enjoyed the opportunity to linger after worship for a nice meal. The brunches went through several different configurations of leadership, but in the early years the people who did the shopping and cooking ended up feeling like they had tackled a job that was too big. Having to come up with a menu and do all of the work got to be a bit bigger volunteer job than they had envisioned. It wasn't the process of preparing a single brunch, but the demands of having to do it over and over again. Several wonderful brunch cooks and coordinators burned out after a year or two of leading the project.

There was no doubt that the congregation enjoyed the brunches, it was just that it was hard to sustain leadership for the program. Some years we foundered a bit, with insufficient leadership. Last year the Department of Education took on the project, believing that it was good for the church to have opportunities for all ages to gather together. It was a lot of extra work to add to their already busy portfolio.

This year we have devised a new plan. Each department of the church is adopting a single brunch. Groups within the church that are already organized for other tasks are adding one brunch to their list of jobs. So far, the groups have chosen weeks that have some connection to their other ministries. The Department of Worship held a brunch on Worldwide Communion Sunday and continued their theme of breads of the world into the brunch. This month the Department of Stewardship and Budget is serving a brunch

as a part of their annual stewardship drive. Next month, the Department of Education will serve a brunch as a part of the Advent Fair.

So far the plan has been a success. And the groups are gaining a great deal through the process of gathering for a different kind of work than their usual responsibilities. Members of committees get to know one another in specific ways because of the tasks at hand. Randy is an engineer and he is good at analyzing data and developing charts to help others understand. Pat works in investments and she has developed a system for the department to track their finances each month. Lia is an expert in advertising and she brings ideas for promotion and communication. Each member brings something to the table, but they are used to working together in the setting of a meeting with the budget and finances of the church as the center of that meeting.

So planning, preparing and serving a brunch is a new task and the roles in the committee shifted. Pat provided recipes. Dona organized the shopping. The group wanted to make the process fun, so they started by gathering for breakfast in a local restaurant. From there they all went shopping together. It didn't take long to have all of the items in the cart in the checkout line. From there they went to the church to do the advance preparation. Again roles changed as the task was different from their usual work. Instructions came from a different leader than usual, people chose tasks by what they enjoyed and by what remained to be done. The kitchen was full of laughter and good conversation and the tasks were accomplished quickly. In about an hour, the work was finished and people were headed out for other adventures. A few lingered in the parking lot with continuing conversation.

One of the best ways to get to know others is to work with them on a common task. And sometimes we get to know others even better when we mix up the tasks. Doing a different job allows different parts of our lives to be shared.

It is a simple lesson, but it is one that we need to learn over and over in the church. Working together is good for us. Serving others is why we gather.

As Christians, one of our sacraments is the simple act of sharing a meal together. We have made a ritual of communion and formalized its sharing with books of worship and traditional liturgies and long arguments about the authority to serve. But the core of the sacrament is simply a group of followers of Jesus who gather to eat and drink in remembrance of Jesus. We tell the story of that night when Jesus gathered in the upper room with his disciples and shared the meal. We repeat the words that Jesus used and we sense our connections with all of the faithful people who have shared this simple meal throughout the generations of the church.

Every meal holds the potential to be a sacrament when we remember.

So today we will gather as a congregation for worship. In the formal service, we will share a formal liturgy of communion. We will repeat the words and share the sacrament in accord with our traditions and those of our church. And when the worship is finished, we will head to our fellowship hall for another meal. Both events are sacred. Both bring to mind the goodness of God and the presence of the resurrected Christ.

And the work of preparing and serving and cleaning up will be easy work, shared by a team of people who have discovered the joy of serving.

How fortunate we are to have the fellowship of service.

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## November 3, 2008 – Daylight Savings



Well another summer of daylight savings time has ended. In the last few years we've been stretching out the practice here in the United States, springing ahead even earlier in the spring and waiting until November to fall back. If I have counted right, I changed seventeen clocks on Saturday evening and Sunday morning. The clocks in the cell phones and computers and one radio clock set themselves at the time change. Maybe the most important clock is the controller that rings the church bell. It is a complex 24-hour, 7-day mechanical clock that can only be moved forward. In the fall, we trip the breaker for an hour and then restart the clock. I use a similar technique with our antique wind-up clocks as well. The clock that controls the light on the outdoor cross does not need to be re-set for daylight savings, as it is set to turn on when it gets dark. I adjust the start time about once a month to coincide with the shortening days in the fall and lengthening days in the spring. Most years I don't bother to change that clock for daylight savings time. I still need to set the clocks in the cars. I usually remember to do that within the first week or so after the time change.

Anyway, the clocks have been set and within a day or so more we will have adjusted to the change in the time. It sort of makes you wonder what we have saved. If our purpose was to save daylight, perhaps we should make a few withdrawals from our savings in the next couple of months to stretch out the days. I always notice the fall back, because it makes darkness come so early. We'll be eating dinner after dark for several months now. We'll be driving home from work in the dark until spring.

I have no opposition to daylight savings time. I don't have much of an opinion one way or the other. If changing all of the clocks helps people to get up earlier in the summer, so be it. I like to get up before sunrise. I enjoy watching the colors creep over the horizon. I enjoy the morning whether it is summer or winter. Our house has a great view to the east and I've taken so many photographs of sunrises over the years that you might think that I would tire of it, but each sunrise is unique and worth the look.

Daylight savings time is like so many other things in our life. Time doesn't change. We have just agreed to change our attitude toward time. As a society we all agree to get up a little earlier, go to work a little earlier and thereby gain extended evenings during the summer months. I've served churches that adjust their service times in the summer to worship earlier in the day. Daylight savings time accomplishes the same thing without having to change the worship time on the sign in front of the church.

Sometimes we need to adjust our attitude. Not only is it good for us to be open to changes, change also makes us think about things. Falling back and seeing the dramatic change in the time of sunset is a reminder that we all have a limited amount of time on this earth. The days go by and each one is a gift. And all too often we fail to recognize what a treasure the gift of each day is. We often live as if we would go on forever - as if our lives had no limits. But we know the truth that we are all finite and that this life will reach its conclusion. We understand so little about the reality of resurrection, but it seems, from our limited perspective, that time is radically different in God's realm than our own.

Perhaps the change in time could become a signal to all of us to examine our priorities. We are occasionally in need to re-examining what is most important to us and making changes in our lives to reflect our priorities. Fall and the change from daylight savings time seems like an excellent opportunity to ask ourselves whether or not our use of time reflects our true priorities. Are we investing our time in the things that matter most? Are we being wise with the limited amount of time that we have? Does the way we spend our time reflect the values we hold?

Maybe that would be a good way to invest the extra hour. Since it comes in the night, most of us use the extra hour to catch up on a little lost sleep. But it might be a good discipline, once a year, to take an hour to reflect on our priorities.

You notice that I am writing this after the fact. The change in time occurred early Sunday morning. By now it is too late to recover the hour. But the idea is still good. And perhaps investing an hour looking at our priorities would be valuable on any day of the year.

May we make wise investments of the time we have saved.

## November 4, 2008 – Election Day Morning



Today is a day like many other days. The weather is surprisingly warm for November and we have enjoyed the opportunities to be outside. The forecast calls for cooler temperatures later in the week, but today should be another beautiful day in the hills. The pundits are saying that today's election is an historic election. The presidential and vice presidential candidates have been working right up to the last moment and the returns are in from the first Dixville Notch, New Hampshire, the first polling station in the nation to report. According to a news report last night, voters in our county have engaged in early voting in record numbers. Nearly 18,000 residents of our county, or about 1/3 of the registered voters, have already voted.

We're going to vote the old fashioned way, by going to the polls in our neighborhood. Actually, for us, it is more convenient. With the tight parking lot, security screening, and older building with lots of stairs, our county courthouse is not the easiest place to get in and out of for folks who have some difficulty walking. Our neighborhood firehall is much easier, with adequate parking and a nice level floor and no stairs. And, for us, it is a neighborhood gathering. Most of the workers are neighbors and we run into other neighbors at the polls. If we go mid day, there will be no lines and voting will be convenient and easy.

There is a bit of excitement about the day. I am probably not as excited as I was the first time I voted, but it is hard to escape the sense of participation in an important aspect of our democracy. I've been looking forward to casting my vote this year. Part of what I've been looking forward to is the end of the campaign. There has been a reasonable

amount of nastiness in the campaign. It seems to me that local campaigns have become more nasty and filled with dirty tricks than they used to be. It is disheartening to see campaigns that believe that the way to victory is through attacks, innuendoes and half-truths.

But voting is a lot about hope for most of us. We vote because we believe that there are ways to make the future a bit better than the present. We vote because we believe that participating in the process will enable us to select leaders who will solve problems, provide vision, and make necessary changes. We vote because we believe that our opinion is necessary and that we can contribute to our society.

This election comes in the midst of unsettled times. The irony of the fact that I received my quarterly pension fund statement yesterday is not lost on me. After years of watching our savings go up quarter by quarter, it is disheartening to see them go down at such an alarming rate. I know it is all paper, but tens of thousands of dollars seems significant. It is the second quarter in a row with losses that are occurring at a rate that could not be sustained for very many quarters without wiping out all of our retirement savings. Of course we are not alone. Our friends and the people we serve have seen similar losses. Our retirement is invested in the same kinds of funds that most of the people in our country use. And the markets will recover in time and the investments we are making right now will yield good results over the years. But one would like to believe that the vote might make a difference in things like our ability to earn a living and save for our future.

Election day seems like a good day to be hopeful. Even though we know that our ultimate hope does not lie in the governments of this world, even though we acknowledge that there is a power that is greater than the powers and principalities of this world, we also participate in the processes of our democracy with the conviction that we are called to express our faith in this world and that working for justice and peace are causes to which we have been called.

So once again we'll go over our sample ballots and then we will go to the polls to express our best judgment. And we trust that our neighbors will be doing the same thing. And we expect that the combined wisdom of the people will be greater than the wisdom of any individual. And we know that we will not get everything our way. At the end of the day, when the results are in, some of the candidates and causes for which we voted will be victorious and others will have lost. We will continue to live with our neighbors and be citizens of this state and this nation. We will continue to agree with some of the actions of our government and disagree with others.

We will not be forming the realm of God on earth with our votes. But hopefully we can contribute to a just society. God's work is accomplished through many human actions. Our quest for democracy is only one of those actions.

So we may be staying up a little later than usual tonight watching election returns. And we may be a little more easily distracted by news reports throughout the day. My prayer for the day is that cynicism will not reign, that the youngest and newest voters will see enough good from casting their votes to continue to stay engaged in the process, and that we will discover a sense of unity in our common concern for the future of our nation and our world. And I pray that win or lose the candidates will have the humility to be diligent in prayer and remember the limits of their authority.

It is not just another day. It is a day when history is being made. And we all have an opportunity to participate in that history.

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## November 5, 2008 – The Day After the Election



Photo from Rapidcityjournal.com

For the most part I do not speak out publicly on politics. It is not that I have any reluctance to share my opinions, but I am careful not to be seen as speaking for others. The congregation I serve is wonderfully diverse and on most political issues, we have members who fall on both sides of the issue. What binds us together is not agreement but faith. And I treasure the honor of serving a congregation that is willing to disagree on political issues while coming together to serve our community and world.

And I have not blogged about the election. My personal web site is linked to the church's web site in such a way that it could be easily seen as an official extension of the church's site. I have been granted permission to speak to the congregation I serve, but not to speak for that congregation.

The election is over and the results are in. The pundits are calling it an historic election for our country. I am grateful that the presidential race was, for the most part, free from the politics of personal destruction that have polarized our country in past elections. The speeches of the candidates last night showed mutual respect. Senator McCain's concession speech was as gracious as I have ever heard. And Senator Obama's victory speech spoke of the honor and character of John McCain, whose mention drew cheers from the crowd of Obama supporters. The rhetoric of last night bodes well for the future of difficult and challenging governing that lies ahead.

But, now that the election is over I am going to speak of one item that has been on my mind. Our local newspaper chose not to endorse a candidate in the race for United States Senator from South Dakota, an unusual position for a newspaper that rarely apologizes for its partisanship and Republican leanings. I would not have been surprised to see the Journal endorse Joel Dykstra, the republican candidate. Nor would it have surprised me to see the Journal choose not to endorse Tim Johnson because of his votes on the Senate Banking Committee or other issues.

Instead the Journal chose to write an editorial about Senator Johnson's speech impairment and his mobility limits. Since suffering a brain hemorrhage, Senator Johnson has worked diligently at recovery. His mind is sharp and his attendance record in the Senate is stellar. He has continued to be effective in championing legislation.

To disagree with the policies of a candidate is a reasonable position for a newspaper. To choose disabilities as the reason not to support a candidate is a slap in the face of every disabled member of our community. The newspaper editorial came off as saying that persons who use canes or wheelchairs for mobility should not serve as senators and that those with challenges to their speech should not apply.

The ignorance that such an editorial betrays made me ashamed to be a citizen of the city served by the newspaper. Persons with disabilities have a great deal to offer to our community and to deny them any role in our society is a failure of our society.

How I wish the writer of that editorial would spend a day with me at Black Hills Industries where citizens of our community who live with disabilities work and contribute to our common life and demonstrate courage and leadership that does our city proud. How I wish that writer would attend an art show at the Suzie Cappa Center for Art Expression and Enjoyment or go with workshop families to the annual gala.

How I wish the entire editorial board of the newspaper would open their eyes and look around themselves. Over six hundred members of our community are adults living with disabilities who are meaningfully employed and contributing members of our society. Persons with disabilities are home owners, tax payers, voters, and readers of newspapers. The newspaper owes every one of them an apology for the ignorance and prejudice of its misguided editorial.

Our state is fortunate that Joel Dykstra, the candidate who opposed Tim Johnson in the election chose to run on the issues and not on the prejudices of the newspaper. He won approximately 37% of the vote in his run against the popular incumbent Senator Johnson. Though he was not elected he knows that he ran hard on the issues and chose to keep his campaign positive. For that we can all be grateful.

And I am proud to be represented in the United States Senate by a person who daily lives with disability. When his speech is slower, his colleagues will be forced to slow

down and listen. When he uses his cane to navigate the halls of congress, he will be standing up for every person with a mobility disorder.

I pray for the health of each person who participates in the editorial policy of our newspaper. I sincerely hope that none of them will ever suffer a health crisis like Senator Johnson's hemorrhage. And I hope that they will have many years of active life free from disabilities. But, as one of my friends who uses a wheelchair for mobility refers to us, we who are "temporarily abled," will all face challenges to our health and our abilities as we age.

And someday the ignorance and prejudice that was so shamefully displayed in the newspaper's editorial will be overcome with the truth that persons with disabilities are active and contributing members of our community.

Today the election is over. Today we must go to work and the challenges we face as a nation and as a community require the participation of all of our citizens. I thank God that persons with disabilities are my friends and neighbors. They will contribute greatly to the future we share.

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## November 6, 2008 – Snow Day



The blizzard warnings were out yesterday and there were many discussions about whether to cancel or hold various events. I am reluctant to cancel events, but we allow the leaders of various groups within the church to make their own decisions. The bell choir rehearsed. The adult choir did not. We were in town for youth group, but the coffee house where we were set to hold our senior high youth group closed early and we ended up canceling the event at the last minute. The winds were high, but the snow didn't start falling as early as predicted.

But the city will be having a snow day today. The winds are continuing to blow and snow fall is light to moderate around the area. We've got about 4 inches here and the snow continues to fall. The winds are high enough that there will be drifting in open areas. The airport is closed and area schools have announced that they will be closed. There is a no travel advisory on the Interstate highway from Kadoka to the state line, a distance of about 150 miles that wanders across the northern badlands and skirts the edge of the Black Hills. Right now it is too windy for the snow plows to accomplish much. They'll be more effective later in the day.

Our office will run a modified schedule today. The preschool will have a snow day, as its schedule is linked to the public schools. They announced that all schools will be closed at 4:45 this morning. Other businesses will make decisions based on who is able to get to work and other factors. I am expecting a call from our daughter, who always tries her best to get to work. She doesn't have a four-wheel drive vehicle, and so sometimes calls her dad for a ride when conditions are rough. She's only missed one day of work

due to weather since she took this job - and missed that day only because others got stuck and blocked the road.

One of our cars is in the shop for a repair job that will probably take the rest of the day if the mechanic can get to work. If not, we'll get it on Friday. That is no inconvenience for us, because we have a good pickup and won't be snowed in except to the extent that we stay home because we choose to do so. I have a meeting scheduled this afternoon with a family to plan a funeral. It will occur as planned, I'm sure.

The lights have been flickering this morning and we had a few minutes of power outage during the night as several clocks need to be reset this morning. We've got plenty of mechanical clocks, so there is no doubt about what time it is. The crews at the power company won't have a day off today. They've probably been working all night as well. The first blizzard of the season is always a bit of a test of equipment and things break when it gets cold. The winds and wet snow are hard on power lines.

We are pretty much ready for winter. The garden is buttoned up, the storm windows are on and things are pretty much ready to go. I have a couple of plastic lawn chairs that are sitting out on the deck. We had highs in the '70's two days ago. There is plenty of food in the house and it would take several days before things got too boring. If the power goes out, we've got firewood and we can cook on a camp stove in the garage. But, frankly, it's been a decade since we've had a power failure that lasted more than a couple of hours and we're not too worried. We'll stay warm and comfortable in our home.

I don't remember too many snow days from my childhood. The town where I grew up was on the Eastern slope of the Rockies and we usually had enough wind to blow the snow off of the clear places. I'm sure there were a few days when things were cancelled due to the weather, but snow days weren't common. As an adult, I kind of enjoy snow days. They provide a change of pace and sometimes a bit of a break from a life that has a bit too many activities scheduled. With a four-wheel drive pickup and tire chains, we are rarely really snowed in and can come and go as long as we use appropriate caution.

It is the first blizzard of the season, so there will be drivers who have forgotten about slippery roads and who will be slipping and sliding into the ditches. With luck we'll avoid major injuries and the tow truck operators and body shops will get a little extra work.

The weather is always a good reminder that there are forces in the world that we cannot control. I'm perfectly happy with that arrangement. I don't need to be in control of everything. And our circumstances are nowhere near as vulnerable as those of the people who lived here a century or more before our time. Our circumstances are nowhere near as vulnerable as the most impoverished people in our city. I'm sure that the shelters are full and that folks are crowded in some places. I'm sure that there are

homes that are not as warm and comfortable as ours and that there are people who don't have the luxury of a little extra indoor space when it's tough to get outdoors. And there are plenty of folks who have to work when the weather gets tough: law enforcement, highway crews, utility crews, and others.

So, happy blizzard day. We live in South Dakota. The weather will change. The forecast calls for the storm to continue throughout the day. Temperatures will climb to the mid-forties by Saturday, with a possibility of additional scattered snow showers for the next week or so. The hills need the moisture. The garden is tilled and ready to soak it in. Stay warm. Be safe. We'll all be out and about in a day or so.

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**November 7, 2008 – Good Folk**



I spent an hour or so with a family yesterday discussing the funeral of their father. Paul had lived to 91 years of age and had outlived his wife by almost a decade. He had outlived many of his friends as well. I never really got to know him. His daughter and son-in-law have been a part of our church for some time now.

Paul was a rancher from down by Fairburn. Fairburn is famous for our state mineral, the Fairburn Agate. It is not famous for its lush fields or its tall trees or fancy vistas. It is famous for a rock. It is ranch land. And the kind of land where someone has to be willing to work hard and sacrifice much in order to make a go of it. Not that it can't be done. Lots of folk have earned a living from Western South Dakota ranch land. But the life the land affords is not one of high luxury. Paul was well suited to this life. He managed to get by without debt. If he couldn't afford it, he didn't have it. He didn't need new vehicles or new equipment. He didn't need a fancy house or lots of furniture. His three daughters were teenagers before they had an indoor toilet. "I wouldn't want to deprive my girls of the exercise." I suppose they got even more exercise on hot summer days when kick on the outhouse door would rouse a snake that had crawled in for the shade and made it rattle.

The love of the land and the love of the critters is something that some people never quite understand. There is more than a fair touch of isolation in ranch living. It's a half hour to town, more if the roads are bad, and you don't go there for no reason. You go to town for parts or groceries or vet supplies and sometimes for a dance or to attend church. You learn to be self-reliant and fix things when they break. You become a

survivor. Paul lived over nine decades pretty firmly attached to the ranch his grandfather settled. He once said that the best home he could imagine was the sheep wagon he shared with his grandpa on Red Shirt Table down on the rez.

He wasn't much for talking and he really wasn't much for talking about feelings. Not that he minded sharing his opinions with others. He was always there to help a neighbor and the big jobs of ranching, like branding, were always done together. His family was everything to him and he became attached to the cattle as well. He couldn't stand to do his own butchering and when an animal had to be put down to end its suffering, he was always reluctant with the job. He wasn't big on partying, not that he had any objection to having a good time, and he really didn't like it when people mixed too much booze with ranch chores. "When people get to drinkin' during branding is when people really get hurt."

I wouldn't presume to know what he thought about his life or the land. But I know from experience that men like Paul have a depth of faith that is rarely expressed. You can call it the "way of the west" or the "cowboy way," or whatever you'd like. Men like Paul live with a sense of right and wrong and a connection to the land and the animals that keeps them connected with the One who created the land and the animals. And nobody ranches the land between the hills and the badlands without truly discovering the meaning of hope. Without hope Paul would have packed it in before he was fifty.

No, I really didn't know Paul. I prayed with him in the ICU in the hospital. I've visited with his family. But I know the kind of man he was. He wasn't the kind of man you'd get to know by sitting down and talking with him anyway. He was the kind of man you'd get to know by fixing fence all day or helping to stitch up a heifer, or watching how he behaved at the sale barn.

His funeral will be simple. Not too many flowers, thank you very much. Not too much show. There is no need to draw too much attention to the death of a man who didn't want to draw too much attention to the way he lived. Paul doesn't need the approval or judgment of the folks who remain.

There isn't much that needs to be said, except "good bye old man." And lay him to rest beneath the good dirt of the hills of South Dakota. And pour the last cup of coffee from the pot and take it out to the porch and drink it while you listen to the wind howl. And if you listen close enough you'll hear the sound of good friends catching up. There aren't too many extra words in heaven. Paul and his people didn't waste too much energy talking. But good folk know that death isn't the end of the connection.

On the ranch you learn to accept life and death. You're there when the calf is born and you're there when she dies. You don't shield your kids from the truth and you don't ignore it yourself. You live with it. It's not a bad thing that Paul has died. He was ready. Ninety winters is enough for most folks. What is important is that he lived. He worked

hard, he paid his bills, he took care of his wife, he raised his girls and he loved his grandchildren. He was good to his animals and fair to his neighbors.

Farewell, Paul. The people you lived with and the people you left behind are good folk. And we know you're with good folk in God's space.

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## November 8, 2008 – Digging Out



The storm was pretty much over in Rapid City by Thursday night, but it took most of the day yesterday to get the streets cleared and the walks dug out so that folk could get around town. With the temperature reaching into the '40's there was plenty of melting to help with the process. The snow was heavy. Folks who had their driveways shoveled clear found that the snow plows deposited enough snow to create a barrier between the driveway and the street. Many businesses didn't have all of their employees working. A lot of folks had to wait for crews to clear the streets before they could get out.

We didn't have it bad at all. We were never really snowed in. With everyone else's attention focused on digging out, things were relatively quiet at the office. We didn't have a secretary, so some of our tasks were different than the usual routine. I folded and stapled the bulletins, a job that is normally done by volunteers. It is good to do that kind of job from time to time. It is a job that needs to be done. By doing it I gain appreciation for the work that is done by volunteers. I can let my mind wander as I work, something that is not always an option for me.

Because I have a pickup that could get around town, I did my share of giving rides to others and pulling out stuck cars. We have a heavy tow strap and solid hooks on the front and a hitch on the back that make it easy to give someone a small jerk that will get them out of a snow drift or across a plow windrow.

The news that we got is that things were much worse for some folk in other places. At one point there were over 300 miles of Interstate highway closed. Approximately 200

vehicles had been abandoned on the Interstate, making plowing a challenge. The governor declared a state of emergency and advised no travel in almost all of the state. Most of the major roads have been plowed by this morning, but there is still plenty of snow and ice and in rural areas there are plenty of roads that haven't yet been plowed. We've already heard stories of folks who spent a night or more in their stuck cars.

All in all it appears that we weathered the storm without too much problem, however. And having a good blizzard early in the winter helps keep folk aware of the danger and may make them a bit more cautious for the rest of the winter.

We haven't seen a newspaper since the storm began. I suspect that it was a delivery problem and that the paper actually printed. We'll catch up on local news eventually. Most of it will be about the blizzard anyway, and we pretty much know what happened on that score.

Church will be open and ready for worship tomorrow. We had an adventure and now we're back in business. The storm came at an appropriate time in the week so we had minimal disruption of church activities. a choir rehearsal, a youth group meeting, and the watercolor society were the only events that were cancelled. A couple of days with spotty office hours didn't seem to disrupt too much.

Around the edges, I had an opportunity to look at the sheer beauty of the snow. The high winds meant that it wasn't evenly distributed. There were waves and hills of snow in the fields. Gullies and ditches were filled in, so the usual shape of the land was altered. The snow had varying textures so that light and shadow danced on its surface. Strange curves and shapes appeared on the lee side of drifts. In some places the snow was smooth and sculptured, in other places it lay in a jumble of chunks. The water flowing down the streets had chunks of ice floating on the surface that looked like miniature icebergs. In the afternoon the sun came out and the snow sparkled. The shadows had a blue tinge instead of the usual grey. There was a lot of beauty. It was a feast for the eyes.

Life is like that. Beauty is a graceful gift that appears where it will, even when it is unexpected. Something that seems grim at one moment is a source of joy at another. Fear and danger can yield to joy and appreciation.

In the middle of the storm, late on Thursday, I was walking around the side of my garage to get another shovel to put into the pickup. My eyes caught some motion off to the side. Thinking it might be a deer or turkey, I took a second look. It was the two girls who live next door, all bundled up in coats and hats and boots. They had found a place in their own back yard where the snow had drifted deep enough that if they laid down it was over their heads. What I had seen was two faces peeking over the edge of the drift. The storm had become a wonderful adventure for them and they were having a good time.

The truth is that they had probably been indoors all day and it is likely that they were driving their mother up the wall and she finally told them to bundle up and go outside for a while. But for a while, until they got wet and cold, outside was just the right place for them. Across the state people were worried about the blizzard. Meetings were being cancelled, snowplows were breaking down, emergency personnel were searching for lost folks, The governor was pondering a state of emergency and the national guard was being deployed. But in our neighborhood there were hills to be sledded, drifts in need of footprints, snowballs to be thrown and beauty to be discovered. The blizzard was an adventure that gave area kids two snow days to stay home and explore this wonderful world.

I am grateful to our neighbors for reminding me that the weather is not a problem to be solved, but rather a gift to be enjoyed.

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## November 9, 2008 – Woodchucks



I have blogged before about the Woodchuck Society, a group of people within our church who take excess wood from the Black Hills, cut and split it, and deliver it to people in need of winter fuel at Eagle Butte and Wanblee. This year the crew has centered its work around trees that have been thinned near the Rushmore Radio towers and transmitters. There are also sizable piles at the home of the leaders and organizers of the group, a farm on Sheridan Lake Road and at the church. Deliveries are set to begin on Saturday.

The blizzard may affect the schedule of deliveries. I have not had any e-mail contact from Eagle Butte since the blizzard. It is possible that their power has been out. We'll need the roads to be plowed and the ground to have dried out a bit in order for us to get in to our usual delivery site which is off of the paved roads.

The situation at Wanblee has been fairly grim. The entire community lost electricity early in the storm. About 200 people moved into the school, which had a generator, but there were no cots, too few blankets, and not much food. They cooked and prepared food that was at the school, but ran out of diapers and other essentials. Friday night the generator broke down leaving the gathered group without heat and the ability to cook. Blankets, water and toiletries arrived from the Rapid City Red Cross yesterday, and the road to Kadoka is now open, though residents are reluctant to leave town for fear of looting of their homes and many don't have gas money to make the trip. The store in Wanblee has not opened since the blizzard began, making the nearest store 28 miles away in Kadoka.

Blankets, candles and water are being delivered to homes and there is an informal system of checking on folks, but those living in more rural and isolated situations are still on their own to survive.

We've got firewood ready to deliver and a crew that will be available on Saturday, but we had already promised a run to Eagle Butte, so we won't know until mid week which direction we'll be heading for sure. And Saturday is a long day off for people who are waiting for the power to be restored. Hopefully the more than 20 power poles that need to be reset to restore power in Wanblee can be repaired and power brought to the community on Monday or Tuesday. If the weather cooperates and the snow melts, people will have some increased mobility and supplies of food can be increased.

National Guard crews have already assisted with emergency evacuations and will continue to assist with snow removal and support of emergency personnel. There was big progress made in clearing snow and opening roads on Saturday and more people are able to get out to resupply.

We weren't quite prepared for this storm. The blizzard was more severe than we've seen in recent years with winds over 75 miles per hour in some places and drifts piling to 20 feet or more. Families did not have sufficient supplies of food or water stocked up for the emergency, and there are fewer four-wheel drive vehicles in the area due to increased costs of obtaining and running them.

And this is just the beginning of the winter. People who have lived in this area for a while know that we often have open weather in November and December and many of our storms come in January and February and spring blizzards can last into May. This doesn't mean that we spend very many winters with continuous snow. We usually have time to dig out between storms and often have weeks and weeks with bare ground.

But the predictions of a more severe winter gained credence last week as we started of the winter of 2008-09 with a storm that set a few records.

Which is a reminder that the Woodchuck Society does important work. People helping people with real needs. This winter there will be a need for more firewood than ever and the fuel that we supply will make a big difference in the lives of the people that we serve. We'll also be delivering some mittens, hats, baby blankets and other supplies when we make our trips. Some of the knitted items have traveled all the way from Florida in support of our partners on the reservations.

So the Woodchucks will be busy this week. And we'll need to be a bit flexible until we get our contacts made. But we have gotten a reminder that the work we do is important.

## November 10, 2008 – Jazz



Through a cooperative venture of the Black Hills Chamber Music Society and the Dakota Jazz Consortium, the Jazz Diversity Project came to our church last night. A larger-than-usual crowd for a chamber music event gathered and heard the story of jazz through narration and an excellent jazz group. Jeremy Hegg played the piano and provided the narration, with excellent musicians on the trumpet, saxophone, drums and upright bass. They played everything from ragtime to contemporary fusion. The audience was mixed, but a little older than average. The music was just right for the audience. There were a lot of people present who recognized and remembered the hits from the 1920's, 30's and 40's.

There was an image from Jeremy's narration that sticks with me this morning. He spoke of the marching band being an expression of European music. Before the formation of symphony orchestras in the United States, marching bands were a way to carry on the European tradition. They had order and structure, and the music carefully learned and then performed over and over again. He invited the audience to imagine a marching band coming down the street, turning the corner, and coming face to face with the rhythms and drumming of Africa. The resulting musical conversation is Dixieland swing. Jazz, the uniquely American art form, was born of a blending of diverse musical traditions. They are mixed together and blended, with each retaining its unique character, instrumentation and ideas until a new kind of music emerges. He gave a similar example when he was speaking of the Latin influences on Jazz in the twentieth century. "Add chili peppers to cool in such a way that you retain both the cool and the fire."

I think that jazz is a wonderful expression of the United States. Like jazz, our nation is not a finished product. It is a conversation in inclusive democracy. When our forebears wrote the phrase “all men are created equal,” they didn’t yet conceive that African slaves were included. When Abraham Lincoln paraphrased their actions in his speech at Gettysburg: “with liberty and justice for all,” the nation could not yet imagine granting the vote to women. We didn’t develop democracy all at once. The noblest ideas of human brains have taken over two centuries to begin to come to fruition. The experiments with democracy on the North American continent all still have a long way to go.

At the same time, what has been achieved is nothing short of miraculous. This nation endured a civil war and granted freedom to the slaves. And then it invested a century in repairing a failed reconstruction effort so that all could enjoy the civil rights that had at one time been reserved for a few. And this year we elected our first African-American president. One of the quotes that circulated during the last days of the campaign was , “Rosa sat so Martin could walk. Martin walked so Obama could run.”

The election of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States has sparked a lot of references to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Obama often referred to him as “the preacher,” in his speeches. There are a lot of famous quotes of Dr. Martin Luther King. He was a man whose words inspired millions.

One of the speeches that is not famous and is not often quoted, was made in 1964 at the opening of the Berlin Jazz Festival. Dr. King began his speech this way:

*“God has wrought many things out of oppression. He has endowed his creatures with the capacity to create—and from this capacity has flowed the sweet songs of sorrow and joy that have allowed man to cope with his environment and many different situations.*

*“Jazz speaks for life. The Blues tell the story of life's difficulties, and if you think for a moment, you will realize that they take the hardest realities of life and put them into music, only to come out with some new hope or sense of triumph.*

*“This is triumphant music.*

*“Modern jazz has continued in this tradition, singing the songs of a more complicated urban existence. When life itself offers no order and meaning, the musician creates an order and meaning from the sounds of the earth which flow through his instrument.*

*“It is no wonder that so much of the search for identity among American Negroes was championed by Jazz musicians. Long before the modern essayists and scholars wrote of racial identity as a problem for a multiracial world, musicians were returning to their*

*roots to affirm that which was stirring within their souls.*

*“Much of the power of our Freedom Movement in the United States has come from this music. It has strengthened us with its sweet rhythms when courage began to fail. It has calmed us with its rich harmonies when spirits were down.*

*“And now, Jazz is exported to the world. For in the particular struggle of the Negro in America there is something akin to the universal struggle of modern man. Everybody has the Blues. Everybody longs for meaning. Everybody needs to love and be loved. Everybody needs to clap hands and be happy. Everybody longs for faith.*

*“In music, especially this broad category called Jazz, there is a stepping stone towards all of these.”*

I believe that Dr. King was on to an important truth, not only about music, but about our life together. Our church stands solidly in the European classical tradition. Our pipe organ and choir are used to play music by European composers than any other style of music. Classical music has been the mode of expression of our faith for generations. And we will not give up this music which lifts our souls and stirs our spirits. But the time has come for our congregation to open our doors to more jazz. We were lucky to be the place of last night's performance. We need more jazz in our lives. If we are to truly to be a church where “no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey,” we will need to expand our musical styles. Dr. King was so right. “Everybody has the Blues. Everybody longs for meaning. Everybody needs to love and be loved. Everybody needs to clap hands and be happy. Everybody longs for faith.”

And we are in the business of faith. We are also in the business of hope and meaning and love and joy.

The heritage of our church includes the Dakota Odowan, the hymnal where European hymn singing tradition met the language and drums of Plains Indians. And we have heard the beat of the drum in our worship and in our lives. The door has been opened for a blending of musical styles and traditions that respects all of the roots, yet is about the process of creating something new.

This moment in the story of our nation and this moment in the story of our church is an invitation to make new music together. And part of that music will be jazz. The rhythm of our life together will be syncopated.

Together, now: “a one, two, a one, two, three four . . .”

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## November 11, 2008 – Veterans' Day



Various cultures have had different ways of honoring their warriors. Some tribal cultures celebrated warriors and raised the vast majority of male children into that role. There were special ceremonies and rites for honoring veterans as they returned from battle. Our nation and society have struggled with how to treat returning veterans.

Today is Veteran's Day. November 11, 1918 was the day of the cease fire marking the end of World War I. Although the official treaty wasn't signed until April of the following year, November 11 is widely recognized as the end of what was at the time the most destructive and far-reaching war the world had ever experienced. November 11 was observed as Armistice Day across the United States in 1919 and following years, but it wasn't until 1926 that congress passed a joint resolution observing Armistice day, declaring, "it is fitting that the recurring anniversary of this date should be commemorated with thanksgiving and prayer and exercises designed to perpetuate peace through good will and mutual understanding between nations."

A day of prayer for peace is indeed a way of honoring veterans, and thus it was observed in the United States. The act declaring November 11 a legal holiday, adopted in 1938 declared the day to be "a day to be dedicated to the cause of world peace."

World War II required the greatest mobilization of soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen in the nation's history. The involvement of U.S. Citizens in the war effort is unsurpassed in previous or subsequent times.

But it wasn't until after the Korean War, in 1954, that Armistice Day was changed to Veteran's Day and declared a day to honor American veterans of all wars. Quickly the day dedicated to peace was transformed into a day of honoring those who served in war. In some communities the celebrations became a kind of glorification of war instead of a day of dedication to peace.

Our nation has long had an uncomfortable relationship with its veterans. Following World War II, perhaps in part because of the large number of veterans returning from that war, congress passed the G.I. bill, which virtually guaranteed that every returning veteran could obtain health care, an education, and purchase a house at a reasonable rate of interest. The guarantees of health care, education and housing enabled an incredible burst in productivity and economic boom. Returning veterans from World War II were the builders of institutions and organizations. Service clubs, churches, fraternal organizations, chambers of commerce, and countless other organizations benefitted from the leadership and service of the veterans of what Studs Terkel dubbed "The Good War."

The support of the G.I. bill, however, was an anomaly. It stands unique in all of history as a moment when a society chose to support returning veterans. Although some levels of special support for veterans remain and congress has acknowledged the need of additional support for veterans returning from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, we have not since supported veterans in an organized and systematic way that we supported those who served in World War II.

Perhaps the low point in support for veterans is the way that veterans from the Vietnam war have fared in our society. The number of homeless veterans of that war is approximately the same as the number of U.S. Citizens who died in that war. The tragedy of the war has continued in the lives of veterans. The persistence of homelessness among Vietnam veterans has led to an inaccurate stereotype. Although there are nearly 58,000 such veterans, they are a small portion of the 8.2 million Vietnam era veterans reported by the U.S. Census bureau. Most Vietnam veterans lead productive, active lives and contribute to their communities in countless ways.

The bottom line is that war affects all of its participants for the rest of their lives. Any nation needs more than a single day to honor veterans. Rather this day should serve as a perpetual reminder that our commitment to veterans needs to extend for all of their lives.

So today is a day with many different agendas. It is a day to remember the cessation of the hostilities of World War I. It is a day to live, pray and work for peace. It is a day to honor and thank veterans for their service. And it is a day to re-commit ourselves to meaningful support of veterans as they return from service. It is a big agenda for a single day. That is why we recognize this day every year.

May our commitment be renewed this year as we observe the day.

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## November 12, 2008 – The News



Yesterday as snow continued to melt, I saw something orange in the snow windrow that the plow had left at the curb by our yard. I went to investigate. It was an orange plastic bag with two newspapers inside. They were thoroughly soaked and barely readable. Apparently our paper delivery person had not been able to deliver during the blizzard last Thursday and had sometime on Friday gotten out and delivered the papers by putting them in bags and throwing them onto lawns or driveways. Our driveway had been cleared of snow, so the bag should have been easy to spot, but I suspect that it either didn't land in the driveway or landed so close to the street that it was soon buried by the passing of the snowplow. I had shoveled the snowplow windrow away from the driveway end without discovering the paper. We have a special box for the paper and looked for the paper in the box, but didn't search for it in the yard.

I could get replacement papers from the newspaper company. But the truth is that we really didn't miss the paper. Even on blizzard days, when we had plenty of time to read, the newspaper is no longer the way we get our news. Most days, I have scanned a half dozen newspaper web sites as well as BBC world news and CNN headline news before I get to my newspaper. I often look at our local newspaper web site as well, which means that I have read the front page articles before looking at the newspaper.

I used to say that every pastor needs to get a newspaper for local news, local sports and obituaries so that the pastor is in touch with the community that is served. But we don't want to wait until the next morning to get the sports scores and increasingly the newspaper isn't the first place where we hear the news.

This reality has meant that the newspaper has already begun to shift resources and priorities. There are far fewer people engaged in producing the printed newspaper and increasingly the stories in the newspaper are generated for the Internet first and taken from the internet for publication in the paper. All of the articles on the front page of today's newspaper were posted on the Internet before midnight last night. Because readers can access the Internet and even respond to articles before the newspaper is printed, the news is less "new" when we get it. In addition because the Internet is increasingly a place where revenue is generated, less attention is focused on traditional reporting and more on gathering news from other Internet sources.

The result is that the printed newspaper is a lower priority for the news company for whom it used to be the only business. Spelling and grammar errors are tolerated. Editing is more a process of page layout and less a process of actually reading and changing words and sentences. And the decisions about what news to cover is made less by an editorial board and more by individual page designers.

Yesterday, I was delighted to see front page coverage of a local church that gathered supplies to help families stranded by the blizzard in Wanblee. There had been front page stories about those families each day since last Saturday. Local church members gathered supplies and delivered them to the local Red Cross for distribution. It warranted a photo and a front-page article. On Saturday our congregation will send forth a caravan of nine pickup trucks and several trailers to deliver between 7 and 8 cords of firewood to the Cheyenne River reservation and again in a couple of weeks, we'll be heading to Wanblee with a similar load of firewood. I doubt if it will even be covered by the newspaper. We think of it as a big effort and a significant event. The newspaper is looking for stories that fit into their pattern of reporting. The only way we might get coverage is if we fit into some existing news theme. If the newspaper were covering fuel shortages on the reservation or tree thinning in the black hills we might be seen as having a connection to their existing story line. A church sending relief supplies to Wanblee fit into the existing story pattern, so they got coverage.

I know this sounds like a complaint. But I don't mean it that way. It is simply the case that the newspaper business is going through a radical change. Fewer and fewer households receive newspapers and the companies that survive beyond the middle of this century will be ones whose focus is not exclusively on print on paper. Advertising revenue will also shift from print to electronic technologies. And those who wish to get the news and those who have newsworthy stories to report will increasingly turn to other ways of obtaining and communicating the news.

And it is not only newspapers. National Public Radio yesterday announced that it has hired Vivian Schiller as its new CEO. Schiller was most recently the head of the Internet arm of the New York Times. It is clear that the radio is increasingly moving toward digital technologies. Conventional radio, where we turn on the machine and listen to

what is being broadcast at the moment is beginning to fade. Increasingly people are downloading media files and listening on their own schedule. I know that I listen to many of my favorite radio programs that way.

The world is changing and how we obtain our news is changing as well. I guess I'm swept up in the change with all of the rest. I begin my day by writing this blog. I justify it in my own mind because it is a process of writing. I say to myself that I am writing an essay each morning. Which is true. But I am not writing a book, nor will these words ever see much print on paper. I do print my blog each morning for my mother to read, so at least one copy is printed each day, but it is mostly an Internet venture.

So the soggy newspapers went into the garbage without any sense of loss. The world has moved on and I have little interest in seeing what was printed last week during a blizzard. I might remember to look more closely for the paper next time we get harsh weather, but unless I lose my Internet service I'll probably have a rough sense of the news.

I am not, however, quite ready to cancel my newspaper subscription. I still check out the comics every day. And I like the feel of paper in my hands and reading words from paper over my morning coffee. There is less and less to read and it doesn't take as long as it once did, but I still find the newspaper worth the money. We know, however, that we are in the minority. The majority of the houses on our street no longer have newspaper boxes. When we travel, we find that the people we meet rarely receive a daily newspaper. Fewer and fewer people are turning to newspapers as news sources. And fewer and fewer newspapers are being printed.

Even as I embrace the new, I can miss the past. And as we live through the change, I'm learning to clutter my computer "desktop" with temporary files just like I clutter my physical desk with newspaper clippings, articles, books and other papers. Some things never change.

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## November 13, 2008 – A Mess of Wires



Our church has been engaged in a process of expanding our pipe organ for several years. It took about three years to raise the money and the construction has been going on for a couple of years. Much of the construction is behind the scenes. First new pipes had to be made, then the chamber had to be prepared for the new pipe work. A new console is being crafted.

One of the big parts of the process is a digital conversion. Our pipe organ was originally manufactured in 1960 with what was then state of the art technology. That meant that each pipe had an electronic switch that opened and closed a valve allowing air to enter the pipe according to the input from the organist at the console. Each switch had wires connecting it to the console. This meant that there were thousands of tiny wires that were put together into cables and the cables came together into a large “umbilical” that was fed through a conduit under the floor to the console. The digital conversion of our organ means that every switch at every pipe is being replaced with an advanced digital control. These controls are connected by tiny wires to printed circuit boards which are in turn connected to the console by a fiber optic cable.

The process of conversion of the organ meant that new circuit boards and wiring were installed, but not yet connected while the old wires were still used to control the organ. When everything is ready, there is a process of taking out all of the old wires, connecting the new ones, powering up and testing the organ with all new wires and controls. Since the organ has thousands of pipes and therefore thousands of switches, there are a lot of connections that need to be made.

This week is the week for the digital conversion. On Monday, after we used our organ for worship on Sunday, the process of disconnecting the old console began. Yesterday a temporary digital console arrived and the connections are being made. There is some excitement with the arrival of the new console, even though it is not our permanent console. This loaner console is required because some of the parts from our old console, such as the pedal board, will be re-used in the new one.

Even though I thought I understood the process well, I am surprised at the piles of old wires that are coming out of the organ. It is a bit unsettling to see huge messes of old wires that have been removed. Thousands and thousands of tiny multi-colored wires, like strands of thread, are combined into black cables. The cables feed to larger and larger cables. And all of that is being removed from the heart of the organ. The new cables are much much smaller and are all neatly connected to green circuit boards that are mounted within the organ chamber. The whole thing is so complex that I can't help but have my doubts about how it will ever work again. I trust the organ builders and I know that we will have a playable organ sometime on Saturday night, but it still seems almost impossibly complex.

But it is a good analogy for our church. Because a church is all about connections. We need to have threads of relationship between each member of our congregation. Some of those threads are family relationships, others are friendships, others grow out of shared mission and ministry, others come from serving on a committee or singing in the choir or participating in one of the small groups within the church. When there is a need or a problem, news is communicated in ways that seem very informal, but somehow the message gets through. The web of relationships is complex and sometimes messy.

As the church grows and changes, new people come into the mix. Others leave because they have moved to a new community or have found a home in another congregation or because they have died. Sometimes we do not know why some people have faded from participation. As new people come and others go, there is a need for new channels of communication.

Sometimes we need to rework the entire system, or at least parts of it, in order to make sure that everyone stays connected.

Unlike the organ, we can't shut down the church for a period of time to make the changes we need. All of our changes are made "live," with the business of the church on-going and the complex and wonderful lives of our members continuing. Even if we slow down for a vacation or a snow day, the lives of our people are going on. New illnesses are diagnosed. new relationships are formed. Children grow up and head to college. New people move into the community. Working folks retire. There are always significant changes to our relationships taking place. So we are always maintaining old systems of staying connected at the same time that we are initiating new ways of communicating.

After this week, there will be no old cables in our organ. The old cables will be recycled for the metal in them and the new wires will be in place. There will be several loads of old wiring to be removed from the building.

Human relationships don't work that way. We don't get to rip out the old relationships and recycle them. We have to strengthen them as we keep the old memories, old hurts, and old joys. Life is a process of adding experiences. We never subtract the old ones. The past becomes the foundation of our future.

Come to think of it, like all analogies, the organ is a very imperfect symbol for our human relationships. About the only similarities is that there is a complex web of relationships and that it can sometimes get pretty messy.

Still it feels exciting to see the mess of old wires leaving our building. And it is even more exciting to see the neat micro cables and fiber optics that are replacing them. And I'm confident that sometime tomorrow afternoon we will begin to hear sounds from our organ again. It may take a while to get the bugs worked out and all of the new connections working properly, but when we do get it going it will be way more reliable and easier to repair than the old system. We are making progress.

And we are making progress with our relationships and new ways of communicating within the church as well.

One thing that is distinctive about our organ project is that we started with an organ that was a wonderful instrument. We have kept every pipe of the old organ. We are adding new sounds and new technology, but every note that the old organ could play can be reproduced on the new one.

Our church is the same. Even though we are going through a time of transition, the core of our message continues. The gospel is the same as the circumstances in which we preach it change. The power of love to transform lives remains. The good news that death is not the end continues. The core of the church is human connections and not the trappings of buildings and technologies and structures and constitutions and other elements we introduce.

When they get the new console hooked up and all of the digital connections working, I'll find a moment to sit at the old console and play a one-line melody on some of the old pipes, just to make sure that the old sound is still in the instrument. I think I'll play "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

In the messiness of our lives and a world of changes some things remain the same.

## November 14, 2008 – Many Moons



There are moments, often when I am outdoors, when I have a sense of the timeless qualities of this land. Yesterday, the moon was rising as I went to my pickup to head for home. I walked over to the edge of the hill to watch as it rose through layers of clouds on the horizon. The wind was blowing at a pretty good clip and the grasses and trees were rustling. The birds were calm and hunkered down for evening. I had no illusions about our setting in history. I was looking out over the old St. John's hospital and the feed mill and the Alex Johnson sign. The lights at the air base were turned on. The city was beginning to twinkle with lights coming on as I looked down on it.

But the moon has a timeless quality. Although we know that humans have traveled to it and even walked on its surface, it is unchanged from the way it appeared to the ancients. It is not hard, sitting on the edge of the hill, to imagine that a couple of centuries ago a young Lakota man might have found the edge of this hill and wandered to it to watch the moonrise. It is good to take a few minutes to clear one's head in the midst of busy times.

For some reason, I was reflecting on the passing of time as I watched the moonrise last night. We have now lived in Rapid City for many moons. I have watched not only the cycles of the phases of the moon but also the cycles of the year. And I have watched all of them over and over again. I have lived in this place longer than any other place of my adult life and in just a few years I will have lived here longer than any other place. Which isn't to say much - my people have been wanderers for many generations. Parts of my mother's family seem to have settled on the homestead land in Montana, but I am a

descendant of one of the ones who moved away. My father's people haven't stayed in the same place for more than two generations since leaving the old country.

But this is good country for wanderers. Although Rapid City has been around for 130 years, the story of this place has been defined more by the people who have passed through than those who have remained. This is not to say that there aren't some important historic families who have come to make this place their home. There are. Families who have lived here for five and six generations have contributed deeply to our community and continue to provide leadership and stability to our place.

But most of the folks are here for a while and then move on. I don't know exactly when one makes the transition from newcomer to native, but if we stay here for the rest of our lives, I don't think we would be counted as natives yet. This land and its people make it a good resting place for wanderers. And over the years we have learned to say "hello" and "goodbye" many times.

In a month, our congregation will have been worshipping in our current home on the hill for fifty years. After seventy years of being a downtown church, the congregation needed more space and found a site close to the city's center where there would be room to grow. The hilltop overlooks the city and affords us views of what is going on below. On the fourth of July the neighbors gather on our hill to watch the fireworks. There have been several dramatic fires in the downtown area which were safely viewed from our hill. And some days it is good just to go outside and watch the sun or moon rise over the community.

The world is different now than it was when our church was founded. Our area was in the territory of active fighting between the Lakota and the U.S. Calvary when our congregation was first organized. The final armed battle, which turned out to be a massacre, really, took place in December of 1890, 12 years after the founding of our congregation, just over 100 miles off to the southeast.

But the world was different when I first came to serve this congregation a little over 13 years ago. I have a colleague who is about the same age I was when I came to Rapid City and now I think of him as a young pastor. At the time I thought of myself as seasoned and experienced, having served two previous calls to congregations in different settings of differing sizes. But the years quickly pass, my hair has turned grey and I am often seen as one of the older clergy in the area. Our children have grown up and moved out of our home and our lives have entered a new phase. We have been here for many moons.

In the ways of the elders of the Lakota people there is an important transition somewhere between 12 and 13 years. When as many winters have passed as the number of moons in the year an infant is ready to become an adult. When a warrior has

fought for as many winters as the number of moons in the year he may have earned the right to speak in the inner circle of elders.

So I stood out on the hillside last night, at the beginning of my fourteenth winter in this place and thought about the passage of time. We have seen some very good times in these years. We have begun some important ministries. We have watched our congregation become a church focused on mission and outreach. We have conducted the funerals of some truly remarkable people and baptised more than a few babies. We have made music together and we have listened to the silence together.

But there is still much work to be done. A few steps from my position on the hillside and a turn away from the rising moon revealed trailers of firewood awaiting delivery this weekend. The winter may be harsh and there are many in need of fuel to remain warm through the cold times. We need to be about the business of forming a budget for the year to come in the midst of challenging economic times. We know the needs of our neighbors will increase and the resources we have to bring to solving the problems of our community are limited. There are services to plan and people to visit and work to be done.

But it is good to pause, from time to time, and offer God thanks for the good years we have known and the winters we have shared together. It has been many moons since we came to this place. And it will be many more before our work here is done. Thanks be to God that we do not have to do it all alone.

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## November 15, 2008 – Surviving



I've been out in a few blizzards, but never felt that my life was really in danger. I've always had access to warm clothing and a way of finding shelter. When the weather gets really nasty, I am usually able to stay put and wait out the storm in a warm and comfortable place. So I can't really imagine what it would be like to be caught outside without proper clothing in the middle of a blizzard. But I know that people die in storms. It happens from time to time in our community.

Last Friday, as we were beginning to dig out from the previous day's blizzard, while most of the town was still shut down, passersby found the body of Delores Mesteth. She had huddled under the 6th street bridge where she died of hypothermia. She was not wearing a coat. What she was doing outside in the blizzard the day or night before remains a mystery. She was only 23 years old. Delores had had a rough life and there had been a time when she was homeless and living on the streets and in the shelter. A coalition of Rapid City agencies and services had teamed together to provide services to help her turn her life around. The Cornerstone Rescue Mission, Behavior Management Systems and Black Hills Workshop and Training Center had provided services and helped her to obtain work, secure an apartment and build a life.

There were plenty of problems that were unsolved. But she seemed to have gone through the worst of her trials and was on a path that was leading toward a meaningful life and productive participation in the community. She was a survivor in many ways. But she didn't survive the blizzard.

She had been away from her apartment for several days. In fact she had been reported to authorities as missing on the Monday before she died. It wasn't the first time that she had gone out without telling anyone where she was going. It wasn't the first time she had been out of touch for several days. People worried about her, but she made her own decisions and was fiercely independent.

I never met Delores. I know her only through the reports in the newspaper. But I know that the agencies that provided service to Delores often face tough decisions with the people they serve. An agency can't tell a person what to do or where to go. Agencies have to be careful in providing services so that they do not deprive those served of basic human rights such as control over their schedule and the ability to make their own personal decisions. Persons who work in helping agencies often have to allow their clients to make decisions that prove later to be mistaken. It is a delicate balance to help someone without taking control of that person's life.

Our community has suffered another tragedy. It is one that many of our citizens don't fully realize. There are lots of citizens in our community who don't become well known by the majority of our citizens. They live mostly quiet lives that are very different from the lives of most of us. Most of us cannot imagine having to spend the night at the shelter or sleeping under a bridge or having nowhere to go. Most of us cannot imagine the power of addiction. Most of us cannot understand the grip of chronic mental illness.

And while there are many in our community who do their best to help in whatever way they can, there are those who fail to have the services they need when they need them. Sometime on last Thursday or early Friday morning Delores slipped between the cracks. There was no one there to rescue her when she made the decision to go outside without proper clothing. There was no one there to rush her indoors and help her get warm.

She had survived some tough times. But she didn't survive this blizzard.

She was buried in Kyle. There will be a memorial service at the workshop on Monday. We'll pick up the pieces and get on with our lives. She hadn't made a huge circle of friends who mourn her death. Most of the city, who didn't know her, will soon forget her. She will become a statistic. The victim of the first blizzard of the winter of 2008-09.

Life goes on. Most of us will survive for another day, another blizzard, another year.

But each of us has suffered a tiny loss in this tragedy. Our community has failed to help one of its members to survive. Our network of services has gaps and we know that we do not have the ability to keep everyone safe all of the time.

I don't even know if there is a lesson to be learned from this tragedy. The agencies involved will look at their procedures and will likely determine that there really wasn't

much they could have done differently. Those who knew Delores will grieve for a while and sometimes ask the difficult “what if?” questions. These are questions that do not have answers.

And life will go on.

For Delores the pain and suffering and struggle are over. And she has entered into the peace that only God can offer. For the rest of us perhaps we will tell the story to remind others of the dangers of the weather. Perhaps we will sometime remember her when we are conducting a clothing drive or volunteering at the mission. And even when we cannot understand the good that comes out of this event, God does not cease to care. “We know that in all things God works for good for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

Perhaps it is a good think to keep her story in a corner of my mind. I may find occasion to tell it some day. And hopefully that story can touch someone and provide inspiration for change and growth.

It’s work thinking about.

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## November 16, 2008 – A Good Day's Work



We were treated to a spectacular sunset last night. It was a real gift after several minutes of driving directly into the sun. We were on our way home from delivering firewood to Eagle Butte, on the Cheyenne River reservation. Rev. Norman Bluecoat is our partner there and distributes the firewood to heat churches and homes in the area. Our caravan of vehicles included nine pickup trucks and three trailers. If my count is right nineteen people participated in the delivery yesterday. We delivered and stacked just over 11 cords of firewood.

When we go to a more distant location, like Eagle Butte, most of the day is driving. It is very nearly 200 miles from the church to the place we stack the firewood. We departed the church at 8 a.m. and by the time we arrived, unloaded and stacked the wood we were ready for lunch. There was fried chicken and lots of other goodies. We were assisted in unloading and stacking by a team of boys that Austin and Louie had recruited.

It was nearly 6 p.m. when we got back to the church, unhooked the trailers and headed for home. All in all, it was a very good day.

When we are thinking about the blessings of this life, we are quick to think of life and health and shelter and warmth. We often mention adequate food and family and church. Sometimes we remember some of the material luxuries that we enjoy. But one of the blessings of this life that gets overlooked from time to time is the blessing of work.

Good, meaningful work is indeed a blessing of incalculable worth. Having something in which to invest one's time, feeling the power and ability of the human brain and body to accomplish tasks - these are indeed blessings. Too often we become aware of the abilities of our minds and bodies only when we experience some limitation in our abilities. When bending and lifting causes pain, when remembering is a real strain, when balance is not as reliable - then we remember all of the things we once were able to do and become aware of the loss that has occurred.

So it was a real treat to gather with friends yesterday and just move firewood from one place to another. We left the hills, where there is an abundance of trees - where trees need to be cut to clear the forests to make them safer in the event of fires - where people need to get rid of trees that have become diseased or that need to be removed to allow for a change in landscape plans. And we traveled out onto the prairies where there are not very many trees - where fuel is scarce and winters are harsh - where a supply of firewood can make the difference between suffering and surviving. And we used our arms and legs to carry the firewood from trucks and trailers and stack it so that it can be easily distributed to those who need it.

Being the one inside the truck or trailer is the hardest job. It involves bending and lifting and turning around over and over again. The repetition of the motion can make one a little bit stiff. But there are plenty of workers so we could switch jobs often and no one ended up feeling too stiff or sore. It is amazing how smoothly the group worked together. There was no need for a boss or supervisor, there was little need for instruction. There was just a job to be done and a group of willing workers. And the job was finished without any hassle.

This morning we gather for a different activity. We gather to worship God and to give thanks for a successful stewardship drive and the resources to plan for another year of mission and ministry together. We gather to hear the words of our Conference Minister and to be inspired for the tasks of the coming week. We gather for the fellowship of the community of Christ in this time and place. We'll probably be a bit cleaned up and dressed up compared to yesterday. But the church at work is every bit as much the church as the church at worship. And working in service of others is as much a way of honoring God as sitting in pews and listening to music in the light streaming in through stained glass windows.

Our worship will be a little bit better and our fellowship a little bit tighter because we were given the gift of work yesterday. So my day begins with a prayer of thanksgiving for yesterday - a prayer of thanksgiving for a good day's work.

**November 17, 2008 – Paha Mato**



Just off the northeastern corner of the Black Hills is a striking geological feature, known locally as Bear Butte. Separated from the main body of the Black Hills by a few miles the peak rises 1235 feet above the ground. It is made mostly of igneous rock, the result of an uplifting of magma beneath the surface of the earth. It may have once been a volcano, but the eons of erosion have made it impossible to see any evidence whether or not the magma breached the surface.

If you get the right angle, you can see where the name came from. It looks a bit like a sleeping bear, with its head to the northeast. The feature has been used for at least 10,000 years as a religious site, a place to pray and fast and seek spiritual messages and gifts. At least sixty different Native American tribes have at one time or another used the site as a sacred gathering place.

The feature is easily identified, and that made it an ideal gathering place for nomadic tribes. It was an easily described meeting point. In 1857 it was the site of a gathering of many different Indian nations to discuss the advance of white settlers into the Black Hills. The three great Lakota leaders, Red Cloud, Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull all visited Bear Butte. Its Lakota name, Paha Mato, reveals a link in traditional stories between Bear Butte and Mato Tipi, also known as Devils Tower, off to the west. The stories say that the butte is the great bear that scraped the sides of the tower as it rose up to protect a young girl from that bear.

The butte and some of the surrounding land is preserved as a state park, but there is on-going controversy about some of the uses of private land that are close to the site. Some believe that the biker bars and other venues for the annual Sturgis motorcycle rally impinge on the sacred nature of the site. Others think that restricting the use of private property impinges on the rights of landowners. As the biker bars keep getting bigger and bigger, it is unlikely that this controversy will go away quickly. It is not too different from the sense of outrage that Cheyenne and Lakota warriors felt at the choice of the location of Fort Mead, the one time calvary outpost, now Veterans Administration hospital, that is easily visible from the butte.

It remains, for those of us who live in the region, an easily identified landmark, something that signals that we are close to home. A slightly steep, but easily-hiked trail winds its way to the summit. It is a little less than two miles from the parking lot to the top of the hill and the view from the top is well worth the walk. June is the month with the most religious activity at the site and there are usually prayer cloths and tobacco ties along the trail.

Issues of sacred places has been an ongoing conversation throughout the history of Christianity. Like the other great religions that share the scriptures that we refer to as the old testament, we acknowledge that one God reigns over all of the universe. This means that conversation and contact with God is not reserved to any place, but is available in every place. We sometimes make the distinction that our God is the God of history not of any particular place.

And yet there are some places that have come to have great meaning associated with them. Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus, and many different places in Israel, including the Garden of Gethsemane and Golgotha have special meanings to Christians. The places where Jesus walked and taught seem to us to be significant. In the wider region, sites in Greece, Turkey, Italy and other nations that were visited by Paul remain special places for Christians. For most of us, the churches where we worship are very special places, filled with the memories of baptisms and weddings and funerals, made holy by the generosity and sacrifice of so many people that enabled the church to grow and flourish in this particular place. The parlor of our current church building is adorned with pictures of each of the other buildings that our congregation has occupied throughout its history. It would not be fully true to say that place has no meaning to Christians. We know the sense and meaning of a sacred place despite our affirmation that God is present in every place.

Furthermore, we are able to respect the religions of others. Even though smudging, inipi, tobacco ties, medicine bundles and other items and practices are not a part of our traditions and practices, we acknowledge that they carry deep meaning for those who have inherited Lakota spiritual traditions. And our experience with Christians whose identity is Dakota or Lakota has taught us that one can be faithful to both the spiritual traditions of native religious practice and the faith of Jesus Christ.

Bear Butte has come to hold many meanings for many different people. As such, its preservation as a state park makes sense. The park provides space and protection for traditional religious ceremony without inhibiting access for recreational hikers and others who just want to see the view from the top. It seems that both uses can be preserved. The grazing buffalo, reservoir and campground add to the richness of the park. Some tracts of land are best when held in common ownership rather than being the exclusive possession of individuals. Bear Butte is a place that it makes sense for all of us to own together and for access to the property to be open to all, including visitors from around the world.

Were I to find myself far away from this place and never able to again climb Bear Butte, I would still be able to enter into meaningful prayer with God. I would still be able to take my deepest joys and concerns in prayer and know that my prayers are heard and understood. But since I do live in this place, Bear Butte is a good place for an occasional hike and time of quiet contemplation. And I say a little prayer each time I pass the mountain, knowing that my prayer joins with the prayers of many others who with many different languages and many different cultural traditions have exclaimed, "Surely God is in this place! Surely this is holy ground!"

The Butte was here long before we arrived. It will be here long after we have ended our life on this earth. Our prayers go to God who knows the time before the Butte arose and the time after it will be fully eroded into the landscape. God is even bigger than the features of our geology and geography. Realizing that can make us feel small and insignificant. On the other hand, our prayers go to God who listens and responds to every prayer. Realizing that can make us feel loved and treasured. We are both.

May our prayers never cease.

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**November 18, 2008 – Vocation**



A survey of primary care doctors recently released by the Physician's Foundation revealed that nearly half of the primary care physicians in the United States would consider getting out of medicine within the next three years if they had an alternative. The Foundation goes on to interpret this number as an alarm for the U.S. There is already a shortage of primary care doctors. As more and more doctors leave the practice of medicine, the shortage of doctors is becoming a crisis. It is difficult for medicare and medicaid patients to find physicians that are willing to treat them. Even patients with insurance are having problems finding primary care doctors. And those who do have a doctor have an almost even chance of being treated by someone who is not happy in his or her job. The survey reports many different reasons for doctors wanting to leave the practice of medicine. Chief among the reasons is frustration with insurance, billing and other forms of paper work.

It is not just physicians. I speak to lawyers who are unhappy in their practices and who discourage their children from pursuing careers in law. I know teachers who are working diligently to figure out some way to get out of teaching. And I have plenty of ministerial colleagues who are constantly tired, frustrated, and unhappy in their work.

Are we simply a nation of malcontents who would not be happy in any profession? Are we chronically unhappy people who have lost our ability to find job satisfaction and joy? Do we belong to a generation of whiners who simply do not want to work?

I think that for many people my age, there is a loss of purpose in their lives. They cannot find meaning in their everyday activities because their jobs are not connected to their deepest faith. To put it in religious language, they do not have a sense of calling about the work that they do. It is risky to use “we-they” language, but when it comes to deep seated discontent, I am an outsider. Sure there are frustrations with my job. And there are days when I wonder if I am accomplishing anything at all. But I can’t imagine myself in any other calling. And I do not share the physician’s sense of trying to figure out how to get out of my job. So I am an outsider to the deepest dissatisfaction with work that is characteristic of many of my age cohort.

I think that our age needs to re-discover vocation. Vocation comes from the Latin *vocare*, meaning “to call.” In the Vulgate, the Latin Bible, the word is not used in relationship to individual jobs or professions, but rather as the call of God to all people to come to salvation. All humans are called to come into relationship with God. Prior to the sixteenth century the term was used in reference to groups of people more often than it was used in regards to individuals. It was the great reformer Martin Luther who used the term vocation in reference to an individual life’s work.

Along with contemporary protestantism, the concept of vocation grew. It came to refer to the fullness of one’s life and how time and energy is invested. The concept is simple: each person is endowed with certain gifts, talents and abilities. These are a gift of God that is given with a purpose. Each person also has a specific calling in life - a vocation. The vocation is broader than the choice of career, but refers to the whole of a person’s life including marriage and family, church and civic commitments as well as work.

Calvin built upon Luther’s concept of vocation. In the *Institutes of Christian Religion* he defined the role of the Christian and vocation, noting that God has two callings for each Christian: a general calling to serve God and a more specific calling to engage in a particular form of work.

At the same time as the concept of the protestant work ethic was being developed, the Roman Catholic Church focused more specifically on the use of vocation to refer to a direct call of God to the religious life. People who felt called to enter a convent or monastery and those who were specifically called to commit all of their lives to religious work were said to have a vocation.

Both concepts take seriously a relationship with God. What one does with one’s life is not merely a matter of personal satisfaction, accumulation of wealth, or pleasure. Rather a person is seen to belong to God and the output of a lifetime is seen as participating in God’s purpose for this world. Serving others becomes a high priority in this understanding and financial remuneration becomes secondary. Life is not just about what I accomplish, what I earn, and how much satisfaction I find. Life is about participating in something that is larger than the individual and serving God by serving others.

When one discovers vocation, financial motivation becomes secondary.

The concept of Christian vocation has taken a back seat for more than a generation. In its place have come aptitude tests, highly selective educational institutions with competitive admissions processes, personal job satisfaction ratings and incredibly wide ranges of income within the same institutions. There is some attention to the concept of vocation in the emerging church movement, but it is too early to tell what role vocation will play in the future of the church.

About eight years ago, the educator Parker Palmer explored the concept of vocation in his book, *Let Your Life Speak*. It continues to be an inspiration to teachers and to others who need to rediscover their sense of calling midway through their careers. It seems that our entire society could use a re-discovery of vocation and calling.

The question, "What do I want to do with my life?" needs to be replaced with the question, "What does God want me to do with my life?" The process of seeking answers needs to be far more contemplative and prayerful than looking at a list of jobs and average pay scales.

It is possible that some people who are currently practicing medicine (or law, or teaching, or the pastoral ministry or another profession) are being called to change their life's work. It is likely that there are more individuals who are being called into the practice of these professions. There are those who believe that the market will sort out this confusion. A shortage of physicians produces higher compensation and higher compensation attracts more physicians. And perhaps the marketplace plays a role in the decisions of many. But I believe that God will provide the people that our society needs to provide care for all if we decide as a society that providing care for all is a priority.

Along the way i hope that we re-discover the concept of vocation and re-consider what God is calling us to do and be as a people as well as individuals.

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## November 19, 2008 – Earthquake



Map from United States Geological Service National Earthquake Information Center.

People in San Jose, Costa Rica were awakened by the shaking of an earthquake just past midnight. The quake was felt in San Jose as a short tremor followed by one that lasted almost a full minute. Several aftershocks were also felt. The epicenter of the quake was about 135 miles away from the city, in the Pacific Ocean just off of the Costa Rica-Panama border. The Observatorio Vulcanológico y Sismológico de Costa Rica reported that the quake could be felt all over the country. So far there are no reports of injuries from the quake which was measured as a 6.2 magnitude quake. A similar quake in a similar location, in December of 2003, resulted in 2 deaths and damage to at least 70 homes.

Costa Rica residents are used to earthquakes. They are common in the tiny country that sits near the connection of the North and South American continents. Most of our partners in mission there have earthquake stories. One of our favorite stories is about an earthquake that struck during a party at the International Peace Center. Everyone crawled beneath the tables for protection. As they waited for the quake to subside and began to realize that there were no injuries, the gathered group discovered that only one person, Mae Louise, had taken her cake with her and was enjoying it as she sat beneath the table.

Earthquakes can cause considerable damage and the damage is usually worse in areas where temporary shelters have been set up on hillsides. If it is muddy, the mud will slide, taking shacks along with it. Even if it is not particularly muddy, the poorly-

constructed buildings are more prone to collapse than ones built of concrete block or other more permanent materials.

The news of the earthquake makes us think of all of our friends and mission partners in Costa Rica. Chances are that today will be life as usual for them. They probably woke up enough to know that there was an earthquake, determined that their homes were secure, and went back to sleep. Earthquakes are often not front-page news in Costa Rica. And they have a lot of pressing business to which to attend. There are hungry children to be fed, children to get ready for school, programs to plan, and a lot of other jobs that need attention at the church. Wednesday evenings usually see programs at the church and there are plenty of activities that will demand the attention of Pastor Dorotea and other church leaders. A little earthquake probably doesn't have much more effect than providing an interesting topic of conversation over morning coffee.

Those of us in the United States will probably be checking our Internet news sources a little more often through the day to see if there is more information. We are used to news coming slowly from Costa Rica and the southern part of the country nearest the earthquake epicenter is rural and isolate and it would take time for news of any injuries and damage to make their way to San Jose.

To those of us who visit Costa Rica only occasionally, life there, especially for the folks in the neighborhood surrounding our sister church seems a bit tenuous. There are all kinds of things that can go wrong. Heavy rains, common from July through November, can result in all kinds of problems for the makeshift homes that have been put together in the gully. The children often do not get to school as regularly as they should and once at school the bureaucratic jumble, common in Costa Rica, can result in teachers being in the wrong place, overcrowded classrooms, lunch service being disrupted, and a hundred different challenges to effective learning. A shortage of jobs means that children and adults are often hungry. The general lack of security makes it impossible for homes to be left unoccupied, so adults are often unable to leave home for regular employment. The lack of childcare combines with the fact that the majority of households are headed by a single mother means that survival is a challenge for many of the families who live close to the church.

Pastor Doratea knows the stories of hundreds of tragedies and problems and sometimes the weight of all of the problems is overwhelming to her. It is hard for her to maintain professional collegial relationships as other pastors are located far from her corner of the city, and there is little time for pastors to gather to share the joys and concerns of their calling.

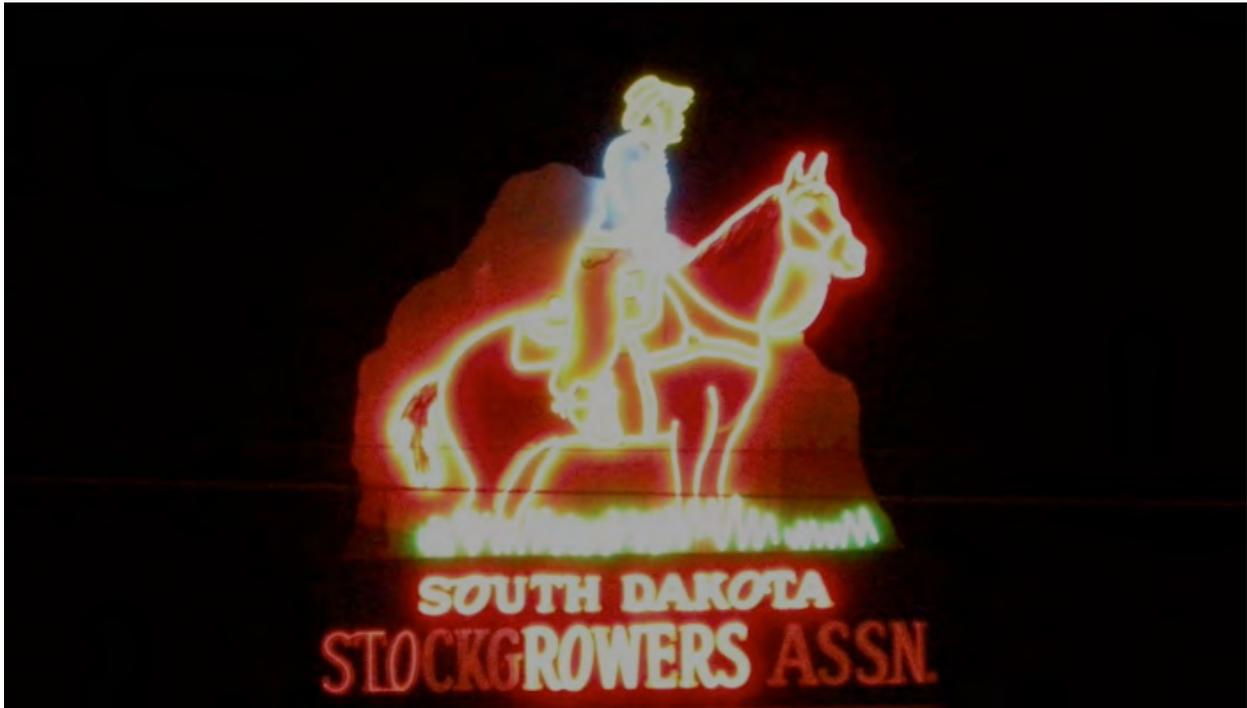
We, who watch from a distance and who hold the people of Community Christian Church of Los Guido in our prayers, say a special prayer for Costa Rica this morning. We pray for safety for all of the people. And we say a special prayer for Pastor Dorotea as she begins her day. She and I are both early birds, we often rise at about the same

time of day. This time of the year, Costa Rica is one hour ahead of us, so she's probably already up and getting started on her day. May she feel the power and presence of the Holy Spirit as she goes through her day. May she have a moment to pause and remember all of the people who hold her and the congregation she serves in our thoughts and prayers. May the link that connects us be stronger than the distances that divide us.

And may all of us be reminded of our connections with the people of God throughout the world and our call to serve those who have need wherever they may be.

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November 20, 2008 - South Dakota Rowers



I was driving down St. Joseph street, just past the Alex Johnson Hotel last night when I saw the sign. "South Dakota Rowers" it proclaimed. It seemed like it might be an organization worth checking out. I like boats and paddling, and I've even been known to row from time to time and I'm from South Dakota. The sign had a picture of a cowboy. I've been known to wear a cowboy hat from time to time. In fact I was wearing one when I noticed the sign. This might be just the organization for me. I hadn't known until last night that there was a group called "South Dakota Rowers."

As you can see from the photograph, I was looking at the South Dakota Stockgrowers Association sign. Not all of the letters were lighting up last night. The sign is a local icon and has been a part of the downtown for a long time. The South Dakota Stockgrowers Association has been around since 1880.

It was such a comical moment in my mind that I stopped and took a couple of pictures of the sign.

That sign got me to thinking, however. I wear a cowboy hat, but I'm not now, nor have I ever been a cowboy. The closest I ever came was working a few brandings on local ranches when I was growing up and summers spent on my cousin's place in the years that he was making the conversion from a ranch that was almost entirely dryland wheat to the mixed cattle and crops ranch that he operates today. I grew up around real cowboys and I have some pretty positive feelings about the folk who produce our food, but a cowboy I am not.

I've gone through several phases of wearing cowboy garb in my life. When I was a kid, we used to get a new pair of jeans and a new cowboy shirt for rodeo weekend each year. Our town always had a parade for the rodeo and promoted the event as "The Biggest One-Day Show in the West." Some years I had boots and a straw hat to go with the outfit.

By the time I went to college, I wasn't interested in many things cowboy. In some ways I tried to distance myself from the ranchers in my home county with their conservative politics and sometimes anti-education attitudes. But when I graduated from college and got ready to head for Chicago for graduate school, I bought a new pair of cowboy boots. Money was tight in those days and it was a purchase about which I had thought quite a bit. Somehow, when I arrived in Chicago, I needed to have some symbol of the simple fact that I wasn't from Chicago. I was from Montana. Cowboy boots seemed to fit the bill.

A few years ago I got burned on my face and the skin doctor who provided care to me in my recovery made the comment that I should get used to wearing a hat every time I go outside for the rest of my life. He said, "whatever resistance to skin cancer that you once had, you've pretty much used it all up." So, I've tried to be good about wearing a hat wherever I go. And I've got quite a collection of hats.

I have a fedora which I bought for when I'm dressed up. I thought that it made me look a little distinguished. With my beard, it makes me look like some kind of stereotype of a rabbi. I have a couple of canvas hats that are great for boating, but not quite the style to wear when heading for a business meeting. I have a wonderful leather hat that I picked up in Australia that I used to wear for all occasions, but I've worn it for a few too many work days for it to look like something I should wear when I have on a suit and a tie. About a year ago, I picked up a black cowboy hat on a whim. It fits really well. Even in the wind, it is a good hat for me. And, being a short guy, the extra height of the hat doesn't hurt anything.

But I know that owning the hat doesn't make me a cowboy. In fact, when people comment on the hat, I often respond, "It's a lot cheaper than a horse." When I was a kid, I'm sure that I put on my cowboy clothes and imagined myself to be a cowboy. Maybe someday I'd be a guy who could ride a horse and throw a rope and garner attention and cheers at the rodeo. But it has been a long time since I spent much of my imagination or energy thinking about things that I am not. I like being a pastor.

On the other hand, I don't want to get too separated from the real people that I serve. The church is not a hierarchical organization with the clergy at the top and the people at the bottom. Our corner of the Christian Church has always recognized that all Christians are ministers and that a pastor needs to be a member of a local congregation. We belong together and there should be no special status or privilege associated with

ordination other than the role of servant. I have been called to serve the members of this congregation, not preside over them.

Much of liturgical clothing is worn to remind the pastor of his or her role in the community. A robe is worn over the clothing to remind the pastor that it is not clothing that makes one a pastor. There can be little display of fashion when the clothes are covered up and not on display. A stole is worn around the neck as a reminder of the towel that Jesus wrapped around himself when he washed the feet of the disciples. We are called to serve.

So maybe a cowboy hat is a good reminder to me that I am just another member of this community. I can stroll downtown and tourists would never identify me by my role in the community unless they read the vanity plates on my pickup. I can fit in with the people that I serve. Certainly my choice of headwear gives my friends opportunities to make gentle jokes about what I happen to have on my head.

For a guy who says he doesn't care about what he wears, I find myself thinking about my choice of clothing from time to time. I've written a couple of blog entries about my choices of clothing. But the gospel this week is pretty direct in its instructions: our calling is far from considering what we will wear and more focused on clothing those who don't have adequate clothing, feeding those who are hungry, and visiting those who are sick and in prison.

So I confess that I am not a member of South Dakota Rowers. And I probably will never be. But seeing the sign last night gave me an opportunity to think a bit about who I am and what God is calling me to do. For that I am grateful.

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## November 21, 2008 – A New Ministry



Currently in the United States there are 7.3 million children who have a parent in prison. Since the incarceration rate in South Dakota is above the national average, it follows that we also have a larger share of children with a parent who is in state or federal prison. We know that children of parents in prison have a very high chance of themselves being imprisoned at some point in their lives. The TLC program is an initiative that partners with Big Brothers Big Sisters to match people from the faith community with children of incarcerated parents.

Our congregation has taken on the project of offering a fellowship meal for children and their mentors once each month. The meal is an opportunity for children to gather for food, games and fun and for the mentors to share experiences and provide support for one another. Our first dinner was last night.

Because our community, like others, attaches significant stigma to families of those who are in prison, I decided not to take any pictures of the children or their mentors, hence today's photo is a simple sunrise with our cross in the foreground. It can be a symbol of a new beginning and of our belief in the power of resurrection.

The Big Brothers Big Sisters mentoring program for children of parents in prison is a school-based program. Mentors and children meet at school to provide a safe setting. The program has produced positive results and the majority of students have improved both school attendance and grades since being matched with a mentor. The program is based on the conviction that children can be assisted in achieving their highest potential

when engaged in consistent and committed mentoring relationships with people of faith.

As positive as the program is, there is a need to move outside of the school setting to foster broader relationships between mentors and children. In addition, there are unique experiences of adults who mentor children of incarcerated parents and providing support for the mentors involves providing opportunities for the mentors to get together and discuss the unique challenges of this relationship.

It seemed like a good match for our congregation. We're good at providing meals. We have a building with adequate space for children and adults. We have many committed volunteers who can interact with children and mentors. And we have a long-term relationship with Big Brothers Big Sisters. Our youth group participates in an annual fund-raising event for Big Brothers Big Sisters and our members have participated in the program in many different ways.

Last night was a great beginning. As the pizzas cooked in the church ovens, children and mentors began to arrive. The Big Brothers Big Sisters staff engaged all of us in introductions and group-building exercises. Soon several tables filled with children, mentors and church volunteers all talking and laughing as they shared a meal. After supper there were separate programs for children and mentors as the church volunteers cleaned up the kitchen and packaged up the leftovers to go home with the children.

Sometimes the problems of this world seem overwhelming and beyond our abilities. But there are other times when we are able to make new connections and find new avenues of mission and ministry. When we remind ourselves that it is God, not ourselves, who is saving the world, we are freed to participate in God's work in the ways that we are able without being overwhelmed with problems that we are unable to solve.

We can't fix everything that is wrong with our world.

But we can make a difference in the lives of a handful of children.

And that is enough for now.

One of the greatest joys of the work that I do is that of seeing new programs emerge. When the idea was first presented to me, I said, "If we can identify five people in our congregation who would help, we can make this program succeed." Last night there were exactly five members of our church besides myself who put together the meal and launched the program. A couple of others are involved but were not able to be there last night. By the next time we serve a meal, the number of volunteers will have increased. It is easy and natural to get involved and the project will continue to grow.

When we first learned of the TLC program, someone said that the letters TLC had many meanings. Tender loving care was one. The left-behind children was another. After last night, I think the letters also stand for “teach, learn, care.” It’s a good mission for followers of Jesus, whose first disciples called him “Rabbi,” which means “teacher.”

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## November 22, 2008 – Survivors



Survivors learn to read the obituaries. It is very rare for an obituary to mention suicide or depression or mental illness. But survivors know how to read between the lines. When someone dies of cancer, the word cancer often appears in the obituary. The struggle to overcome a devastating disease like cancer is often described for what it is worth: heroic, valiant, courageous. People who have died after a long struggle with mental illness are rarely seen by society as heroes.

There is a stigma attached to suicide that makes families hesitant to talk about it. There is a stigma attached to mental illness that leaves the friends of its victims at a loss for words and feeling awkward when they are around the family.

But there is one day every year when we speak openly of suicide. We gather together at teleconference sites, in auditoriums and in churches and in private homes. We hear news of the latest research. We study the tools of prevention. We remember the loved ones who have died. The Saturday before Thanksgiving each year is National Survivors of Suicide Day. Events across the nation are designed to support survivors in their grief, to educate ourselves and the public about mental illness and its treatment, to engage in specific strategies to prevent suicide wherever possible, to work for adequate funding for research and treatment, and to imagine a world where stigma is removed from the treatment of all diseases.

There was a time when we thought that the human brain was too complex to understand and that brain diseases were nearly impossible to treat. Early surgical

treatments were incredibly barbaric. The first attempts at electro-convulsive therapy were imprecise and often dangerous. Treatments like induced hyper glyceemic shock were attempted before they were understood. There was a sense of desperation in the treatment of chronic mental illnesses that resulted in the extreme isolation of institutionalization and the overuse of massive doses of sedatives.

Fortunately the days of “One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest” have passed. Research has produced realistic guidelines for proper administration of antipsychotic medications. Psychopharmacology is a recognized field of research and expertise. The National Suicide Prevention Hotline is staffed with trained professionals at all times of the day and night. The number of suicides that are prevented is increasing. It is far from hopeless.

So, once a year, we are very intentional about mixing hope with our grief. One never recovers from the death of a loved one, regardless of the means of death. One survives. We do know that suicide grief has some special characteristics that often intensify the tragedy and present challenges for those who struggle with that grief. The message of hope is critically important.

The Christian church has struggled with its lack of understanding of suicide and there have been some moments when our church has been less than helpful for survivors. We looked at suicide as a willful act or an ethical choice. We knew that the intentional taking of a life of an innocent person is wrong. But in a suicide, there is no one to blame but the victim. The innocent victim must also be the guilty perpetrator. Suicide must be a sin. It is, after all so wrong and when things are wrong we want to find someone to blame. The twisted and convoluted thinking that blamed the victim seems misguided today, but there was a time when the dominant view in the Christian community was that suicide is a sin. Many believed that it was a sin from which salvation was impossible. For people who claim to trust God to be the judge, we can be incredibly judgmental at times.

We have always had the tools to be a beacon of hope. “For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 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.” (Romans 8:38-39) Our theology does not require us to be judgmental. Our Scriptures give us every reason to speak of hope to those who are grieving.

So for me today is a day about bringing a bit of light to the church I love and serve as well as a day to remember. Our congregation has been very gracious in providing space for our local Survivors of Suicide support group. Our congregation has been loving and caring to the survivors who are members. And our church has been supportive of my investment of time in the Pennington County LOSS (Local Outreach to Survivors of Suicide) team. But we still have a way to go. We still sometimes whisper

when we should speak out, sometimes are silent when we should speak up, sometimes fail to bring the words of hope that we know.

We will not sweep suicide under the carpet. We will remember. We will give thanks to God for the lives, however brief, that ended by suicide. We will work with all of the strength we are able to prevent future suicides.

And today - and every day - we will speak of hope as we emerge from the darkness of despair into the light of a new day.

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## November 23, 2008 – Separating Sheep and Goats



Picture from the Department of Animal Husbandry, Himachi Pradesh, India.

Today is the day celebrated by Christians as “Reign of Christ” or “Christ the King” Sunday. It is the last Sunday of the Christian year. A new year begins with Advent next Sunday. The tradition is to celebrate the sovereignty of Christ over all of the earth and to enable faithful persons to discern the difference between the way God reigns and the ways of human rulers and leaders. It is a significant challenge because our experience is limited and we are able to only partially and imperfectly envision that which is beyond our ability to directly observe. The reign of Christ is always about the present and the future. It is that which is to come as well as a present reality. This sense of defying the categories of time is difficult enough for us to imagine. But there is more.

This year’s Gospel reading invites us to think about judgment in a new way. The parable, from the Gospel of Matthew, begins with what seems like a simple distinction. God’s judgment is like separating sheep from goats. God, like a shepherd, will separate one group of humans from another and the distinction will be obvious, at least to God. Sheep on one side, goats on the other. One group destined for glory the other for punishment. But then the image becomes a bit more complex. Those who are selected for glory are surprised at their selection and unsure why. They are said to have offered food and water and clothing and comfort and visits to the judge. But they cannot remember having done so. The judge states: “Whatever you did for the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”

The condemned are equally surprised at their punishment. They have been accused of failing to offer food and water and clothing and comfort and visits, but have no memory

of such a denial. “Whatever you did not do for the least of these, you did not do for me,” is the reply.

The problem is that most of us do not fit clearly into one category or the other. There are few that have never helped others in some way with food or water or clothing or comfort or a visit. And none of us has always responded to the need that is presented. It is impossible to respond to every request, every need that one sees. Our lives are not perfectly good, nor are they perfectly evil. We are sometimes good, sometimes offering food and water and clothing and comfort and visits. And we are sometimes bad, failing to offer what is needed.

Were the judgement to take place today, we would be as surprised as the characters in the parable, because we are not certain to which category we belong.

And there is another part of the parable that captures our attention. The victims in the story, those who are hungry and thirsty and naked and sick and in prison, are God’s family. They are referred to as “brothers.” On Reign of Christ Sunday this clearly presents a different kind of ruler. We cannot think of human rulers whose brothers are hungry and thirsty and naked and sick and in prison. Usually the families of those who exercise power and authority over others enjoy special privilege in a society.

The parable invites all who hear it to re-examine our priorities. Where do we spend our time and resources? How do we invest our lives? Who are our friends? With whom do we stand? Who do we see as our brothers and sisters? Too often we are trying to make distance between ourselves and the victims of life’s tragedies. We don’t want to spend our time with those who are hungry and thirsty and naked. We will respond by giving to a charity. And we will visit a hospital from time to time and some of us even visit in prisons, but we are quick to return to our homes and to make distance between ourselves and those other people.

The parable invites us to understand that “those other people,” are God’s family. Serving others is a way to draw close to God. Mother Theresa of Calcutta got that part of the parable right. We admire her but few of us are ready to fully join her.

The day and the parable present us with many challenges to our thinking. And it invites us deeper into the pathways of service to others, especially those who are considered to be “the least:” the least fortunate, the least equipped, the least understood.

Maybe if we spend more time with God’s family we will be less surprised to discover God’s way of coming into relationship with the world: a baby born to a poor woman in an obscure corner of the world. Maybe this is so difficult that we need to return to these ideas every year and every year ask ourselves, “Lord, when did we see you . . . .?”

## November 24, 2008 – The Button Box



Being a baby boomer, the adults with whom I grew up were people who had lived through the depression. Saving things was a positive value. “You never know when you are going to need something,” was a phrase that I often heard. We had several super savers in our family. My great uncle Ted filled storage buildings with boxes of old inner tubes (can be cut up to make large rubber bands) scraps of sheet metal (can be formed into all kinds of useful household items) twine and string (there was a time when people tied packages with string) grocery bags (when they were made of paper and could be used for wrapping packages) miscellaneous parts (Uncle Ted always took apart broken appliances and other items to save screws, pulleys, bearings, motors, and any other items he might someday use) and general junk (you never know when you are going to need something). As a result, Uncle Ted’s sheds were wondrous places when we were children.

Since I grew up amongst savers, the notion of a large box of buttons was not strange to me at all. I thought every household saved all of the buttons off of discarded clothing. My mother had a sewing cabinet with rows of small plastic drawers that were filed with buttons sorted by color. I think that all of my aunts had boxes of used buttons that could be taken out and searched through for just the right button to replace a lost one. I think that the button boxes were also used to entertain us when we were children. We would be allowed to sort through the buttons and look at the unique ones. It was like digging through a treasure chest.

One of our hobbies these days is sorting through possessions that others have accumulated. In a relatively short period of time, Susan's father moved from his large house into an apartment and from the apartment into a single room in an assisted living center. The house was filled not only with the possessions that Susan's parents had accumulated in forty years of living at the same address, but also with things brought from her grandparents, aunts and uncles and other relatives when they had come to the point of downsizing. The basement was full of boxes, some labeled better than others.

My job is mostly to move things. I load boxes into pickups and trailers and have become quite good at moving furniture. At one point Susan and both of her sisters had rental storage units filled with things from her parents' home. Although we keep trying and resolving to empty out our storage unit, it hasn't happened yet.

Last night Susan brought home a box from the storage unit that was labeled "Sybil's photographs." Sybil was a beloved aunt who had lived in Rapid City. Most likely the box had been moved from the manager's home at Placerville Camp to a house on highway 44; from the house on highway 44 to Westhills Village; from Westhills Village to Susan's parent's home in Billings Montana; from that home back to the storage area at Westhills Village; from that storage area to our rented storage unit; and finally we opened it up last night. As I said, it was labeled "Sybil's photographs." It contained a tablecloth, a half dozen kitchen knives, one photograph and a button box. And, if memory serves us correctly, the button box didn't come from Sybil at all. In fact we think it came from the mother of the woman who worked at a different church camp in Montana. Those buttons could easily have traveled several thousand miles since they came together in that particular box. And they could easily have been buried where no one could find them for a quarter of a century. "Don't throw it out, you never know when you're going to need something."

That said, it is a marvelous collection of buttons. My mother immediately got out a muffin tin and began to sort the buttons by color. At least we will have a box full of sandwich bags full of buttons sorted by color.

My private theory is that if we got all of the buttons in our house and the storage unit together we'd probably have enough buttons to fill a steamer trunk. That would look like a treasure chest to children. Except that you can no longer allow children to play with buttons. Choking hazard. And, of course, we have no young children in our lives. Ours are grown and we are left in that awkward "in between" stage where we have no grandchildren and excessive hinting is discouraged. I am told by my peers that it is just another phase we parents go through and that we will grow out of it.

In the meantime, what to do with buttons? And books. And furniture. And old children's clothing. And collectables. And a thousand other things that are family treasures too precious to part with. I suppose we could build a large storage building and with any

luck pass on to our children a collection that is even larger than the one we seem to have inherited.

But, of course, we are resolved to sort through the items. We've already discovered many things that can be discarded and others that can go to the church rummage sale for community recycling. We've begun to celebrate our anniversaries by each identifying one item that we can get rid of for each year that we have been married. Since we've been married for 35 years, that decreases the inventory by more than seventy items each year.

And I have a three-quarter ton pickup and am willing to rent a trailer to deliver anything to any relative who might want any of it. I'll be loading up the pickup the end of this week for a run to take back to Montana some furniture we moved from Montana a few years ago. (I never said the process was efficient). I own my own furniture dollies and hand truck and lots of furniture pads (mostly old blankets - you never know when you're going to need something).

And, for what it is worth, if there are any readers of the blog who need buttons, let me know. I think we have some we could send you. They may even be sorted by color.

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## November 25, 2008 – Rethinking Christmas



Thanksgiving has not yet occurred, and Advent doesn't begin until Sunday, so it seems a bit premature to write about Christmas this morning, but the advertisements are coming in on a regular basis and there is Christmas music in the stores and people are anticipating "black Friday," an annual shopping and spending spree that follows Thanksgiving. There have already been a couple of articles in the newspaper and other places warning of a Christmas downturn. With the stock market still on the decline and unemployment rising, there will be plenty of people facing financial challenges that they have not before experienced. CNN led an article with the line, "There won't be any brightly wrapped packages under Annette Peterson's Christmas tree this year." The story went on to say that the woman was out of a job and that there isn't any extra money to buy presents. It also reported that the couple spent \$600 last year on presents for their three-year old daughter. The Petersons are not alone. More than a million Americans lost their jobs this year.

There will be plenty of budgets that need to be tightened this holiday season.

Perhaps hard financial times present an opportunity to rethink Christmas. I know nothing of the family in the CNN article, but they were presented as a typical American family. To the extent that this is true, it seems to me that we are due for a reexamination of what is most important in our lives. I can accept that the couple has less money and that they may not have money to spend on presents this year. That shouldn't mean that they cannot celebrate Christmas.

Several things occur to me off the top of my head. A three year-old whose mother is out of a job could benefit and find joy in having more time with her mother. They could bake or cook together, lowering food costs at the same time as they build memories. There are Christmas presents that can be hand made for little or no cost. Some of our favorite Christmas decorations are the ones that were hand made out of common household items. There have been plenty of packages over the years in our house that were wrapped in the Sunday comics, or plain paper decorated with paint or images cut from old magazines. We've even formed a family tradition of at least one present wrapped in duct tape. Passing down a treasured family heirloom does not cost money, but can be a gift with deep meaning. Think of all of your possessions. What do you have that you can give away? A gift from the heart is more valuable than a gift from the wallet. And more time allows for more imagination in planning surprises and treats for family members.

Essential items can be wrapped as presents. And most households have some forgotten pieces of clothing or unused items that can become freshly appreciated when packaged up as a present.

There are plenty of ways of giving a gift without spending money.

If money and market forces determine whether or not we can celebrate Christmas, it seems to me that we have forgotten the core of the story of the baby who was born in the common room where the animals were kept and laid in a manger because there was no room in the inn. Perhaps the experience of hard financial times will make the opportunity for us to draw closer to the simple fact that God came to us as a baby born to poverty.

Mary and Joseph didn't have \$600 to purchase presents for their baby. And whatever the value of the gifts they received from the magi, the particular choice of gifts did more to foreshadow the early death of Jesus than to provide any luxury for the family.

Despite what the advertisements say, despite the best efforts of the marketers, Christmas, at its core, is not about how much one can afford to spend.

Maybe this year will give us the gift of the opportunity to rethink Christmas. Decreasing the pressure to spend money and to make purchases can decrease the stress of the season. Having less money for shopping can be translated into having more time for family activities. Less purchased, more homemade is a good recipe for memories. The common knowledge of more difficult times and an uncertain financial future can give permission to scale back.

Here's my holiday tip. "It's OK not to buy a lot of gifts." And one more: "Give the gift of time and togetherness - its value is incalculable.

Advent is the season of preparation. Four weeks to think and plan and decide what is most important. I hope that our family will invest that time in preparing for Christmas in such a way that our celebration focuses less on presents and more on love.

Every year we have a couple of special services on Christmas Eve. Although we do place a donation box in the entryway of the church, the offerings are always for an outreach program and never for our church. And we don't pass the plate on Christmas Eve. I hope that word gets out that our community is filled with churches who will have meaningful Christmas celebrations that are offered with no cost to the participants.

I think it is a good year to rethink Christmas.

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## November 26, 2008 – Getting Started



November 25 might not seem like the ideal day to start building a new house in this part of the world. Our weather can be pretty cold and there are times when there are significant snow storms at this time of the year. But yesterday was a delightful day and we were working in t-shirts by noon. We are starting a new home that is a partnership between Black Hills Area Habitat for Humanity, the downtown Rapid City churches and downtown businesses. The crew was small yesterday, with a holiday tomorrow. But five of us started with bare concrete and were able to install the center beam, mud sill, and all of the floor joists before it was time to pack up our tools and call it a day. Not a bad beginning. It will take us about a half day to install the decking and then we can start framing walls.

I haven't been working on a Habitat project for a few months so a day of swinging a framing hammer has left a bit of stiffness in my arm and shoulder. It is just enough this morning to remind me that I was working yesterday. It is a good feeling.

There is an important symbol in starting the building yesterday. It is a sign of the progress that has been made in the past two decades since a group of dedicated volunteers started the first Habitat for Humanity home in Rapid City. In those days, home construction was a start and stop affair, with periods of fund-raising and organizing between building projects. After a couple of decades and more than fifty homes, Black Hills Area Habitat for Humanity is now able to sustain continuous year-round construction. Most of the time there are multiple projects in the works. There is a

double home in town that the crew has just finished roofing as well as the project we started yesterday. Before we finish this project, there will be another one in the works.

Because of the way that the financial picture works with Habitat for Humanity, the more houses that are built, the more we are able to build. Homeowners make payments after they have moved into their homes and the payments that they make are reinvested in new homes. There is still a significant amount of fund-raising that must be done because Habitat is always cash poor. We try to keep as much of our assets as possible tied up on mortgage lending. And since Habitat for Humanity builds homes with no profit and lends money at no interest, we have substantial assets without any income. The income comes from fund-raising.

On the surface, to those trained in the finances of the world, the scheme doesn't seem like it would work. But it does work wonderfully. It is our attempt at applying the financial principles that are given in the Bible to the marketplace of our community. And the principles of the Bible are sound and work in any type of economic system. While the wider economy is reeling with a downturn that has home mortgages and the derivative financial projects at the core of the problem, Habitat for Humanity is largely unaffected. The default rate of Habitat for Humanity homeowners is virtually the same as it was when the economy was booming. The default rate is quite low, but there are some homeowners who have significant changes to their financial situation and have difficulty making payments. However the number of such cases is lower than conventional mortgage lenders experience in good financial times and way lower than the current market. The Habitat for Humanity financial model places people in homes that they can afford by eliminating profit and interest and using volunteer labor, thus lowering the cost to the homeowner. The homes are modest. Simple, decent housing is our only product. We build single bathroom homes and we don't build any garages.

My schedule is very busy. And today is going to be a long day in part because I had a lot of tasks that were set aside in order to volunteer yesterday. But I am glad I took time to volunteer yesterday. The work is a pleasant change of pace from my everyday job of computers and appointments and meetings and phone calls and e-mails. And there is a sense of accomplishment that accompanies a construction job. A pile of lumber is transformed into a structure.

Today I turn my attention to worship services and correspondence and the business of administering a church. That is good and meaningful work as well and I enjoy it very much. It felt good to get started yesterday. And I worked the whole day without hitting any of my fingers with the hammer - not bad for an amateur. It feels good to get started with a new project.

**November 27, 2008 – Thanksgiving**



My father taught me a lot of things: how to fish, how to hunt, how to drive a car, how to fly an airplane, how to weld, how to drive a nail, and how to care for my tools. He taught as much by example as he did by words: how to be a husband, how to be a father, how to be an active member of a church, how to contribute to the community, how to help others, and so much more.

But my father didn't teach me much about the kitchen. He could make pancakes or fry an egg. He would cook other things if pressed, but the kitchen wasn't his natural environment. It was my mother who taught me how to bake bread. We ate a lot of bread when I was growing up. When my parents remodeled the kitchen in our home, my mom designed a section of counters that was lower than the rest, so that she could knead bread there. We would bring back wheat from the farm in large trash cans and mom used a small mill to grind her flour as she needed it.

There is nothing like the smell of baking bread. Even today it brings back memories of coming home from school to discover fresh-baked bread for lunch. Fresh baked bread doesn't need anything else to make it taste good, but we often got some fresh creamery butter and a little sugar sprinkled on top. Or sometimes we made sandwiches with chokecherry jelly. The memory makes my mouth water.

As readers of my blog know, it is my habit to start each day by writing this blog. However, this morning, in recognition of Thanksgiving, I started my day by mixing up the dough for rolls for our Dinner. Kneading dough is a good exercise. It takes a bit of

strength in the arms and it has a wonderful feel. The dough is always sticky when starting, and it takes a little flour to get the texture just right. Push and fold, push and fold. I don't know how many times it takes, or how long it takes, though some recipes give precise amounts. Nor do I have an exact amount of flour that is used. It is a matter of feel.

Sometimes, when I bake bread, I cut back on the salt and substitute margarine for the butter. I am sure that it is better for my health. But today is Thanksgiving. I made my bread the way I really like it, with butter and honey and a bit of salt. Flour, water, and yeast are the only other ingredients. One batch of bread makes about three dozen rolls - enough for the gang that will assemble at our friends' home for a midday feast.

My sister and her son will spend most of today traveling. They spent the night 550 miles west of here at Butte, Montana, about half way through their journey from Portland Oregon. So we'll have another Thanksgiving dinner with turkey and all of the trimmings tomorrow. I'll bake another batch of rolls for that meal as well. The rolls are good with dinner, but they are even better as leftovers. A fresh diner roll with a bit of leftover turkey, some lettuce and a smidgen of cranberry relish (the good kind with horseradish) makes a great sandwich.

The good thing about baking bread is that you have to wait. I always let my dough rest for a half hour before kneading and then I let it rise once before punching it down, kneading a bit more and forming the loaves or rolls. It takes time. And much of the time doesn't involve effort. You just wait. There is time for a cup of coffee and reading the newspaper and doing the dishes and other chores. There is time to think about how good the house will smell once the bread starts baking. There is time to build ample anticipation.

This morning is a good time for anticipation. I think that as I get older, I enjoy the anticipation as much as I do the event. The bread will be ready - in due time. Family and friends will gather - in due time. The turkey will be carved - in due time. We will say our prayer of Thanksgiving - in due time. The day will have all of the elements - in due time. And right now there is time for waiting and anticipating.

So I send you my heartfelt Thanksgiving greetings. Once again we have set aside a day to give thanks to God - to openly express the gratitude that we should always feel but sometimes forget. All that we are and all that we have is due not to our own efforts, but to the bounteous grace of God. As the song says, "All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above. So thank the Lord, O thank the Lord, for all His love."

Last night we gathered at the church with friends from five other congregations. The pastors of the congregations have become friends in recent years, sharing a weekly Bible study and time for prayer. And we have begun a new season of cooperation and shared ministry. How good it was to hear our choirs sing together and delight as our

congregations renewed their friendships. How refreshing to feel our congregations not as competitors but as partners in the ministry of Jesus Christ! The celebration was a wonderful gift and a great way to start the festival of Thanksgiving.

May your celebrations be genuine and meaningful and may you know of God's great love for you.

Happy Thanksgiving!

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## November 28, 2008 – Grandpa



After a wonderful Thanksgiving feast yesterday, we took a short walk in the woods. The day was beautiful and our gathering had been large, so there were ten or eleven of us taking a leisurely stroll with another dozen or so back at the house. As we walked along, I became aware of a most wonderful sound in the hills. It wasn't just the sound of children, with their delight at the discoveries of the hills. It wasn't just the laughter, so musical, that was freely shared by the young ones. It was the sound of conversation that spanned the generations. Our little walk yesterday had two grandfathers with their grandchildren.

"I have to watch out for my grandfather," one of the children said to me at one point. From my point of view, the grandfather was perfectly capable of taking a walk in the woods and not in need of much care at the moment, but there was a special sense of connection that made our little group more than an odd collection of people of different ages. We were a family who knew intrinsically that it was best for us to watch and care for each other. And like most families of this earth, our connections were not based solely on genetics. Families have a wonderful way of adopting in other people and including them in the joys and responsibilities of family.

Walking with our daughter I was treasuring the opportunity to talk with her in such a relaxed and easy atmosphere. She was telling me of her plans for the next year and it was not difficult for me to remember when she was the age of the children. Now she is making adult decisions and living independently. I am proud of her in so many different

ways, and I take delight in her maturity and independence, but I also treasure a few moments to be dad and daughter and hear about her hopes and dreams.

Our little cluster of people was a remarkable gathering of talents and skills. We had no shortage of topics for interesting conversation. In the span of a short walk, we discussed trees and game, hunting and fishing, education and universities, family dynamics and relationships, travel and living abroad, and a host of other topics. There were people with graduate degrees and those who had earned titles and honors. But there is no title and no honor greater than that of “grandpa” or “grandma.”

Among the treasured memories of the day is the sound of a five-year-old voice exclaiming, “Grandpa.” “Grandpa, look at this?” “Is that a deer track?” “Grandpa come over here.” “I could go stand on that rock if you come with me.”

One of the great joys of family is the joy of generations. Our little Thanksgiving celebration included people from five to eighty-eight and spanned four generations. It is a blessing that not every family on this earth is able to enjoy, one that we too often take for granted. Access to easy methods of travel has resulted in families being spread out all over the world and often the distances are significant. So I give thanks for living in a world and being a part of a network of families where multiple generations are constantly connected.

In English, we have many different ways of addressing God. Sometimes we pray to Almighty God, or the Creator, or to Jesus. The prayer of Our Savior begins with “Our Father.” In Lakota, the word for God is Wakantanka, but you often hear prayers addressed to Tuakaashida, grandfather. The form of the prayers comes from long-standing cultural experiences that ancestors will provide guidance, assistance and support for the challenges of everyday living. There is great wisdom in this way of thinking about God.

Of course all human language falls short of the reality of God. No matter what words we choose, we are using imperfect tools to point towards that which is perfect. Our language allows us to go only so far in describing the reality of the Creator of all of the universe. Jesus’ prayer addresses God as “Abba,” a concept that might be as accurately translated as “Daddy,” as “Our Father.” The word demonstrates a close relationship and a connection that cannot be severed.

Perhaps as we search for ways to think about and to address God, we would do well, from time to time, to employ words that speak of the generations of our relationship with God. Our faith has been inherited from many generations who have gone before. Adding words like Kuashi (grandmother) and Tuakashida (grandfather) might serve to remind us of the many generations of our faith.

And, after all, there is no word in any human language that conveys more respect, love or admiration than “Grandpa.”

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## November 29, 2008 – Looking Again



One of the things about living in an area that is a destination for tourists is that there is always something to do. Like other residents of the Black Hills, we get to make regular trips to Mount Rushmore, Crazy Horse, Custer State Park and other destinations within the Black Hills. And sometimes we act as if we have seen those things so often that there isn't anything new to see. But one of the joys of taking someone else to look at a familiar sight is that they enable us to see that sight in a unique way.

My nephew said that he had never visited Mount Rushmore. I'm quite sure he has, but he might have been pretty young when he visited. At any rate, yesterday's visit was a fresh experience for him. It was a little chilly, but we were able to walk the trail that winds up a little closer to the base of the mountain and down to the sculptor's studio before taking in the displays in the visitor's center, and making a stop in the gift shop.

"Awesome" was the word that my nephew used to describe the experience. The scale and size of the carving is indeed impressive, even for those of us who live nearby and look at the faces on a regular basis. "Where does someone get the idea to carve a mountain?" I don't know if there is an answer to that question, but I told part of the story of Gutzon Borglum's working on Stone Mountain in Georgia, where the original vision was to carve the face of Robert E. Lee on the rock. Borglum convinced the sponsors of that project to increase their vision to reflect the scale of the rock and the result was the largest bas relief in the world. There was room for Lee as well as Stonewall Jackson and Jefferson Davis followed by a legion of Confederate troops.

Borglum left the Stone Mountain project before it was completed, but that work probably helped him develop the techniques that were employed in the creation of Mount Rushmore. There are displays at Mount Rushmore that explain the techniques used in the carving of the mountain, the choice of which presidents to carve, and other details, but there really isn't anything in the displays that answers the question, "Where does someone get the idea to carve a mountain?"

We humans are capable of some pretty big dreams. And, occasionally, we figure out how to make the dreams into reality. The dream was only partially realized at Mount Rushmore. The original vision included sculpting more of the figures. As the project progressed, Borglum spent more and more time away from the site, raising money and even accepting other commissions for sculptures. His son Lincoln provided on site supervision and continued the work for about a year following his father's death. The project, however, looks essentially the way it did at the time of the elder Borglum's death.

Time and other family activities prevented us from making a visit to Crazy Horse yesterday, but I do want to take my nephew there sometime soon. The vision and scale of that project dwarfs Mount Rushmore. And, in my mind, it leaves the question even more open. What inspires a person to single handedly start a project that will take generations to complete? One has to admire the vision and tenacity of Korczak Ziolkowski who developed the vision and started carving the mountain in 1948. His family continues to move ahead with the mountain carving project that has now gained recognition and support from many different places.

Of course there is more than a small amount of ego and audacity involved in the process of thinking that one can improve the appearance of a mountain. Both Borglum and Ziolkowski demonstrated, at times, their share of self-promotion and inflated ego. And yet their inflated sense of self-worth seemed to be justified by the work they actually accomplished in their lifetimes.

Both monuments have provided publicity for the Black Hills and attracted visitors from around the world. And they give us interesting adventures with guests who come to visit our family.

Perhaps every person has, somewhere inside, a desire to make some mark on this world that will last longer than the span of a human lifetime. We all understand the significance of being a part of something that is bigger than ourselves. Most of us engage that desire by participating in something that someone else has begun and that will continue beyond the span of our life on this earth. But a few individuals start something new. They have the imagination to envision some project that is larger than life - larger than their own lives - and then get those projects started. They have the ability to share their vision with enough other people that they can get going on their life's work.

I suspect that the process of carving mountains has a unique niche in the history of humans. It is hard to imagine that there are many mountains left that are available for carving monuments. Should the greatness of some future president match or even surpass that of the four carved on Mount Rushmore, it is unlikely that there will be a place for the same kind of memorial.

Nonetheless what has been done is “awesome.” We are inspired by the vision of the founders and the technique of the sculptors. It is worth a visit. And it is worth looking again to see and experience what we might have missed on an earlier visit.

I’m grateful my family provided me with another opportunity to take a walk beneath the familiar faces.

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## November 30, 2008 – Black Friday



AP Photo

I was not familiar with the term Black Friday until this year. I had known that the day after Thanksgiving was a big day for shopping and sales, but have, for the most part, avoided shopping. I'm not a big fan of shopping in the first place, and crowds don't appeal to me. The term refers to the fact that some retail businesses only make profit during the last few weeks of the year, without holiday sales they would operate "in the red." So the huge sales totals of the day after Thanksgiving, as people turn their attention to Christmas gifts, helps the store move "into the black." But increasingly Black Friday is being associated with shopping violence.

Our local paper yesterday was enough to make one want to avoid such a senseless process. The front page headline story was about a 15-year-old girl who was struck in the throat by another shopper. Assault charges are pending. And the national news was headlined by the story of the death of a Wal-Mart employee who died when shoppers on Long Island broke down the doors and rushed into the store. A pregnant woman and three other shoppers were also injured in the incident. The part-time, temporary employee had been hired just for the holiday rush. Trying to earn some additional money for the holidays cost him his life.

A quick survey of news from across the country showed that the nation's largest retailer was the most common place for Black Friday shopper violence, but the violence was not limited to Wal-Mart. Black eyes, bruises, smashed toes and elbowed ribs were widespread across the country's retail outlets.

Out-of-control crowds and total chaos erupting into violence over consumer goods seems so tragic and unnecessary. These people weren't fighting over groceries or health care or education or housing. They were fighting over video game systems and bargain prices for socks and MP3 players and GPS units. Where are our priorities when trinkets and games and bargain prices become more important than the safety and health of our fellow citizens?

Black Friday is black because of the violence to which we have succumbed. It doesn't have to be that way and we don't have to act that way.

I know that most of the people who went shopping on that day were courteous and knew how to restrain their own behavior. I know that those who perpetrate violence are the exception and not the rule. I know that the stores themselves have no intention of stirring up violence. I am not trying to place blame. But human beings are capable of some incredibly stupid behavior at times. And irrational behavior seems to be exaggerated by the stress of holiday seasons, the fear of uncertain economic times, and the press of crowds.

So, with respect, I have declined to go shopping this weekend. There will be other opportunities for me to purchase the things I need. I will find gifts for family members that are within my budget. And I will step aside and allow others to obtain the bargains that are in the stores this weekend. There will be no shortage of customers for the stores. And I have no more right to the sale prices than any other citizen of our community.

I have a new Black Friday tradition for myself. I'm going to avoid shopping. With a little planning, I could avoid even the grocery store on that day. It will have no effect on my contribution to the economy. I will still purchase items from local businesses and still participate in our economy. I simply am declaring that I will leave the crowds, and the rush and the excitement and bargains of the day after Thanksgiving to others. You won't find me waiting outside of Wal Mart at 5 a.m. And you won't find me inside the stores at noon either. I will take a little extra time for family, and perhaps do a little extra reading, or take a longer walk in the woods.

I'm not out to start a movement. I don't want to convert others to my plan, though there will be plenty of room for others to take a walk or read a book or spend time with family. On the other hand, if I could persuade the most uptight, angry and violent of the shoppers out there to imitate my plan, the shopping experience would be better for those who remain.

For at least one family in New York the day after Thanksgiving will always be a sad day - a day of remembrance of tragedy and loss. And the senselessness of that loss will always be a part of their thoughts. "If only . . ." It didn't have to happen. It could have

been avoided. Victims of crime live with that sense every day. And the anniversaries of deaths are especially troubling for surviving family members. So I will stand with those who mourn. I have never met the family, and it is unlikely that I ever will. But I choose to mourn their loss and to share their sense of tragedy and I know how to avoid ever becoming part of an unruly crowd of shoppers that gets out of control. I will avoid going there in the first place and if I ever find my self in such a situation, I will simply walk away. And remember the day when the crowd thought their bargains were more important than the health and safety of their fellow citizens.

Black Friday doesn't have to be violent. And we don't have to give in to the violence.

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## December 1, 2008 – Vacation



I am taking a week of vacation. Susan and I almost always travel when we are on vacation. It is the nature of our job that one has to get a bit of distance from it in order to gain the perspective that vacation offers. Because so much of the work we do is relationships, we continue those relationships when we meet people in the grocery store or pause for conversation around town. However this week, I am taking a week of vacation to sort out some of the things that we are storing for other family members and to accomplish some work around the house that has been neglected in the rush and bustle of everyday living.

I do, however, have an obligation to the people that I serve, who are paying for this vacation, to use my time in such a way that it renews my energy for my work and enables me to return refreshed and ready for the hectic work of Advent and Christmas. How I spend my time on vacation is not just a matter of my own desires, but also of making wise decisions for the community in which I participate. I need to give ample time to my family, to self care, and to prayer to justify the investment of time and energy in providing the vacation.

I rarely take a week off from worship, even when I am on vacation. Our usual pattern is to worship in other congregations when we are on vacation. I am aware that there is a part of the practice of the Christian faith that is essentially communal. Worship is what we do together and not something that I can do on my own. And it is my practice to engage in communal worship every week. However, I decided not to attend worship yesterday. Instead, I drove across southeastern Montana to Red Lodge to deliver a load

of furniture to family members. At the time my congregation was worshipping, I paused for a brief time, in the open country between Alzada and Broadus to listen to the wind howl across the prairie and to watch the grass blow on the hillside. I stretched my legs and took a short walk, thinking of the many blessings that I have received and offering thanks to God for the abundance of this life. It was chilly, but not cold, and a short walk across the prairie is quite different from a walk in the woods. I never got far enough away from my pickup that I could not see it if I turned around.

There is a restorative power to the prairies and empty spaces. It allows me to be reminded of the vastness of this world and of the truly enormous spaces that separate us. Were I to have to walk the distance that I drove yesterday it would take me nearly a month, and it would not be an adventure that could be safely undertaken in the winter. But it was little effort to hop in my truck and drive across the countryside to the base of the mountains here in Montana. And today I will drive home with equal speed with the wind to my back and an empty truck.

The driving time is thinking time for me as well. I have recordings of several lectures and continuing education programs that I want to hear, and I got to some of them yesterday, but part of the way I just drove without the distraction of other voices and allowed the vastness of the land to re-enter my being.

It does not escape me that Advent has begun. At home, in church, the first candle has been lit. The waiting and anticipation has begun. And out on the prairies, there is a bit of waiting going on as well. The deer and antelope are trying to eat whatever forage they can to prepare for a winter harsh enough that they will not all survive. The grasses are dormant, waiting for the spring melt and for rain if it comes, to renew them to show forth spring green. Winter is a time of waiting on the prairie. There is less activity, more conserving energy, the nights are long and the days are short.

I am trying to remember ever taking vacation in Advent. I don't think that I have ever done that before. It is a time when I want to be with my church, my community, as we engage in the preparations that are important for us. It is an unusual time of the year for me to take a week off. And I usually don't take my vacation one week at a time. It takes me long enough to disengage and then to ramp up for work that a week seems insufficient to truly relax and feel the distance of separation. But this is what has worked out for this year. And I know that I am benefitting from this time away from the daily routine and schedule.

For the way that I do the work to which I am called, health and family are essential. I am dependent upon the support and love of my family and I need energy to tackle long days and perplexing challenges. Taking care of my family and of myself is something that cannot be neglected if I am to continue my work over the long haul. And it is something that I owe not only to myself and my family but also to the church and to God. Ministry is an exercise in endurance as well as energy for the task at hand. Many

of the challenges of the church are ones that require years of investment and leadership. Much of what we do together are tasks that cannot be accomplished in a short period of time.

So I am grateful for a couple days with the open road and a task to justify the trip. I enjoy the drive across the open spaces and am renewed by the beauty of the land. And if I have missed worship, that too is a good thing, because it reminds me that worship is something that I need as much as those whom I serve. I don't advocate skipping worship on a regular basis, and I don't intend to develop a pattern of doing so myself, but I do know that I am eager for this coming Sunday, for the Advent Arts Festival and all of the busy activities of the church. And eagerness is a good sign that the vacation has been meaningful.

And the prairies are open enough that no one else can hear my singing as I drive from here to there. How fortunate I am for this week of vacation.

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## December 2, 2008 – The Road Ahead



A teacher and mentor, Ross Snyder, once wrote, “There is no well-marked road which our history will take. It turns, writhes and darts with surprise unforeseen. Our life is a mountain, with valleys between, and spiraling paths through the mixed-up ravines.”

For some reason, we got to talking about our future last evening. There is a mood of uncertainty about our country as financial markets plummet and pundits predict doom and gloom. People who have carefully planned and prepared for retirement are seeing their plans altered by forces that are beyond their control. Folks who thought that they had secure jobs in stable companies are discovering that their jobs are at risk and their companies are crumbling. So much can change in such a short period of time.

Of course this has always been true. An accident can change the course of a life in seconds. An illness can leave the best laid plans in shambles. We do not possess the ability to see the future.

I have had the good fortune of excellent weather and well-designed roads to make the trip of the last couple of days an easy venture. I was able to cover a little over 800 miles without any significant discomfort. There are gas stations and restaurants at convenient locations along the way and the vehicles we drive these days are reliable enough to provide for safe travel even when the weather is more challenging than it has been in the past few days. This is not to say that the unexpected won't happen. Cars do break down. Mechanical devices are not perfect. And there are still a few places along the

highways I drive where there is no cell phone coverage. But travel is certainly easier than it was a century ago.

In some ways it might also be said that we have many more amenities as we face the reality of our aging than were possessed by previous generations. Our community has a wide range of options for senior living, from town houses to apartments to assisted living homes to care centers. There are home health services, senior citizens centers, and a host of other programs that are available to assist those with specific needs. Senior citizen housing and care is a multi-million dollar business in our community and it continues to grow by leaps and bounds. The so called “golden years” are a source of “gold” for businesses with the foresight and ability to capitalize on the growing demand.

The beginning of the retirement of the Baby Boomers is upon us and sociologists tell us that the population is such that boomers will present our country with the biggest population of retired persons in its history. A smaller percentage of the population will be working and a large percentage will be seeking leisure in retirement.

As we look forward and think about retirement, it seems as if we need to be open to re-invent the concept. The system that has worked well for people who retired in the second half of the twentieth century may not be sustainable with the onslaught of retiring baby boomers. As we boomers face retirement, I suspect that things will be much different than it was for our parents.

There is nothing magic about the age of sixty-five. Perhaps our society will be better served with no set age for retirement. Different people retire at different ages depending upon their needs and means. When health permits, older workers can provide significant contributions to their workplace and to the culture at large. It also seems that there are alternatives to complete retirement. Part-time work, volunteer work and other ways of remaining engaged without the rigors of full-time employment are viable options for many people as they move toward the end of their working careers.

It is clear that the road ahead for many people is nowhere near as easy to follow as the highways across our land. And there will be the need to blaze some new trails as we move ahead.

On the other hand, it is also clear that excessive worry is counterproductive and unwarranted. Yes, it is true that we do not know what the future holds. And yes, it is true that there will be significant challenges ahead. But the future is where it has always been: in God’s hands. The gospels are filled with Jesus’ teachings about letting go of worry about the future. “Consider the lilies of the field . . .” “Which of you by worrying can add one bit to the span of your life . . .” “Do not put your treasure where moth and rust destroy and thieves break in and steal . . .” “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear . . .” “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself.”

One of the life skills that is essential is learning to live with uncertainty. Perhaps our times are more uncertain than some other times. We will probably only know that through hindsight. And perhaps our future is more clouded than it has been for previous generations. But I don't think we are particularly unique in the story of people on this planet.

What is more, surprise is part of the joy of the journey. Were our future known and predictable, it might well seem dull and boring. I look to the future with anticipation and hope in part because it is not yet revealed. I don't know what lies ahead.

Anticipation is the mood of the season. Happy Advent!

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## December 3, 2008 – On the Banks of the Limpopo



From wiki pictures.

I have never been to Africa. I have met many people from Africa. I have read stories about Africa. I have imagined what it might be like. But I have never been to Africa. And one of the things about a place where one has never been is that images are a bit distorted. One of the images of Africa that I carry in my head is from Rudyard Kipling's story, "The Elephant's Child:" "Go to the banks of the great gray-green, greasy Limpopo River, all set about with fever-trees, and find out." I have never been to the Limpopo River, but I can picture it in my mind. In my mind's eye, of course, it is the home of the crocodile. I can picture the grey-green color and the muddy, greasy nature of the river. And I know that the fever tree gets its name from the swampy areas where it grows. Swamps, being good breeding grounds for mosquitoes, were areas where people contracted Malaria, thus the name fever tree. The Limpopo, with its exotic name and somewhat dangerous setting runs through my mental images of Africa.

The fever of the Limpopo these days is cholera. The river has been tested and it is infested with cholera. People living along the river have fallen victim to an outbreak that is becoming an epidemic. The situation is especially acute in Zimbabwe, where other sources of water are scarce. Harare, Zimbabwe, has been without municipal water since Sunday. Reports are that the sewage system has not functioned properly for months and that toilets no longer work anywhere in the city. Public health officials have been unable to cope with the cholera outbreak which has claimed the lives of 565 people this fall, with over 12,000 reported cases.

Governmental corruption, election fraud and other political issues surround Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe. There have been sanctions imposed by other governments. The sanctions have been cited as being a factor in the lack of basic services in Zimbabwe. The problems, however, existed before the imposition of sanctions. The sanctions are mostly travel bans and a freeze of foreign assets, which have an effect on the political elites, but do not directly affect basic human services. With unemployment hovering near 90% and inflation in the hundreds of millions of percents, average citizens have no access to spendable currency and no way to purchase anything. Since the currency has no value, there is little incentive to work and basic maintenance of community infrastructure such as water and sewage simply is not occurring. People cannot trust the safety of whatever municipal water they get. Every drop of water to be consumed must be boiled and since there is no electricity, wood fires must provide the heat for boiling water. Fuel is becoming scarce.

Cholera leaves its victims weak and dehydrated. Part of the treatment is the administration of intravenous fluids, but medical supplies, including fluids, are scarce. Victims are overwhelming clinics and hospitals and many are being treated outside because there is no room to bring them inside. Prior to the outbreak, hospitals were already being shut down due to a lack of funds as the economy and the government continue to crumble. Harare's two main hospitals are both closed.

People are desperate. And they are angry because of the total failure of the government to provide even the most basic of services.

Life seems fragile amidst the chaos of Zimbabwe. Life is not pretty on the banks of the grey-green greasy Limpopo river.

Imagining the situation in Zimbabwe does give me an appreciation for the luxury of living in a home where there is clean drinking water available from the tap and the sewage system functions properly. Earlier this fall some of the residents in our neighborhood were upset about a fee that was imposed by the city. Although we live outside of the city limits, we are now required to obtain city permits for our septic systems and to have them inspected and maintained in accordance with city regulations. Some of my neighbors balked at the fees and felt that they were unfair. But it is obvious that what we do with our sewage has a direct impact upon water quality in the city and that keeping the water supply safe and secure is everyone's responsibility. Whether or not one agrees with the imposition of the fees, it is important to note that we live in a place where the infrastructure works, where city and state employees monitor the quality of our drinking water and where sewage is properly treated. The contrast with the citizens of Zimbabwe is dramatic.

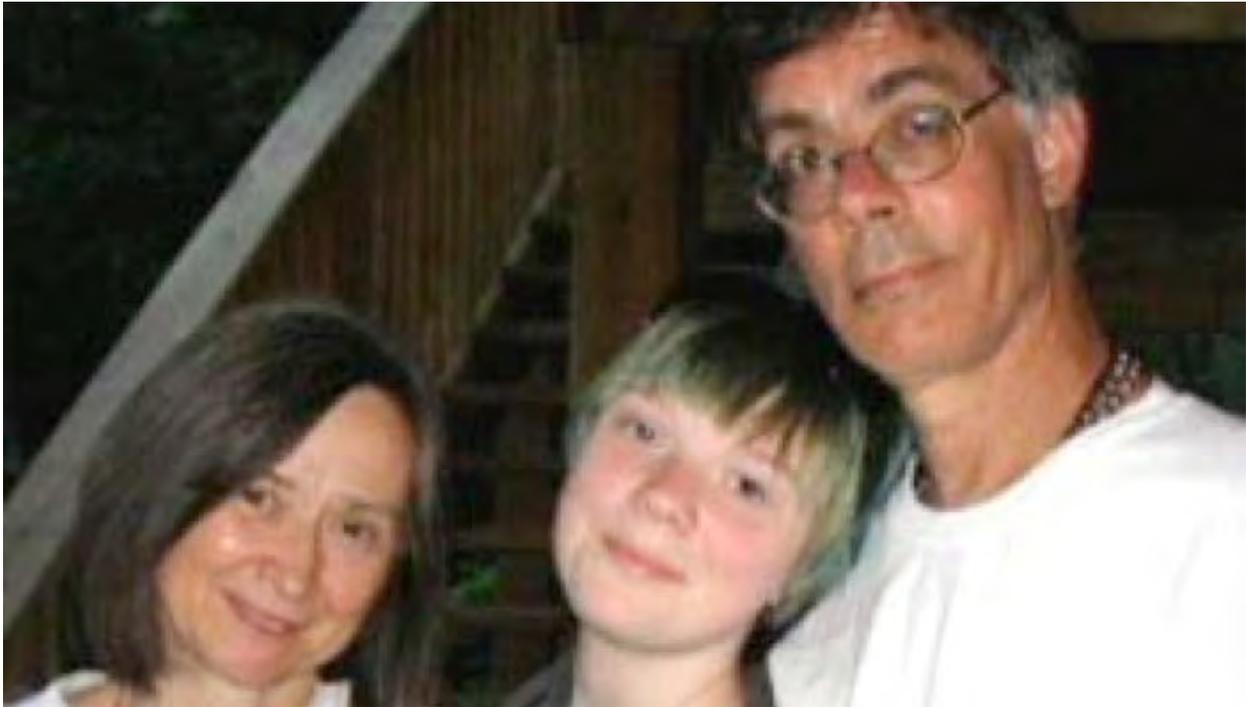
No, I have never been to Africa. But its people are in my prayers. And I am doing what I can to support Church World Service, whose relief workers are working to bring

whatever help they can. And I hope that we will never take the simple gift of clean drinking water for granted.

The banks of clear, clean Rapid Creek are a long ways from the banks of the great grey-green greasy Limpopo River.

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## December 4, 2008 – Forgiveness



Family photo, provided by CNN.

Kia Scherr is experiencing the worst kind of grief imaginable. On the night of November 26, her husband Alan and 13-year-old daughter Naomi were on the trip of a lifetime. They had traveled to Mumbai, India and were staying at the Oberai Hotel. They were in the restaurant when terrorist gunmen burst into the hotel and started shooting. Both Naomi and Alan were killed in the attack. It took a while for the news to travel halfway around the world to Virginia where Kia was anxiously trying to get news about her family. When the news did arrive, it was the worst news imaginable. Both were killed by the gunmen. She had spoken with both her husband and daughter by telephone a couple of days earlier and they reported that they were “having the times of their lives.” But they ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time. With no connection to the causes of the terrorists or the political dynamics of the conflict between Pakistan and India, they simply were hungry and went to the hotel restaurant at the same time as the terrorists decided to attack the hotel as a symbol of Mumbai’s prosperity without regard for the people who were in the hotel.

They were innocent victims. They did nothing to deserve their fate. And Kia is an innocent victim. She did nothing to deserve the grief and loss and emptiness that she feels. And nothing can change the reality of the deaths of her husband and daughter. The pain she is experiencing is beyond description. It is the kind of pain that gives rise to deep anger. Victims like Kia have turned their anger into generations of conflict, pain and suffering in the past.

But Kia has chosen a different path. Here is the statement that she made to the press: “We must send them our love, forgiveness and compassion,” Kia Scherr told reporters

Tuesday of the Mumbai attackers, nine of whom were killed by Indian forces. "As Jesus Christ said long ago, they know not what they do.

"They are in ignorance, and they are completely shrouded and clouded by fear, and we must show that love is possible and love overpowers fear. So that's my choice."

It is an astounding choice. And it is a choice that interrupts the cycle of violence and hatred. In the midst of the deepest grief and pain that she has ever experienced, she has chosen to speak and act from her faith. What calling could be higher than her visible demonstration of the power of love. "We must show that love is possible and love overpowers fear."

Sometimes we get caught in a cycle of grief and anger and despair. The world seems to be so full of senseless violence. We have learned to accept and live with atrocities and terror. We read the stories of the innocent victims of disputes and battles whose origins we cannot understand. We think of the world as a violent place and the daily stories of death and destruction don't seem to have much of an impact on us unless it comes too close to home.

As Christians we celebrate Advent with our belief that into this world of darkness and despair God enters with the light of love and hope. Christmas is our annual celebration of the particular way that God comes to us in human form, in Jesus of Nazareth, and brings to us a message that we would not be able to receive in any other form: love is stronger than death.

The forces of violence and evil and destruction do not have dominion over this world. God is love. And love overcomes all of the forces of violence and evil and destruction.

Kia Scherr has it right. In the midst of the worst pain imaginable, she has raised her voice for love and forgiveness. She has made a choice. She will not let the terrorists have control over her life. She will not give in to the fear and pain and destruction. She has chosen the path of love and forgiveness as difficult as the choice may be. This is not some sentimental emotion, but rather a genuine power that comes from beyond herself and is embodied in her life. Make no mistake about it, her choice is not an easy one and it demonstrates a strength that is beyond the might of any army. She is a living demonstration of the power of love.

In a season of decorations and colored lights, where it seems that the only way we know how to celebrate is to shop and consume, one light shines brighter than all the rest. Like the star that guided wise men to the manger so long ago, it is a light like no other. It is the light of love. I give thanks for this sign of God's love shown in the power of a wife and mother to forgive.

## December 5, 2008 – Preparing for Inauguration



AP/Getty Photo

The view of the White House is obscured this week as construction crews prepare the stands for the inauguration ceremony that will be held on January 20. It is an event that accompanies the election of each new president and each president wants to mark the event with ceremonies and celebrations that reflect that person's style of leadership. Tickets for the swearing-in ceremony are supposed to be free. 250,000 tickets have been distributed through members of congress, but demand has outstripped supply and some people have been scalping the tickets for thousands of dollars. The price of hotel rooms in Washington DC during the event is also approaching a thousand dollars a night and even private rooms miles from downtown are being offered on Craig's List and other online marketplaces at hundreds of dollars per night. It appears that the inauguration is increasingly a place for the rich and powerful to mingle and be seen.

High prices in tough economic times don't sit well with all people. Our governor, Mike Rounds, has announced that he will not attend the Inauguration. Though it would provide the opportunity for him to mingle with other governors as well as senators and representatives, he feels that the price is not a good investment of the state's limited funds. He is not the only one who will be kept home by the cost.

But there will be a few people of limited means who will be attending the event at no cost to themselves. Virginia businessman Earl Stafford will be paying all of the expenses from transportation to event tickets to meals, lodging, and even gown and tuxedo rentals for hundreds of poverty-stricken, and terminally ill citizens in addition to

the same benefits for wounded men and women in uniform. He has said that he hoped the balcony terrace is filled “with those who are disadvantaged, those who are distressed, mingling with those who aren’t so. And we hope to see on their faces a sense of excitement.” His family’s nonprofit foundation, the Stafford Foundation, is footing the bill of at least \$1 million for what it is calling the People’s Inaugural Project. He is seeking additional sponsors to assist with the project as well.

Why would a retired Air Force officer and successful business man who notes that he does not agree with all of the incoming president’s positions, invest so much in making sure that everyone is included in the national celebration? The answer lies less in his business acumen, which is considerable, and more in the simple fact that he is a Christian. The son of a Baptist minister, Stafford believes in putting his faith into concrete action.

The Stafford Foundation website describes the foundation as “a faith-based, non-profit organization founded on the promoting the principles of Jesus Christ.” The focus of the foundation’s work is “bringing people of good will together to help the underserved, the marginalized and the distressed and assisting them to help themselves, and eventually to help others.” The website goes on to declare, “We believe that by investing in the hopes and dreams, the abilities and the potential of the less privileged, our communities and our nation will benefit.”

“I was inspired to do this by the Lord . . . It’s not about us but about us helping other people,” Stafford declared in announcing the project.

Among the events that participants in the project will attend will be a prayer breakfast and a Martin Luther King, Jr. luncheon, which will “celebrate the realization of Dr. Martin Luther King’s inspirational vision.” The Stafford Foundation is also among the sponsors of the Inaugural Youth Ball on the evening of January 20, “which will allow the next generation of Americans to celebrate this historic event.”

I won’t be attending the Inauguration. It is not my role in life to mingle with the rich and powerful. But I will probably watch some of the events on television. And I will be looking for signs of faith in action as I scan the crowd. I don’t care much if I glimpse a rich or powerful or famous face. But I do hope that I will see ordinary people, those whose lives are dominated by poverty or disability, those who have sacrificed so deeply in service to others, and those whose potential is yet to be realized. We share a common citizenship and we share a common future.

I pray that this inauguration will be the beginning of something more than a change of political party in leadership, a change of something more than the racial and ethnic identity of the President, a change of something more than political philosophy. I pray that we will inaugurate a new sense of responsibility and participation in a government founded on the proposition that all are created equal.

Certainly, the day will be different because of the faith of one son of a Baptist minister.

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## December 6, 2008 – A Batch of Cookies



I spent a little time last night baking cookies. There are some people who have great passions about chocolate chip cookies, hiding their favorite recipes from relatives, adding secret ingredients, and shaping the cookies in just the right way. A quick Internet search reveals 344,000 chocolate chip cookie recipes. One website proclaims, "I have been trying recipes forever in search of the perfect chocolate chip cookie recipe." "Forever" might be a bit of an exaggeration. Ruth Wakefield, cook at the Toll House Inn is credited with developing the recipe and allowing Nestle company to use it on its wrappers in exchange for a lifetime supply of chocolate for her baking. That was in the late 1920's. So maybe the search for the perfect recipe hasn't quite lasted "forever." I use the recipe off of the package of chocolate chips. There is nothing fancy about my cookies.

I made cookies because today the Woodchuck Society is going to make a firewood delivery to Wanblee, the second big delivery of this season. We have eight or nine pickups and four trailers loaded for the trip. We'll leave at noon, deliver the wood to the Catholic church, where volunteers will be waiting to distribute the wood to needy families. Much of the wood will be transferred directly to volunteers' pickups for immediate delivery. The cookies are just a snack to share with the volunteers after we have the wood unloaded.

There is plenty of food associated with the Woodchuck Society. We have an annual picnic and people from the church send snacks with us each time we deliver wood. It is part of the fellowship of the project. And fellowship is an important part of the work that

we do. Of course, our project is defined by a sense of mission. There is a real need for energy assistance and firewood for heating homes. And we have the means to make significant deliveries of wood. Our project has tangible benefits for people in our state. But the joy and camaraderie of working together is a significant part of the process. And it is the fellowship of the group that keeps people engaged in the projects and coming back for more work.

The Woodchuck Society doesn't need me to bake chocolate chip cookies. But being with the people inspires me to want to do small things to contribute to the big work that gets accomplished. Baking a few cookies last evening seemed like a way to remain connected with this amazing collection of people and the good work that they do.

In Lakota culture the gift of firewood is more than just a way to keep warm. Firewood is a traditional honoring gift for elders. Giving firewood to an elder is a way of showing respect for the accomplishments and contributions of the elder. Saying that an elder never lacks for firewood is another way of saying that the elder is deeply respected in the community. So when we take firewood to share with others, we are doing more than delivering fuel. We are honoring our neighbors with the gift of winter warmth.

In Wanblee, younger families must first deliver firewood to an elder before becoming eligible to take firewood for their own use.

Perhaps, in some small way, some home-baked chocolate chip cookies can be a way of honoring the dedicated volunteers who deliver the firewood. There is a lot of work in a load of firewood. Trees have to be cut up, split and the wood is often stacked to cure and dry, moved and stacked again to provide access for pickup, stacked into trucks and trailers for delivery, stacked at the delivery and finally stacked at the home of the recipients. Backs get stiff from bending over to pick up the pieces of firewood. Knees become tired from kneeling the the back of a pickup stacking the wood. People contribute fuel and equipment and time. They are worthy of my honoring and respect.

Of course baking a few cookies is also a way of honoring my family. The house fills up with a delicious aroma and a fresh-baked cookie is a good snack after a long day at work.

There are some drawbacks, of course. The shape of my body quickly reveals that I would be able to do more work for the Woodchuck Society if I would eat a few less cookies. I haven't been searching "forever" for a recipe, but I have been eating an extra cookie now and then for most of my life. And those cookies are beginning to add up to some significant weight.

But today we will work. We will unload and stack the firewood. We'll form human chains, handing wood from one person to the next. We'll toss firewood from one truck to

another. And when we get to the end of the day there'll be a little bit of stiffness and a few aching joints.

And it will be all worth it. Definitely.

Because, with the gift of firewood we honor our neighbors and we honor our God.  
“Whatever you did for the least of these, my brethren, you did for me.” We serve God’s family. And that is a worthy task for this day.

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**December 7, 2008 – Comfort**



The words of Biblical prophets are filled with surprises. These communities of poets, who were social critics, produced large sections of the portion of the Bible that is shared by Christians, Muslims and Jews. The prophets were special conduits of God's message to the people. Their poetry speaks the truth of God in ways that are bold and direct. Often the prophets took on a critical tone and sometimes they were harsh in their warnings, especially when pointing out the excesses of kings who tried to consolidate power, knowledge and wealth. They could be challenging and angry when pointing out Israel's failure to provide for widows, orphans and immigrants in their midst. Their words can still sting when we look at the excesses of our own culture and our failure to adequately meet the needs of people in our midst.

At the same time, the prophets could be tender and use the power of poetry to rally the community and to remind people of God's great love. "Comfort, comfort" proclaims the 40th chapter of Isaiah. It goes on to speak of a new future in which the way through the wilderness will be made easy and God's glory will be revealed. The promise is alluring. But the connections with the world in which we live today are more difficult to make than some of the more harsh and judgmental passages of the prophet's work.

The physical wilderness of Israel can be harsh with desert conditions, a lack of water, hot days and cold nights. Despite the intense shortage of land and the crush of people in the cities of Israel, there remain areas of arid land where it is difficult to survive. The way through the wilderness is not immediately evident and it is hard to imagine a highway that would lead one through that area. But the physical wilderness of Israel is

nothing when compared to its political wilderness. The division of the land of the Bible into communities surrounded by walls, the struggles for access to jobs and water and a host of other resources, the history of violence and terrorism - all of these and a thousand other challenges have made the Holy Land much less than holy at times. Isaiah's call to "Comfort, comfort my people," seems to be a distant cry from the realities on the ground in Israel.

And we, who live far from that place, are not out of the wilderness, either. Our economic system, based on the acquisition of wealth and the sale of consumer goods, is faltering and no one seems to have the answers to the economic turmoil that is upon us. The experts have given up in their attempts to predict how long or how deep this recession will be. It seems that each bit of news is worse than the last: declining markets, increases in joblessness, home foreclosures, overwhelming debt, huge government bailouts that fail to have the desired effect. A cursory glance at the headlines daily reminds us that we live in a wilderness.

And the prophet speaks to the people of the wilderness with a message of comfort and the promise of a way to relationship with God that is obvious, easy and accessible by all. "Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough places shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed and all will see it together."

It is hard to imagine the fulfillment of this promise when we seem to be lost in a wilderness that is not of our own making. While we can claim responsibility for some of the problems of our time, it is clear that we are subject to forces that are beyond ourselves. Comfort seems to be a long way away.

Advent is a special blessing this year. Perhaps that is true every year, but especially this year it seems like a critical time to return to the familiar readings and to be reminded once again that the comfort we seek will not be of our own making. The promise is beyond ourselves and our own ideas and abilities.

We are not alone. God has not abandoned us. Even when times get hard and it seems like we are suffering, God has not forgotten us. We are a people of promise who belong to God, who is faithful in every promise. The present reality is not the final word on the meaning of our lives. We are a part of something bigger than the struggles of the present. Even when we are not able to see the way ahead, we are a people with a future who belong to a God in whose hands the future rests.

And that is the source of our comfort.

There is a way through the wilderness of these times. There is a promise that lies ahead.

So today we will gather to celebrate Advent. And to wait for God to reveal the truth in God's time. Patience is not easy. We have to practice the waiting every year. And there is a part of us that wants to rush to the conclusion, to avoid the waiting, to have Christmas immediately. But there is another part of us that realizes that we need to wait. And that anticipation is also a gift.

Comfort is our gift, even when we do not know what tomorrow will bring.

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## December 8, 2008 – The Art of Conversation



Yesterday was our Advent Arts Festival. The festival has been evolving in recent years. For many years, the focus of the event was Christmas crafts. There were opportunities for people to engage in a variety of crafts, mostly making decorations or simple gift items. This year, the focus was shifted slightly to emphasize arts that might be used in worship. There was a group making banners and paraments for use in the sanctuary, there was a workshop for singing Christmas carols, and another working on music that will be used in worship on December 21st. One group was exploring hand bell ringing.

Each year, there is a large group of members of the congregation who do not participate in the crafts. They sit at the tables in the fellowship hall and converse. This is in part due to habit. Each week after worship, most of the congregation heads to the fellowship hall for refreshments and fellowship. So on a week when we plan something different, many members continue with their usual routine despite the announcements of different options.

So this year, we included in the promotional materials for the Advent Arts Workshop a workshop entitled “the art of conversation,” and invited those who wanted to do so to head directly for the fellowship hall, get a cup of coffee, tea or cider, and a home-made cookie and sit at the tables to visit. Maybe the gesture was largely symbolic. People are going to do what they want to do anyway. But acknowledging the option in the materials seemed to give people permission in a new way to linger about the tables and converse.

Our fast-paced world often does not allow much time for conversation. People have hectic schedules that demand almost constant motion. The present of mobile devices such as cell phones, laptop computers and personal digital assistants means that many of us are almost constantly connected with our work places. In a time of rising unemployment, fewer workers have to complete the work for many companies and work hours are increasing. The vast number of activities and options for children often results in families becoming over-committed and ragged from running from one event to the next.

Yesterday, for some of the members of the church, we gave permission to pause, sit, relax, and simply visit with one another. There was no agenda, no suggested topics for suggestion, no deadline, no task to be accomplished - just an invitation to sit for a spell and talk with other members of the congregation.

By most evaluations, the Advent Arts Festival was a success. More than a hundred people lingered after church for more than an hour, participating in a wide variety of activities. It is not easy to get such a group of talented and engaged individuals to slow down enough to give the church an extra hour. There were still a few people at the church at 2:30 p.m. - four hours after the end of worship.

Most of the things we do in the church are difficult to evaluate. The results are often so far away in time that we don't see the connection between our efforts and any kind of tangible results. We count numbers from time to time: attendance, membership, pledges, participation in various activities. But the numbers are only partial indicators of success and they speak nothing of growth in faith. Some of the most faithful times in the history of the church have been times when the church was not judged by the outside world to be successful. And some of the times when the church was successful in the eyes of the world with big buildings, leaders who were power brokers, and lots of wealth were times that we recognize, in retrospect, that the church strayed from the Gospel and the people drifted toward idolatry. Success and failure in the church cannot be measured by the standards of the world.

I am pleased that we made intentional space for the art of conversation in our Advent Arts Festival yesterday. It may be one of the most valuable arts for the expression of faith. Like music, drama, dance and visual arts it holds the potential to express what we believe and to provide an avenue of connection with that which is beyond ourselves.

The prologue to the Gospel of John speaks of incarnation in a unique way. It says, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Perhaps in the simple act of lingering for conversation, we made a little room for God's word to dwell among us yesterday.

## December 9, 2008 – Gray Day



Yesterday was a gray day. It rained off and on during the day, melting the remaining snow on the ground. The sun threatened to break through the clouds a couple of times but, for the most part, it was a cloudy day - not the best day for outdoor activities. We notice that kind of day around here because we don't have too many of them. For most of the morning there were a handful of deer bedded down in the neighbor's yard. They would watch me when I stepped out on the deck, but didn't feel threatened enough to get up.

I had plenty of indoor chores for a day off and kept myself busy without venturing too far from home. When we spend as many days running around from here to there as we do it is a treat to have a day to stay in. I baked bread, painted the ceiling in a hallway downstairs, caught up on some paperwork and did some reading. All of which is another way to say that I don't have too much news to report in this morning's blog.

The world had its share of exciting events yesterday. A marine jet crashed into homes in a San Diego Neighborhood, Mexican officials released statistics showing a dramatic increase in organized crime, the EU deployed troops to Serb-controlled areas of Kosovo, Ghanaian elections are still too close to call but it appears that a peaceful transition in power will take place, rioting continued in Greece after a 15-year-old was killed by police, Sony announced layoffs of 8,000 workers, and more. For the people directly involved in any of those events, the day was hardly routine.

But in our little corner of the world, it was a calm and peaceful day. And calm and peace are blessings to be savored.

We have such easy access to entertainment with all sorts of technologies to bring music and movies into our homes, cable and satellite systems that bring hundreds of television channels, huge sports arenas and concert venues in most communities, and all sorts of options for dining out. We have become a culture that expects to be entertained. And sometimes we forget how to entertain ourselves. More importantly, we fill up our lives with so many activities and events that we forget how to be quiet.

Faithful people have known for thousands of years that quiet contemplation is one important way of experiencing God's presence. Centering prayer takes time and is most easily practiced in an environment without too many distractions. When we overfill our lives with appointments and events and activities we risk missing a deeper relationship with God that, like any other relationship, requires time and effort on our part.

Sabbath, time intentionally set aside for relationship with God, is a spiritual practice that is not particularly valued or taught in our generation. Churches schedule multiple worship services and activities to accommodate the various schedules of their members. They rarely promote the value of setting aside a day for worship. Even the notion that church members ought to set aside the same time every week is viewed as a bit obsolete. In order to make church life work for our members, we often schedule meetings and attend to administrative duties on Sundays. There are members who will serve the church in a variety of ways if it doesn't mean having to make multiple trips to the church in the same week. We have begun to pay attention to ways to place meetings and events back-to-back so that people don't have to make an extra trip to the church.

The hectic schedules work for churches, but I wonder if they work for the people that we serve. Do we do our members a favor by not asking them to set aside more time for the church? Do we encourage hectic and fast-paced lifestyles by failing to provide calm? Are we raising yet another generation of young people who see church as a consumer activity - something that is worth their time only if they are entertained?

The answers to these questions will be revealed in due time. In the meantime, it is important that we, who are leaders in the church, take a serious look at our own lifestyles. I know I have a tendency to over-schedule my life. I know that I often fail to make enough quiet space for contemplation, study and prayer. I know that there are simply adjustments I could make to my schedule that would open up more time for Sabbath. And I know that there are others who look to me as an example.

So today I give thanks for a gray day yesterday. It was just what I needed. And perhaps today I will find a few more moments for quiet because I had the gift of time yesterday.

## December 10, 2008 – Remembering Martha



I don't know the reason why, but I woke up this morning thinking of Martha Snyder. Martha was a teacher and mentor for us in the 1970's as we pursued our education at Chicago Theological Seminary. She is author of the landmark book on child development, *The Young Child as Person: Toward the Development of Healthy Conscience*. Together with her husband, Ross, she founded the *Institute for Meaning Formation*. More importantly for the memories I hold, Martha was the founder of the Chicago Theological Seminary Laboratory Preschool.

Students of Religious Education at the Seminary were required to spend a semester teaching in the preschool. Every day after the preschool children had gone home, Martha would have lunch with the students and together we would discuss what had happened, what it meant, and how it related to our lives as Christian educators. The program was unique in the ways in which it integrated pastoral counseling and religious education as complimentary disciplines. Our noontime discussions drew upon theology, psychology, psychiatry, educational psychology and human development. This unique combination of Clinical Pastoral Education with developmental theories of education led to a learning environment that was imitated by several other theological schools.

Martha Snyder grew up in Columbus Ohio and as a teenager became active in the Christian Endeavor movement. In 1930, she married a co-worker in the movement, Ross Snyder, and they were colleagues and partners for 62 years of marriage and ministry. In 1940, Ross became a member of the faculty of Chicago Theological Seminary, which is where we met the Snyders when we were students in the 1970's.

Ross and Martha had two sons, Mark and Ross, Jr. Both of their sons were students at the famous University of Chicago Laboratory School, founded by John Dewey when he was a member of the faculty of the University.

Immersed in the lives of their sons, Martha was a keen observer of the style and the activities of the lab school. She watched as young teachers tried to transfer educational theories into practical classroom experiences. She observed what worked and what did not work. As their sons grew into adulthood and pursued their own careers as a cardiovascular surgeon and child psychologist, Martha turned her attention to early childhood education. At the CTS Preschool, Martha developed her skills of listening to children, interpreting their artwork, understanding their unique needs, and working with them as they developed and internalized conscience. Martha was especially interested in the process whereby children moved from external controls and limits on their behavior to internal controls and self-discipline.

Like her husband, Ross, Martha produced reams of unpublished resources for her students and pursued formal publication of her work only at the end of her career. It was not unusual for us to have twenty or thirty pages of reading of type-written sheets of paper loaded with references to the works of others. Martha produced annotated bibliographies that revealed not only the depth of her own research, but often her close professional relationships with noted scholars and teachers. The twenty years that Ross worked with Seward Hiltner on the federated faculties and the Institute for Religion and Personality were dynamic and exciting years in the development of religious education theory and practice. Martha was a direct participant and partner in that process during those years and was collecting information and research.

But what I remember most was her style with her students. Down on their level, meeting them eye to eye, Martha had an incredible ability to discern what a child was thinking and what was motivating a particular behavior. Her words were often simple. "Jeffrey, tell me what happened," but I did not get similar results by imitating her words. It was her tone of voice, her style and her whole being that communicated to the children that they were being taken seriously and that there was a great benefit for them in telling Mrs. Synder about their lives.

Martha really did care about each of the children.

And at lunch she would ask us, "What did you learn today?" And she truly expected every day in the preschool, whether we were observing through the one way window or were active participants in the classroom, to be a day of new learning. "Each person is a teacher and each person is a learner for life." Martha expected us to be aware of what we were learning and articulate in expressing what we had learned. She wasn't interested in whether or not we could repeat the things that she had observed or the conclusions that she had drawn. She wanted to know what important work we had discovered and what ideas, theories and new research we were pursuing. She had a

unique way of sending me scrambling for the library after a lunch with simple words like, “you’ll want to read . . .”

Now, more than three decades since I have been in a classroom with Martha, what I remember most is her tone of voice and the sparkle in her eyes. Martha always looked directly into your eyes when she spoke to you. And I remember her passion for the children.

She was willing to discuss the behaviors of the children, but saw behavior as temporary. It was the meaning of the behavior and the deeper meaning that the child was discovering that motivated Martha’s classroom interactions. “What does it mean to Jeffrey when he tries to bite another child?” “What is he really trying to say?”

I know that every time I teach, whether the students are adults or children, that there is a little bit of Martha Snyder in me. Perhaps that is why I woke up this morning thinking of Martha. I have a class to teach this morning. All of the students are retired, many of them are older than Martha was when I was her student. This isn’t a preschool class. But it is a class of learners who each bring their own quest for meaning to the room. And how much and how completely they learn may have more to do with how carefully I listen than with what words I say.

Martha taught us that a “living human document” was the primary “text” for each teacher. Observing students is more important than describing life stages. “One knows the truth as one participates in the truth.” Martha enabled us to participate in the truth.

Thank you, Martha. I’m still learning from you.

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## December 11, 2008 – Shopping



Members of our youth group went shopping last night. Their job was to purchase items for Christmas stockings for children who live in one of the shelter homes in our city. They were on a tight budget. They had \$5 per stocking and a dozen stockings to fill without going over the total of \$60 for the entire project.

There was agreement among the youth about some of the items. They all agreed that there should be some candy in each stocking. And they all agreed that there should be at least one toy in each stocking. The girls started their shopping in the cosmetics department, looking at fingernail polish, lip balms, hair decorations and such. The guys headed for the toys first and were attracted to various items that could be thrown or sent flying through the air.

I kept suggesting toys that I think of as basic: crayons, play dough, small balls. The youth didn't find the crayons to be exciting enough for a stocking. And they thought that crayons without a coloring book were an incomplete gift. It was interesting that after much discussion, one youth did choose crayons and a couple of coloring books as a part of the gift. We decided that jacks and marbles were probably not a good idea when we weren't exactly sure of the ages of the children.

I'm not much of a shopper. I tend to get into a store and become overwhelmed by the sheer volume of merchandise. I could have made my choices and been out of the store in a matter of minutes. It was a bit of a discipline for me to follow the teen shoppers

through the store and to listen to them as they weighed their decisions. But it was also interesting to watch them make their choices.

Most of the teens have \$5 in spending money on a fairly regular basis. They would spend as much in a fast-food restaurant without much thought. They have possessions that cost considerably more. So figuring out what to do with \$5 was as much of a challenge for what they could not purchase as for what they were able to purchase. In the end, most of the youth went together to purchase some items. A large bag of candy could be divided among all of the stockings and sharing the expense meant that there was more left over for other items. A box with three small toy cars could be divided among three stockings and leave money for other items.

All of the teens ended up with too many items to fit into the stockings that had been provided. They were surprised at the abundance of gifts that they found. When they received their assignment for the evening they wondered what could be purchased for such a small amount of money. By the end of the evening, they were amazed at how much they had been able to get for \$5.

It wasn't a typical shopping adventure, but it was an opportunity to work with the youth and to help them to understand some of the challenges that are faced by some of the citizens of our community. There are families where even \$5 is an extravagance that is beyond the means of available funds. There are families whose very existence is dependent upon donations and the generosity of others. There are families who don't get to choose the gifts their children receive, but have to accept what is offered by others. And there are children who don't get the experience of being given \$5 to spend in any store.

We are so used to abundance that we forget that it is a luxury. It is a useful discipline for youth to consider how best to invest a limited amount of money in a project. The question, "If I had \$5, how would I spend it?" is considerably different from the challenge of making choices of how to invest \$5 for a child who has little or no spending money. The conversations with the youth as they made their choices became opportunities to open their eyes and minds to a reality in our community that is often invisible.

I wouldn't have thought that shopping would be a meaningful exercise for a youth group, but I have to change my mind. It turned out to be a good adventure and an opportunity for the youth to grow. You still won't find me spending much time in the stores. I'm just not much of a shopper. But it was a good way to invest my time last evening. Maybe we all learned something new.

## December 12, 2008 – Dark and Light



The moon is shining through the trees and casting long shadows as I rise for my day. The eerie shadows stretch across the fields that are a bit brighter because the snow reflects the light. It is light enough to take a walk, if one is careful. But the light has taken quite a journey before it gets to my eyes. It has traveled from the sun to the moon where it was reflected towards the earth and from the moon to the earth where it is reflecting off of the snow. Still it is good to have a nearly full moon to provide a bit of light during the long winter night. The winter solstice is approaching. In a few days we will experience the shortest day of the year as the tilt of our planet means that places in the northern hemisphere are farthest from the sun.

We don't live that far north. We still get a fair share of daylight, even in the midst of winter. Although we rise before the sun and stay up long after it has set, we are getting about ten hours of daylight as we near the solstice. Farther north the days are shorter. In Fairbanks, Alaska, there is less than four hours of sunlight each day right now.

Doctors have noticed that there is a particular set of emotional symptoms that come from the shorter days and lack of sunlight. Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), also known as winter depression or winter blues, is a mood disorder. People affected by SAD experience normal emotions during most of the year, but have deeper depressive symptoms during the winter. There are various forms of therapy for the disorder, including spending time under special bright artificial lights that help to make up for the lack of sunlight.

In the church, this is the season of Advent. The name of the season is derived from the Latin, "adventus," or "coming." We are waiting for that which is coming. In the Western church, we celebrate Advent for just four weeks. In Eastern orthodox churches, the season begins on September 1 and lasts for nearly four months. Although Christianity has made large efforts to separate itself from religions that organize their beliefs around the phases of the moon or the cycles of the sun, we do use images of light and dark in our preparations for Christmas. We light candles to remind us of the light that is coming into the world. We decorate our homes with lights, almost in defiance of the darkness that seems so prevalent. We anticipate the season of Epiphany, which follows Christmas, in which we celebrate Jesus as the light of the world.

This year there are many things for which we wait.

We live in uncertain and unsettling times. It is interesting that the word for the mood disorder, "depression," is the same word that is used to describe a severe economic downturn. Economists are reluctant to use the word depression in association with the current recession and many are quick to point out the differences between the current situation and the great depression of the 1930's but there is a sense of sadness about the current economic situation and more than a few people find themselves overwhelmed by their economic circumstances. The quote, attributed to President Truman goes something like, "It's a recession when your neighbor loses his job; its a depression when you lose yours."

We are waiting for good news about the economy. We are waiting for good news about jobs. We are waiting for good news about our prospects for retirement and the status of our retirement savings. We are waiting for good news about jobs. We are waiting for good news about the world situation. We are waiting for good news about the troops who are deployed to far away places. We are waiting for good news about politics.

This year there are many things for which we wait.

And sometimes we are tempted to just sit in the dark and wait.

But in the church we light candles. And each week we light more candles than we did the week before. This Sunday we will light the gaudete candle. Gaudete is another Latin word, meaning "rejoice." We choose to focus our attention on joy in the midst of the dark season of waiting. We affirm that there is great joy coming and that the darkness of our present situation does not define who we are. The world may be experiencing darkness, we may be feeling a bit sad, but there is great joy that lies ahead and we choose to celebrate that joy.

I think that Advent is an especially poignant season this year. In the depths of sadness, we need to reach for a joy that is deeper than just going through the motions, a joy that is far more than just a surface happiness. Deep down, in the very nature of the

universe, there is great joy. The rumblings of creation are reflected in the birth of new creation. We are reminded in this season of Emmanuel - God with us. We are not alone. And that is good news indeed.

So as I peer out my window at the moon in the trees, I wait. But I am moved to joy when I realize that there is much good that lies ahead. God isn't finished with us yet. And great joy is dawning.

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## December 13, 2008 – Farewell Tour



Tonight we say farewell to a Christmas tradition that has been a part of our lives since we have lived in South Dakota. The musicians of a South Dakota Acoustic Christmas will take to the stage in the theatre of the Rushmore Plaza Civic Center for the final concert in a remarkable series of Christmas events.

In 1995, the concert was held in our church. I was new to the church and new to the process of hosting outside groups in the church. The church I had previously served was too small to host many concert events. When the musicians arrived and began to unload their equipment, I knew that this wasn't going to be an ordinary church event. As people began to arrive well in advance of the concert, I was beginning to get nervous. The last fifteen minutes before the musicians began to perform were hectic. We were setting up folding chairs in the balcony, in the narthex, and anywhere else we could fit them. The parking lot had filled up earlier and cars were parking all the way to West Boulevard. The musicians were trying to use my office as a "green room," and there just wasn't enough space. The concert was delightful and the crowd surprisingly accommodating of the crush.

The next week we got a visit from the fire marshall. We were expecting a clean inspection because we had just finished a large and expensive fire code update on our building. He simply said, "You can never put that many people into those rooms again." We had to post placards listing the occupancy limits of the balcony, sanctuary and fellowship hall.

Over the succeeding months, we began to talk about what we might do about the concert the next year. We talked about doing two shows in the church, but it is a busy season for the church and there had been some complaints from the congregation about our hosting the show. We knew that if that many tickets could be sold, there was a possibility of raising significant funds from the concert. I was a new member of the fund-raising committee of Black Hills Area Habitat for Humanity and an idea began to form.

By early fall, we had booked the Rushmore Plaza Civic Center theatre, with a capacity nearly three times that of the church. The musicians had agreed to donate half of the proceeds of the concert to Habitat. Habitat had agreed to assume the risk of low ticket sales. If expenses exceeded income, the loss would fall on Habitat. I had signed the contracts with the civic center and the musicians. I was nervous. And we had a blizzard that night.

But we made a little money. And we started a partnership that just kept growing. In a few years we had sold out shows at the Civic Center. The revenue from a single concert was paying for the construction of a home. We added a second show in the Civic Center. Now the event includes a dinner and is known as the Habitat Gala. People purchase their tickets months in advance for this spectacular evening of entertainment. And the event has become the signature fund-raising event for Black Hills Area Habitat for Humanity.

But tonight is the end of the tour. Some of the musicians have been performing since 1990. And the logistics of a multi-city tour just before Christmas are incredibly complex. And they have decided to quit while they are at the top of their game rather than continuing for years and years.

So tonight is going to be bittersweet for me. The evening doesn't involve all of the work for me that it once did. Someone else has arranged the publicity and negotiated the contracts and sought the sponsors and ordered the programs. Someone else will meet the musicians at the stage door and provide refreshments for them throughout the afternoon and evening. Someone else has recruited ushers and ticket-takers and assigned positions to volunteers. Someone else has decorated and prepared to sell CD's. I'll just be attending the concert and enjoying the music.

And I will be remembering. There have been some wonderful memories. The first time we filled the house and used the proceeds to build an Acoustic Christmas home in Rapid City. The evening we dedicated that home and handed the keys to the homeowners. The year that the musicians of a South Dakota Acoustic Christmas were honored as Habitat for Humanity sponsors of the year for South Dakota.

For the last time tonight I will walk onto the stage with the musicians who have all become my friends over the years. And I will have the honor of introducing a

homeowner who has paid her mortgage in full. And I will make a gentle pitch to the audience for additional funds to build additional homes. If each person in that sold-out crowd could find \$5 per month for the next five years, Habitat would build an additional five homes. It would be 10% of Habitat's ambitious goal of building 50 new homes in the next five years. It is an achievable goal. And, quite frankly, the goal is nowhere near as frightening to me as was the prospect of selling enough tickets to break even back in 1996.

For years to come, when I am pounding nails or installing cabinets, or placing shingles, I'll have the music of a South Dakota Acoustic Christmas in my head. I'll remember the precise and tight vocal harmonies, the dancing fiddle, the artistry on guitar and mandolin. I'll remember the people who have given so much of themselves for others.

Our job is not yet complete. We've build a few houses, but we haven't eliminated poverty housing in our community. We've sung a few songs, but we haven't filled the world with harmony.

Tonight may be the end of the tour, but the music will linger. Just when you think that it's over, the music starts over again. And it's sweeter than it was before. And it's better than it was before. The impact of the music and the homes that we have built will continue.

Thank you, musicians of South Dakota Acoustic Christmas. You've done more than entertain us with your music. You've put a song in our hearts. And we'll keep building because you've connected us to something that is far bigger than ourselves.

And the music goes on and on and on.

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## December 14, 2008 – The Angel



Our family doesn't make too big of a show of Christmas. We don't put up a bunch of outdoor lights and we prefer homemade decorations to the things that are purchased in the store. We do enjoy our Christmas tree. One of the joys of living in the hills is that with a Forest Service permit, we can go into the woods and select a tree for our home. By choosing carefully and following a few simple guidelines, we are able to select a tree without causing damage to the forest.

Yesterday was our day to head out for our tree. We allowed enough time to drive up into the hills to a spot where we know there are a lot of spruce trees. The hills have both federal and private land. There are cabins and mining claims and other areas where it is not appropriate to cut trees and one has to be careful that the site selected is on National Forest land. Yesterday was a warm day, so we were able to walk quite a ways from where we had parked the pickup. The snow was deep in places, and we broke through the crust and sank in with every step, so our progress was slow. After a little hike, we narrowed our selection down to three or four trees and finally made our selection.

We have no illusions about getting a "perfect" tree. We don't mind it if there is a bare spot or if the branches aren't all even. But we were pleased with our selection and grateful for a beautiful day and a pleasant hike in the woods. The forecast was for a blizzard and extremely cold weather, so we were glad to have our tree and be on our way home shortly after noon.

As soon as we got the tree set up in our living room, our daughter was looking for the angel that we put on the top of our tree. She is 25 years old and the angel is a life-long tradition for her. My mother made the angel, years ago, by knitting a cover for a styrofoam cone with a ball on the top. Our angel's wings are made out of gold paper and glued to her shoulders. After nearly thirty years of sitting on top of various trees and being packed away for most of the season she is showing a bit of wear.

Like the shepherds who were among the first to be informed of the birth of the messiah, I am no expert in angels. I've never seen, heard, or conversed with an angel. I don't know what one smells like. I suspect that visits by angels such as the one the shepherds experienced are extremely rare. We have some notable stories of the visits of angels in the Bible and in many of them, the ones visited don't know at first that their guests are angels. When the angels come to inform Abraham and Sarah of the birth of Isaac, they seem to be just some fellow desert travelers. And their news is so preposterous that Sarah is beside herself with laughter. God, of course, always gets the last laugh, and the child that was born was named Isaac, which means "laughter."

So I make no presumptions about angels. A star would be an equally appropriate symbol for the top of a Christmas tree. The star reminds us of God's gift of light to this world and of the star that guided wise men from the East who came and visited the Christ child. In Matthew's Gospel, we read of the star bringing special news from God to people who might not have understood or recognized the message of an angel.

God brings us messages in language that we can recognize and understand. Jacob wrestles with his dreams, Moses hears the voice from a burning bush, Mary is frightened by the visit of an angel in the night. God has no restrictions on the ways in which people might become aware of the mission and ministry to which we are called. I have recognized God's presence in the stories and traditions of our people. And I think that God often speaks to me in the voices of persons who have particular needs in our community and around the world. Surely God is with a hungry child in Costa Rica or a homeless family in Rapid City. Surely God loves the partner families who are selected to purchase Habitat for Humanity homes.

So our homemade angel is a perfect symbol for our family of the surprising and yet simple ways that we become aware of what it is that God calls us to do. Through the gentle teaching of a mother and the warm traditions of family, we come to know the nature of love. And God is love.

So the angel is on the top of our tree again this year and she will remain there until it is time to take the tree down. She appears to have many years of service left in her - enough to last my lifetime and perhaps she'll make the move to the tree of one of our children one day. It is equally possible that they will acquire their own traditions and decorations as the years pass. There is nothing magic about this particular angel. She isn't really an angel - just a symbol of something that is far more important.

There is a blizzard raging outside and the highway department is recommending no travel. I will have to make a decision about whether or not to cancel worship services within an hour or so. But it is warm inside our home and inside our hearts. May Christmas angels continue to grace our world with the good news.

“For unto you this day, in the city of David, is born a baby, who is Christ the LORD.”

God will guide my everyday decisions - even a decision about whether or not to cancel a worship service - even if I don't know for sure what an angel looks like.

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## December 15, 2008 – Yup, It's Cold!



Sometimes, when I am joking, I say that I have earned the right to tell North Dakota jokes because I lived in North Dakota for seven winters. But the truth is that the weather in the part of North Dakota where we lived wasn't dramatically colder than the weather where I grew up. I've spent most of my life living in places where it can get really cold at times. I can tell the difference between -20 and -30 by the feel of my cheeks as I rush from one place to another. I know how to wrap my face in a scarf so that I don't get frostbite. And I know that when it is really cold we spend most of the time indoors despite having heavy boots and insulated coveralls a good winter parka and heavy mittens.

So it might not be that cold. But -17 is pretty darn cold. I suspect our electricity meter is running at a pretty good clip this morning. On the other hand, we have electricity and our house is warm. There are over 800,000 residents of New Hampshire and Massachusetts who have no electricity in the wake of a devastating ice storm. Power crews are having to clear ice encrusted debris before they can get to the power lines.

The blizzard that was forecast for Saturday and Sunday didn't turn out to have much snow. A couple of inches fell and the wind blew and the roads were icy, but it didn't take long for our community to return to business as usual. But after the front passed and the skies cleared, the temperatures plummeted. The danger today is going to be the cold. The forecast high is -10 degrees. Some area schools have announced late starts and there will be more than a few cars that won't start this morning.

Below zero weather isn't that common around here. There are winters when we don't get any days that are below zero and usually when we do get the cold weather, it doesn't linger very long. The forecast is for the below zero weather to hang in for a week this time. People need to be serious about dressing warmly and they need to be aware of the dangers of the cold weather.

Extended periods of cold also result in more equipment failures. Things break when it gets really cold. Most materials become more brittle and crews that have to work outside to make repairs can only stay outside for short amounts of time. Everything takes longer when it is really cold.

But life goes on despite the weather. The funeral that is scheduled for this morning will proceed on schedule and we'll have a very brief committal service at the cemetery. We'll be wearing our long underwear, warm hats, boots and gloves. Fashion takes a back seat to survival when the temperatures sink below zero. But we don't stop living just because the weather outside is cold.

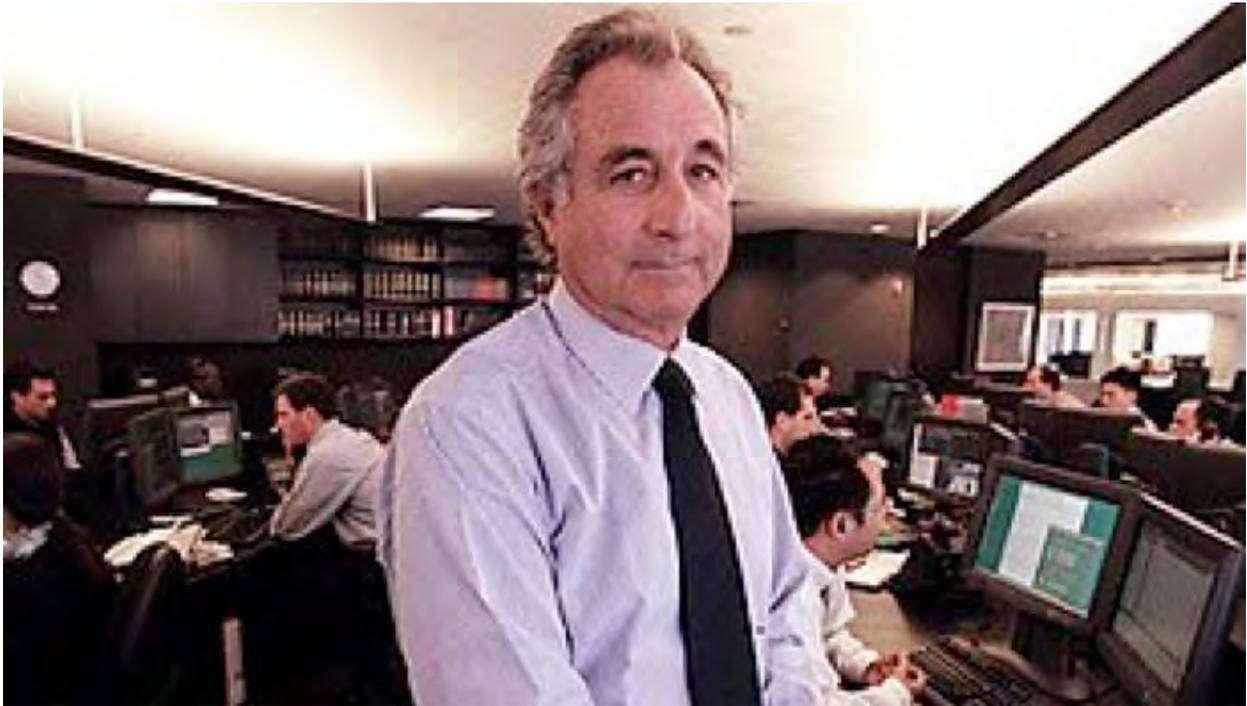
And there are a few advantages to the cold weather. Snow is easier to shovel when it gets really cold. It doesn't adhere to the concrete of the driveway and even areas that have been packed by the cars come clean with a good shovel. People are easier to contact when it is really cold. They tend to stay at home and the phone service is usually very good despite the cold weather. I can justify being overweight a bit easier on a very cold day. I have some reserve energy for those periods of time when I am outside and my body will even consume a little bit of its fat if I work outside long enough. It takes energy to keep warm.

But mostly the real advantage of cold weather is that it gives us stories to tell when the weather gets warmer. There is a camaraderie in having survived the extremes. We can pat each other on the back and congratulate ourselves for having the resourcefulness to keep going even when the weather is cold.

So if you're heading outdoors, bundle up. This cold weather is serious business and it can be dangerous. We need to watch out for each other and be ready to lend a helping hand. Stay inside if you can. It's going to warm up one of these days. And when it does, we'll quickly forget what the cold feels like. By the end of July, we'll probably have complained about the heat.

Life on the plains has always been tough and those of us who live on or near the prairies are kind of proud of our survival skills. We love to tell our stories to those who live in warmer climates. But on a day like today I do have some sympathy for the snow birds who are down in Arizona or Texas waiting for warmer days before returning to South Dakota.

## December 16, 2008 – House of Cards



AP Photo by Ruby Washington/New York Times.

The discovery of the giant Ponzi scheme that was built into Madoff Securities and the arrest of Bernard Madoff will go into the record books as one of the largest and most devastating financial scams of all time. The practice of paying very high returns to investors out of the funds of new investors without actually earning money through business investments is commonly known in the United States as a Ponzi scheme, named for Italian immigrant and early twentieth century swindler, Charles Ponzi. By the time investigators discover the extent of this swindle, we may be tempted to re-name the practice: “Madoff Scheme.”

The sheer size of the swindle is amazing. Initial estimates show that losses may total as much as \$51 billion. There are a lot of private investors among those who have lost large sums of money, including many celebrities. But there are also schools, retirement funds and charitable organizations among the losers.

Haaretz Israel News reports that The Elie Wiesel Foundation, founded by the famed writer and other Holocaust Survivors is among the big losers. Also named as a big loser was Wonderkinder Foundation, the Spielberg charity. The Chais Family Foundation, a California charity that, in recent years has been giving \$12.5 million in grants annually, was totally invested with Madoff and has been forced to close down operations entirely. Staff have been laid off and the work the group had been doing may be over forever. The Zuckerman Charitable Trust, 11% invested with Madoff, has lost at least \$30 million.

It is one thing when the collapse of markets results in losses for investors. It is another thing entirely when losses are caused by fraud, cheating and outright stealing. Perhaps investors should have been aware that their earnings were too good to be true. Perhaps some of them even had an inkling that there must be something wrong that was producing earnings that far above the rest of the market. There will be plenty of blame to be shared, but the bottom line is that some good people and some good charities are now wiped out.

Many investors who were wiped out weren't even aware that their funds were invested with Madoff Investment Securities. They used financial advisors who managed their portfolios. They could have found out, had they carefully poured over their statements and asked enough questions, but they trusted people who had, in the past, been successful and who were producing consistent returns.

There have been a lot of painful phone calls in the past week. Madoff investors had been realizing annual incomes of 15% to 22%. Those earnings are gone and so are the principal amounts invested. The group was very secretive and difficult to get into, which made it a perfect set-up for the swindler's art. There were warnings to investors about the risk they were taking. But it had been going on for quite a while. Some people had been a part of Madoff Investment Securities for forty years or more. And the returns were so good. And the Securities and Exchange Commission had given Madoff a clean report when they investigated several years ago.

The regulatory system was totally dysfunctional. The fraud that should have been apparent went undetected. It is easier to hide a scam in a rising market. It became impossible to hide it when the market crashed.

There will be more startling and shocking revelations of fraud and there will be more innocent victims. The times we are facing are not pretty for investors or for those who benefit from charitable trusts and foundations.

We, as a society, have become greedy. We have wanted to believe that it was acceptable for us to earn large returns on our investments. We have convinced ourselves that even though returns fluctuate, the principal invested is secure. But nothing is truly secure. And material possessions can be lost by those with the best of intentions and even careful investors can end up with significant losses. As the old adage goes, "There are no guarantees."

Jesus advice continues to be true: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is; there your heart will be also."

This week we have been hearing about the thieves who break in and steal. And we know that there will be plenty of broken hearts because of the treasures that have been lost. The markets are broken and it will take some time for them to recover. People who believed that they had substantial wealth may no longer have that wealth. The losses will cause no small amount of pain and discomfort. What seemed too good to be true was. The scheme is collapsing like a house of cards.

But we will not be destroyed. We have a community of believers and we have faith in God, whose rewards focus not on wealth or financial security, but rather on faith, hope, and love. Even in tough financial times, faith, hope and love remain. And those things - no one can take from us.

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## December 17, 2008 – Christmas Down Under



In the early days, Christianity spread from the mideast around the Mediterranean and then into Europe. It followed the spread of the Roman empire and didn't penetrate too far onto the African continent. The spread of Christianity into central Asia and China came later, after the Christian calendar had been established and the major holidays were relatively set. The date of Christmas was set early in the the process, probably sometime during the third century by a Roman Bishop. The date is shared by both Western and Eastern churches. However since most Eastern Orthodox churches have not accepted either the Gregorian calendar or the Revised Julian Calendar reforms, December 25 will fall on the civil date of January 7 until the end of this century.

Thus the Christian calendar was well established by the time that European exploration and colonialism took Christianity to many Southern hemisphere locations such as Southern Africa, South America, Australia and many Pacific Islands.

The tilt of the earth guarantees that the seasons happens at different times of the year in the Southern Hemisphere. In Australia, carols like "In the Bleak Midwinter," "Good King Wenceslas" with the snow all crisp and even, don't make a lot of sense, nor do popular songs such as "Winter Wonderland" or "Sleigh Ride" or "Jingle Bells." In Australia, Christmas is in the middle of the summer and people head to the beach, not the mountains for skiing. In the center of the continent, it is going to be very hot this week. At Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, the temperatures are forecast to reach into the 120s (fahrenheit) today.

The result is that Christians sharing the meaning of Christmas need to be aware that there are many cultural trappings which surround our celebration that don't make sense in all parts of the world. And Christianity is growing at a much more rapid rate in the Southern hemisphere than up north.

In Australia, they sing "Jingle Bells" with words like this:

Dashing thru the bush  
in a rusty Holden ute  
kicking up the dust  
eski in the boot  
kelpie by my side  
singing Christmas songs  
it's Christmas time and I am in  
my singlet, shorts and thongs . . .

Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way  
Christmas in Australia on a scorching summer day, hey!  
Jingle bells, jingle bells, Christmas is a beaut  
O what fun it is to ride in a rusty Holden ute.

If you aren't familiar with Australian slang, and eski is a portable cooler. The term is short for the word Eskimo, which is one brand, but many Australians use the shortened version to refer to all portable coolers. Holden is the nameplate used by General motors for their Australian-made vehicles and a ute is a utility vehicle - a sort of half car/half pickup vehicle that is very popular in Australia.

There are other Australian carols, such as Three Drovers, The Day that Christ was Born and the Carol of the Birds, that reflect a serious Christian faith in the context of a world where the birth of the Christ child is celebrated in the middle of summer.

Culture does affect how we think of our faith. We have been telling the story of the birth of Jesus from our own perspective for so many years that we imagine a cold, clear night, even though there are no references to weather in the Gospel. We might even imagine snow, even though snow is pretty rare in that part of the world.

Sometimes it can help us to recognize the deeper meanings of the holiday when we take a look at it from another perspective. Knowing that there are both summer and winter traditions surrounding Christmas helps us remember that the central Christmas story is not tied to any single season of the year. The gift of "God with us" is available every day, not just in the middle of the winter. The simple story of a baby born to modest circumstances in an uncertain world and the deep sense of hope that he brought is relevant in every generation and in every place.

Having had the gift of sharing Christmas with Australian friends and, more recently, visiting in Australia during their winter and our summer, has helped us to think differently about our Christian brothers and sisters around the world. And that is a blessing. God's gift is for the whole world and not just our little corner of it. And the good news is not our private possession about our personal salvation, but rather Gospel for all people in all times and places.

So, Merry Christmas to you, whether you sing:

"In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan  
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone.  
Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow.  
In the bleak midwinter, long ago."

or

"The North wind is tossing the leaves,  
The red dust is over the town,  
The sparrows are under the eaves,  
And the grass in the paddock is brown;"

we can all join in

"As we lift up our voices and sing  
To the Christ-Child, the Heavenly King!"

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## December 18, 2008 – Journey to Bethlehem



Photo from IanandWendy.com

It is about 80 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It probably never was practical to walk in a straight line. On today's roads, it is a journey of about 100 miles. Mary and Joseph would have had to travel for a week or more to make the trip. Nazareth is in northern Israel and Bethlehem is south of Jerusalem. In today's world, as is the time of Mary and Joseph few would consider a trip between Nazareth and Bethlehem without spending some time in Jerusalem. Perhaps the couple took ten days or two weeks to make the journey.

The route takes one in and out of the West Bank. From Israeli to Palestinian Lands and back again. Starting in Israel, one has to cross into the West Bank. With the construction of the wall as a barrier for people to travel from one place to the other, a journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem is a challenging task these days. Jenin, Nablus and Ramallah are all in Palestinian territories, but Jerusalem is held by Israel. From Jerusalem to Bethlehem means crossing the border back into the West Bank.

To make the journey today requires passing through five permanent military checkpoints and three temporary checkpoints. One would have to have a special permit to allow entry into and exit from Jerusalem, and special documentation would be required to take a donkey through any of the checkpoints. Farm animals are not allowed to cross through pedestrian checkpoints.

A couple would want to think twice before bringing a child into such a conflict-ridden and dangerous land.

Of course that was true for Mary and Joseph, too. The Gospel of Luke reports that when the angel announced to Mary that she was to have a baby, her question was, "How can this be?" Indeed, how can this be?

It was hardly a safe time to begin a family. Israel was occupied by a foreign power. Its people were subject to arbitrary excesses of the occupying forces. It was legal for Roman soldiers to confiscate property and to order civilians to carry their loads. The governor was unstable and willing to do anything, including the slaughter of innocent children, in order to maintain power. There were no real options for refugees to flee the country, were they to fear for their lives in the face of Roman oppression. Perhaps the only safe area would be to cross into Egypt and Egypt had bad memories for the people of Israel. They had been raised with stories of the days when their people had been held slaves in Egypt. The times were dangerous and human life was cheap. How can this be?

Mary and Joseph's lives were totally disrupted by the census. It wasn't just a matter of having to report to government counters. It was a forced temporary relocation to their traditional homelands. Those who had traveled from the south to the north for whatever reasons were being forced to return to the south for the purposes of the governor. There were no guarantees of jobs, food, housing or health care. How can this be?

Mary and Joseph were not among the rich or the ruling class. They had no money for any kind of public accommodation. They were forced to either sleep outside under the stars on a cold desert night or to seek shelter with relatives, most of whom were distant relatives, and there were too many other people wanting to bed in houses that were too small. There was no room for them in the upper area of the house. The only place for them was near the feeding troughs for the animals in the lowest corner of the house. How can this be?

Of course there are still unplanned and unexpected pregnancies in Bethlehem. There are babies born to poverty whose parents have no plan for support of their child. Sociologists say that overpopulation and overcrowding of the West Bank is already out of control. There are far too few jobs in Palestinian controlled territories. Work in Jerusalem is difficult to obtain and even if one were to get a job the uncertainty of whether or not one can cross through the checkpoints makes it difficult to keep a job when one doesn't know whether or not one can make it to work each day. How can this be?

Bethlehem is subject to frequent raids by Israeli soldiers in search of suspected militants. The wall has been designed to restrict the flow of people and to provide some sense of security in the face of out-of-control violence including suicide bombers who

attack civilian targets. The land for the wall was confiscated from Palestinian land owners and in some cases divides their property. Farmers are cut off from their fields. Families are cut off from one another. How can this be?

Those who fixate their attention on the miracle of the virgin birth might miss the miracle that God hasn't given up on us in the intervening years. The message of the prince of peace has been trashed and used for personal gain and some of the most extreme forms of violence have been committed in the name of religion. How can this be?

But somehow, once again, despite desperate circumstances, despite a world darkened by fear and distrust and strife, despite our very human failures, love and hope are born into our world. God hasn't given up on us. Peace is possible. Love is stronger than death.

Along with the news of her pregnancy, the angel brought Mary news that Elizabeth was expecting. Mary knew the ancient stories of women conceiving in nearly impossible circumstances - of Sarah and Rachel and other grandmothers of the faith. Suddenly, however, these weren't just old stories from some dusty past. The news was that it was happening in her time - in her generation - to her cousin. The news must have been shocking and amazing at the same time. The angel knew this and added the words, "for nothing will be impossible for God."

Those words are still true in our world today. Nothing will be impossible for God. God's actions are not limited to the past or even to the present. The future also is in God's hands. Nothing will be impossible for God.

The Christmas for which we prepare is something for which we can never be fully prepared. God comes to us on God's terms and in God's time and not our own. We will be surprised. We may even be shocked. We are likely to ask, "How can this be?"

But it can be. Nothing will be impossible for God.

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## December 19, 2008 – A Box of Fruit



We have considered today to be the deadline for sending out packages to others with Christmas gifts. There are more options for shipping packages and the service is quicker than it once was and we have responded by waiting later and later to get our packages in the mail. However, we were busy packing up and preparing packages last night and we should be able to get things mailed today.

Christmas cards are another matter. We have given up on trying to get our annual greetings out by Christmas. We usually don't even start sending them until after Christmas. It does give us the opportunity to respond to the many cards and letters we receive. Christmas is a busy time for us, but there are really no times that are not busy. It is really a matter of organization and priority. We prefer for our greetings to others to not be rushed and generated to meet a deadline. And we are a bit in awe of our organized friends who get all of those things done on time.

Yesterday there were a couple of packages delivered to us. One was marked "perishable" on the outside, so we decided to open it. It was a sturdy box with a dozen luscious pears inside. We haven't figured out for sure who originated the gift. It has the name of the farm where the pears were raised and we have a couple of siblings who live in that area, so we have an idea, but there was nothing in or on the box to identify the sender.

It is a wonderful gift. We love to eat fresh fruit and we are often torn, when shopping for food because of the distance that fruit is shipped before it reaches us. We have been

told that the average American citizen can save more fuel by decisions about what food to eat than by decisions about what kind of car to drive. It is easy for us to purchase local beef and honey and flour and we do. But fruit is another matter. Outside of a few chokecherries and buffalo berries, there is not a lot of locally produced fruit. So in the case of grapefruit and apples and oranges we make an exception. We purchase other fruits from time to time as well, but with peaches and pears we try to purchase in season when we know they have come from Colorado or another nearby state.

And we always stop at fruit stands when we are traveling. Part of vacation for us is the joy of eating fresh local fruit wherever we go.

But today we have fresh fruit, ready to eat, on our kitchen counter. And we have enough to last beyond Christmas day.

We are told that the practice of gift-giving at Christmas dates back to the visit of the magi. Matthew reports that wise men from the east came to visit the Christ child and his parents and that they offered gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gold has been, over the centuries, a valuable and easily exchangeable metal. It is a symbol of wealth and has considerable value. Frankincense and myrrh are both rosins with fragrant oils, often used for perfumes. They also had significant value in the ancient near east. But the gifts had broader symbolic value. Gold was an acknowledgment of royalty and a symbol of power. The spices were used in the preparation of bodies for burial.

The gifts might have been considered strange for a family with a newborn baby who would soon be doing some serious traveling. They might not have been among the most practical of baby shower gifts. Our traditions of giving gifts come from offerings whose symbolic value was important.

The symbolism of a gift of food is not wasted in this time. Food is a sign of home. Food delivered to our home is an invitation to enjoy the pleasures of home. As fun as a night out in a restaurant is, this gift invites us to stay home and enjoy the warmth of family and friends. And it is just the kind of thing we like to do around Christmas.

My father grew up in Eastern North Dakota where the winters were long and sometimes fierce. One of his childhood memories is of his parents going into town to meet the train just before Christmas. That train had fresh fruit from the Southeast and there would be oranges and apples to share at Christmas. Those were really rare treats in that time, and his parents endured significant traveling hardships in order to bring home that fruit. The tradition continued to my years of growing up when we always had a luscious large orange in the toe of our Christmas stocking. But we did not pass the tradition on to our children. They remember candy in their stockings, but not fruit. And even though we tried to limit the amount of excess sweets, we continued to place candy in their stockings.

It may be a tradition worth reviving in the next generation. At least the gift of a box of fresh fruit was a special early Christmas treat this year and we feel that we are among the most fortunate of people to have someone who loves us enough to go to the effort to send the gift.

Unlike the parents of Jesus, we won't need to flee to avoid the terror of senseless violence of an unstable leader willing to commit infanticide in order to retain the illusion of power. Shortly after Christmas our nation will change leaders in a peaceful fashion and we are freed from having to live in fear. But there are still refugees in this world who leave their homes in terror and there are still powers that justify the slaughter of innocents in order to gain or maintain their sense of power. We have not yet succeeded in making this world safe for all of God's children. So we acknowledge that the peace we enjoy and the pleasures of this world are in the midst of and in spite of a world that still has many injustices and terrors. While we work for peace and extend our efforts to support those most in need, we pause to count the blessings we have and to give thanks to God.

This year, for me, the taste of a fresh pear will be savored as a reminder of the unearned grace and bounty of which I am a recipient. And it will be a symbol of the gifts of home, family and friends that I have received.

I pray that the gifts that I send will also carry symbolic meaning to those who receive them.

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## December 20, 2008 – Thunder in the Hills



From the 2008 Thunder in the Hills Hand Games Tournament Poster.

This is a big weekend in the Black Hills. The motels are all full. Some people are staying in motels in area towns because they cannot get a room in Rapid City. There are a lot of extra cars in town and parking at the Civic Center is overflowing into the lot at Central High School across the street. It's not a return of the motorcycle rally in the midst of the winter. It's the Lakota Nation Invitational Basketball tournament, known simply as LNI.

I don't know all of the history of the LNI, but part of the story is that back in the 1970's with the tensions of the occupation of Wounded Knee and the activism of members of the American Indian Movement, it was difficult for some of the reservation schools to fill out their sports schedules. There were simply fewer teams who were willing to travel to the reservation. The LNI was organized at Pine Ridge to provide a basketball tournament at the beginning of the Christmas break. Teams responded and the event grew each year. Soon the tiny town of Pine Ridge was too small to host the growing event and it was moved to Rapid City.

These days the LNI is more than a basketball tournament. There is a full schedule of games, with tournament brackets for girls' and boys' basketball. But there are a lot of other events and activities. Vendors have filled the civic center with booths offering traditional foods and crafts, LNI clothing, and a host of other items. There are other sports competitions including cross country, wrestling, cheerleading, volleyball, and boxing. There are traditional competitions in storytelling and hand games. There are academic competitions including language bowl, knowledge bowl, scholarship

competitions, and a business plan competition. There are visits by celebrities and reunions of former competitors. And there is a traditional pow wow and dancing competition.

For some of the high school participants, the LNI has become the biggest event of the year, topping other holidays and events. There will be many appropriate Christmas celebrations across Indian country, but no single event will incorporate the pageantry, energy and expense of the LNI. It is the season's biggest event, and for some the biggest event of the year.

It is hard, for people who live in cities and who are constantly surrounded by other people, to understand the importance of gatherings and get-togethers on the plains. As long as there have been people in this part of the world, getting together has been important. Life on the plains can be isolating. The process of surviving can mean long periods of time living in isolated settings. Plains people have always valued getting together with others and have invested considerable energy and time in their gatherings.

Some have looked at the spectacle and expense of the LNI and speculated about what that money could accomplish if invested in jobs or community development or small business origination on the reservation, but the simple truth is that the funds invested in the LNI are not available for those other activities and people whose lives are touched by poverty need the extravagance of a weekend away from the usual from time to time. The organizers of the LNI have come up with an event that attracts thousands of folks and engages the spirits and imaginations of youth and adults alike.

Last night, Dave Strain, former coach at Rapid City Central High School, was honored for his groundbreaking work in integrating native and non native players into the Cobbler basketball program. His leadership opened the doors for many young people to get to know each other and honor each other's cultures. And his program created heroes for generations of native children who aspire to play basketball. By creating a place in the state's largest high school where Native youth could truly belong, Strain has left a legacy that is important in our learning to live together.

Like any sports event, there will be winners and losers in the games and the brackets are quickly being filled out for tonight's championship games, but the truth is that we all are winners with the LNI. Our slow process of overcoming racism and discrimination in our community is aided by events that showcase the talents and abilities of our neighbors and bring us together to get to know one another better. Sports have opened the doors to integration in many places and continue to be one of the areas where we meet one another in positive ways.

It isn't Christmas yet. And we are still a long way from overcoming the barriers and injustices of the past, but perhaps we are making a bit of progress in this Advent season as we await the fullness of God's gift of love to all of the people of this world.

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## December 21, 2008 – Christmas Miracles



Our local newspaper used the word “miracle” in a headline yesterday. The story was about the generosity of a local couple who purchased, wrapped, and addressed a gift for every student at a local elementary school. The article reported on the school’s party and on the wonderful generosity of the couple who made sure that every child had a present with their name on it so Santa could call each child by name. It was a great thing that the couple did, but it was hardly a miracle. The generous couple made no claim of divine intervention. They expressed their love and concern for the children in the way that they knew how to do so. It was a selfless act and a display of human generosity.

There was another story in the same issue of the newspaper where the word miracle could have been used. It was part of a series about a local teenager who underwent surgery at Mayo Clinic in Rochester for a brain tumor. The precision and exacting care of the doctors is impressive. The knowledge and understanding of the human brain is significant. The article didn’t use the word miracle, but we often do when we talk about medical marvels. Humans have benefitted greatly from scientific medicine and doctors steadily increase their ability to relieve human suffering and diminish the effects of disease.

But precise surgical interventions and evidence-based medical procedures are not miracles.

We often misuse that word.

The 1947 movie *Miracle on 34th Street* is about the confinement of Santa Claus to a mental institution and the court proceedings which reexamine the beliefs of the actors and puts them to the test. It has been a seasonal favorite since it was first shown. It is a fun movie, and it even examines belief in a certain kind of way, but it is not about a miracle.

Not that there aren't miracles in everyday life and not that there weren't miracles involved in all of these stories. It is just that one has to be careful in the use of the term.

Humans don't cause miracles.

The miracle in a generous couple who lovingly give of their resources and time to give children Christmas gifts is not the shopping and wrapping and making of gift cards. The miracle is the love of God that inspires people to look beyond themselves.

The daily miracle in hospitals is not the advance of science and the skill of doctors. Nor is it the knowledge that they accumulate in years of training and study and practice. The miracle is not the medical technology and amazing diagnostic tools. The miracle is the healing that God enables in every human body. The miracle is not what the doctors do, but the love of God that inspires them to care about the health of others.

The miracle on 34th street isn't about Santa Clause, but rather about God's ability to enable humans to look beyond the obvious and retain the ability to be surprised and filled with awe at the power of love.

Despite what the advertisements for the Children's Miracle Network proclaim, we humans do not make miracles happen. Miracles are not the product of science, though science certainly has the ability to serve humans in wonderful ways.

Miracles come from God.

And, quite frankly, we often don't recognize the miracles of which we are beneficiaries.

God's love takes on human form. God loves us so much that God comes to us on our own terms, in human form. God forgives us in such a way that we can learn to forgive others and even to forgive ourselves. Love is stronger than death. These everyday realities are miracles. And they are beyond our ability to manipulate or control.

The truth is that we would prefer to be able to control our lives and we would like to make our wishes come true. We wish for many things in this life and sometimes we convince ourselves that we have the power to make wishes come true. Indeed many of our wishes do come true. And no small amount of wishes are fulfilled by human effort.

Hard work, saving, self discipline and other factors can combine to help humans achieve their goals.

But there is a quality that is deeper than making a wish. There is genuine hope. Hope is not placed in our own abilities and skills. Hope is not that our will be done, but that God's will be done. People who live in hope cannot predict the future, nor can we manipulate it to come out the way we want. Our hope lies in the belief that God remains in charge of the world even when things do not go our way. Love will triumph. God's justice will prevail. The gifts of grace and peace will come. All occur in God's way according to God's time. Hope is not the fulfillment of our wishes, but rather the deeper ability to recognize God's goodness when our wishes don't come true.

I suspect that it is rare for the true miracles of Christmas to make the newspaper. The newspaper is more skilled in reporting acts of humans. Human generosity, human skill, human achievement and human problems provide the focus for much of the news that is covered by the media. It is, after all, the product of humans who are reporting to other humans.

Miracles are gifts of God. And despite what we might think, not all miracles are supernatural. God works within the realm of nature as easily as God takes on human form. Every birth is a miracle. Every compassionate tear is a miracle. Each new discovery of the infinite complexity of the universe is a miracle. The beauty and awe of this world is itself a miracle. God is present in every aspect of our lives and God is present in all that is created. But we only recognize miracles when we are aware of God's presence and acknowledge God's active role in this universe.

May you witness many miracles in this holy season.

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## December 22, 2008 – The Littlest Angel



The littlest angel in the Christmas pageant yesterday couldn't be bothered with halo. He was in motion and there simply wasn't enough hair for the halo to stay on top of his head, so he wore the halo around his neck for awhile. And he was too young and too active to sit in one place for any amount of time, so he wandered in and out of the pageant as the mood struck him instead of making entrances and exits with the other children. Just before they were all supposed to walk down the hall for the pageant, he was more interested in a ping pong paddle than he was in a performance in front of the congregation.

Angels like that, and shepherds as well, are a part of many of our pageants. It is what happens when you firmly believe that everyone is welcome and that there is a place for every child, even those who show up at the last minute and have not attended any rehearsals. This angel has been in regular attendance, but he was too young for rehearsals and spent most of his time in the nursery or with his parents. But when his brother got to put on a shepherd costume and his baby sister was wrapped in cloth for the role of the holy child, he wanted a costume too. So he became the littlest angel in the pageant.

There were children who had rehearsed their songs and skits for weeks. And there were scenes with the entire Sunday School up front singing together. There was a choreographed dance with the other angels greeting the baby and warning the kings to return to their homes by another road. The littlest angel wandered in and out of most of

the scenes, sitting up front when he was comfortable, returning to his parents in the pew when the notion struck him.

We print in our bulletins every week, “No matter who you are, or where you are on life’s journey, you’re welcome here.” That applies to children as well as adults. We take that slogan very seriously and try to make it come true. It isn’t always easy. There are children with hyperactive attention deficit disorder who are a strain on teachers and exhaust the other children in their class. Making them feel welcome sometimes tests the welcome we offer to others. There are children who have always been enrolled in full-time day care whose parents expect the institution to provide discipline and who have trouble with boundaries. Making them feel welcome can be a challenge for children whose parents are more actively involved in their lives and more likely to be teachers in our program. Knowing how many supplies and how many costumes to have on hand is a challenge when attendance is so irregular that you don’t know how many children will participate on any given Sunday. Providing a place where everyone feels welcome is anything but easy.

All the same, we are serious about being a place where everyone is welcome no matter who they are or where they are on life’s journey.

And we’re pretty good at that task. The littlest angel isn’t even the best example from the pageant. There were faces in the chorus who wouldn’t or couldn’t learn the words to the songs. One of the “wise men from the east” has many years to go before he develops enough wisdom to know when to speak and when to be quiet. And our Mary was an understudy. The person who was supposed to play the role woke up feeling terrible and with a hoarse voice and needed to spend the day in bed recovering.

But the pageant was a great success nonetheless. We aren’t in the business of professional theatre. We are a church. And we are in the business of worshipping God and teaching our children to worship and to lead in worship. That they did well.

And then we went home and took a nap. We were exhausted.

If you walk through the empty church this morning, you would find that there is gold glitter everywhere. I think it was shaken from angel costumes. The wings of the angel dancers had sparkly glitter on them. I’m doubly aware of the glitter because the angel wings were sewed in our home and we have glitter all around. Maybe real angels are like that too. After they have left, you can tell that they have been there. If God, in the Holy Spirit, is everywhere, why not have a little sparkle that catches your eye after the pageant is finished?

More important than the glitter on the ground is the warmth in our hearts. Once again we have been reminded that ours is the faith of incarnation in the form of a real child.

Once again we have been reminded that God in human form is very real and often messy. And once again the prophet's words ring in our ears:

“And a little child shall lead them.”

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## December 23, 2008 – Preparing



Today is a day of preparations. At the church we will be producing worship bulletins for two services on Christmas Eve and the service for the first Sunday of Christmas, December 28. We have a special creche that we will put out for our Christmas Eve celebrations and we need to ready the area for the pageant at the 7 p.m. service. There are candles to put in the pews, lights to be tested, instructions to ushers to prepare, and a host of other items on our list for today.

At home there are a few more presents to wrap, and the bird feeders need to be filled with seed. It has been cold here and the little birds are going through quite a bit of seed these days. We don't have any out of town guests coming for Christmas this year and we aren't planning to travel, so we haven't had to keep our eyes on the weather as much as some years. The temperature is near zero this morning, with about an inch of new snow, just enough to make it look like a white Christmas. Getting around shouldn't be much of a problem locally and the forecast is for warming temperatures. It is supposed to get up to twenty tomorrow and as high as thirty on Christmas day.

There are plenty of people with travel problems this holiday season, however. The Pacific northwest has received a lot of snow and airports in Seattle and Portland have been closed. Yesterday there was a travel ban in all of Portland and cars without chains were being ticketed. People were stranded in airports and wondering if they would be able to make their holiday destinations on time. Our son and daughter-in-law in Olympia were taking a "wait and see" attitude about their planned trip to Portland today. They

can easily delay the trip or change their plans depending on road conditions and travel advisories.

Blizzard conditions are being reported in the four corners area where Colorado, Utah, New Mexico and Arizona come together. And there is plenty of snow stretching from Northern Minnesota south to St. Louis. On the East Coast, travel has been delayed in major airports in Boston, New York and Newark.

There's nothing new about winter weather in December. But we have gotten used to traveling no matter what the weather and once the air travel system gets slowed down delays beget more delays. There will be plenty of frustrated people over the next few days.

Christmas comes whether or not we are ready. Birth is like that. Mary and Joseph didn't set out to have a baby born to them when they were traveling. We don't control the timing of this world and birth and death do not happen according to our schedules. Even though we go through quite a few preparations, Christmas isn't about being ready. It is about accepting God's gifts on God's terms. A little weather helps to remind us that there are many things in this world that are beyond our control.

All the same, there are lots of things that I want to do in the next couple of days. When the doors are opened and the people arrive at church on Christmas Eve, I want to be ready for them and I want them to feel welcome. Each year we have a few visitors that we have never before met and our families are welcoming a few new friends and family members. The mix of people changes each year because our community is constantly changing.

There are more than a few people in our community for whom Christmas isn't just about joy. The holiday can also be a reminder of loss and grief and it can be a time when sad feelings come to the surface. Some people have holiday memories that aren't pleasant. Others are facing loneliness and separation. Like all human events, Christmas offers the entire range of human emotions for the people in the church. For those who are feeling sad and those who are grieving, we hope to offer a service that allows them to experience their feelings in the context of a warm and loving community. The familiar carols, the glow of candlelight, and the story that contains good news as well as the shadowing of grief and sadness - the story of Christmas is for everyone and offers to each the light of hope in a way that is unique to their circumstances.

The biggest preparation for Christmas doesn't involve errands or "to do" lists. It has little to do with candles or hymnals or bulletins or lights. The biggest preparation for Christmas takes place inside of each one of us. Hope, peace, joy and love are gifts that reside within us and not in some external location.

I'm lucky. My responsibilities give me extra time alone in the sanctuary today. I'll get to walk through the pews and look at the communion table from a variety of different angles. I'll get to think about the people who will be coming and say prayers for them as I go about my chores. I get to handle the figures of the creche and think about the gifts of God they represent. I will personally touch each candle that will be lighted and held by the people who worship in our church, and with each candle participate in God's blessing to each individual.

I enjoy the preparations. And today will be a day rich in meaning.

So say a little prayer for frustrated travelers. Their days will be longer and more difficult than the one I face. And say a little prayer for last minute shoppers and the clerks in the store. Their day will be more frustrating than mine. And say a little prayer for our world - may we greet Christmas with hearts open for hope, peace, joy and love.

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December 24, 2008 – Eve



The “eve” in Christmas Eve is short for “evening.” Christianity inherits many traditions from Judaism. In the culture in which Jesus grew up the day started with sundown. Instead of thinking of days in the way that we do, beginning in the middle of the night, the new day began as soon as the sun was fully set. Darkness preceded light. It was as natural and normal to Jesus and his family as our way of measuring days is to us. As a holdover from those days, some of our holidays and celebrations include the evening that precedes the new day.

But for those who have an understanding of Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, Eve has a delicious double meaning at the intersection of English and Hebrew. Because Eve is the name of the first woman and it is the life force that is inside of each one of us. In one of the accounts of creation in the book of Genesis, God scoops up earth - Adamah - and forms the human. And into the human he blows the breath of life - of Ewa. Eve is literally the life force of every human being - the spirit that is born on the breath of God.

So Eve seems an appropriately wonderful time for the celebration of a birth. And a delightful name for the celebration of incarnation - God taking on human form. Our celebrations are, of course, fueled by our imaginations. We were not present in that moment, and the descriptions that our scriptures give us are scant and short on detail. We do not have photographs or even descriptions of the physical characteristics of the main characters. We don't have very many details at all. It was a busy time. Joseph and Mary were traveling. The circumstances were crowded. The sheep and goats were

being kept in the fields overnight by the village shepherds. The baby was laid in a manger - a common feed trough that did double duty as a crib that night.

The figures of the creche don't reflect all of the qualities of a real human birth. Mary doesn't appear exhausted, which she must have been. The baby is a bit too lively to be a newborn. Joseph is a passive observer and there is no midwife or other relative who may have assisted with the birth. The straw is clean as are the bands of cloth wrapping the baby as well as the clothes of the travelers. Artists have rendered the figures in ways that reflect the creativity of the artists as well as the reports of the Bible.

The reality was a bit messier, and quite a bit more work, and a bit more frightening and exhausting and painful than one might imagine from the figures that are on our communion table. But I enjoy the figures all the same. I enjoy the suspense of keeping them hidden all throughout Advent and displaying them only on Christmas Eve and throughout the Christmas season. I enjoy placing them on the communion table myself. I enjoy the way they look by candle light. This year, our communion table has a new cloth covering it. The cloth has the outlines of hands - the hands of members of our church. And it has the shape of hearts. Hands and hearts providing the place where we display our representation of the holy family.

Protestant churches, especially those of our heritage, don't go in for icons and expensive representations. We have tried, over the years, to avoid becoming too attached to our possessions. The figures of the creche that we display on our communion table are not old. They were acquired as a gift to our church within the past few years. We know that they are only symbols of a reality that is much larger - and much more complex - than a display on a table.

Real babies cry and need to be fed and have to have their diapers changed. They must be supervised. They are prone to accidents. They come into this world unable to speak or clearly communicate their wants and needs. They grow into adolescents and become adults with feelings and intentions and thoughts and ideas that are all their own. They leave and travel to distant places. They fall in love. They die. They grieve and they are grieved. Real babies are hopes and fears and joys and sorrows all wrapped up into a single package.

Our faith is not just Christmas Eve. It would be incomplete if all we had is the story of a birth that may not be accurate, and to the extent that it is accurate, is certainly incomplete. A holy birth is dramatic, but isn't every birth holy? Those who have been present at the moment of birth, who have heard the first cries, who have held the tiny new person - they know that every birth is holy.

Tonight is just our eve - just the starting point of the story of our people. And we know much of that story. It is filled with moments of celebration and awe like tonight, but it is also a story of betrayal and conflict and sorrow and innocent, premature death. It is the

story of the triumph of life over death, but not without real life along the way. Christmas Eve is our annual celebration of anticipation of so much more that is yet to come.

Tonight we will gather for the familiar and holy task of remembrance and celebration. And it will be an evening of joy. And when we toll our bell at midnight we will proclaim our joy to our community. But we know that it is only the beginning of a story that is far more complex and far more troubling than the events of this one night. Tonight is the eve - the edge between one day and another - the edge of life itself born on the breath of God.

And life on the Eve is wonderful and filled with awe. It is a holy night.

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## December 25, 2008 – Christmas



We began Christmas Day with the tolling of our church bell at midnight. Of course our bell is old and the mechanism by which we toll it is not working properly. So the ringing was not regular, but we did ring the bell to welcome the day. And we prayed for peace in our world. We weren't the first to offer our prayers. As we offered our prayers:

It was 8 p.m. in the Marshall Islands, where a state of emergency has been declared due to severe flooding.

It was 4 p.m. in Tibet, where dozens have been jailed for spreading rumors that have given rise to a new round of racial hatred.

It was noon in Pakistan, where a new government struggles for stability and tensions with India bring fears of nuclear war that could involve the world.

It was 11:30 in Afghanistan, where U.S. troops have experienced the most violent year since the current war began and where generations of people have experienced wars involving world powers.

It was 10 a.m. in Israel and Palestine, where prayers for peace have gone up every Christmas since the birth of Jesus, and where conflict has been continual and generations of hatred sparks violence against innocent victims.

It was also 10 a.m. in Somalia, where pirates continue to recruit despite a new U.N. resolution against piracy.

And it was 10 a.m. in Baghdad, where U.S. Troops were longing for home, some on their third or fourth deployment to a war zone.

It was 9 a.m. in the Ukraine where 8 were killed in a Christmas Eve explosion.

It was 7 a.m. in Guinea, where a recent military coup has resulted in marshal law.

As we prayed for peace, it was clear that peace has not yet come to the whole world.

But, for a moment, in our quiet church on a quiet night with the elements of Holy Communion and the candles burning, we felt peace in our hearts. We received a vision of the peace that God intends for all.

We practice our faith in the midst of an imperfect world. We do not imagine that we have the power to build God's realm on this earth. And yet we celebrate the presence of God in the midst of the conflict and strife. We recognize the power of the Holy even as we grieve and mourn the injustices and errors of humans.

Christmas is a paradox. It is a taste of God's realm - a vision of a future that is not yet realized. And we live in the midst of the paradox.

The promise of God is not yet fully realized on this earth. In fact, there are many who look at the harsh realities of this world and see only violence and terror and death and destruction. But in the midst of those harsh realities we see hope and peace and joy and love. Our faith is not a faith that is based in evidence. We do not believe because of what we see in the world.

We believe in spite of what we see in the world.

And last night we once again renewed our faith with a simple ceremony of candles and communion. We touched one another in Christ and were renewed.

Today we go to work once again to feed the hungry and bring warmth to the cold, to visit the sick and bring hope to the victims of injustice, to work for better conditions for the innocent and a better future for the children. Our vision is imperfect and our work is insufficient. And yet we are able to live with a glimpse of the future in our hearts because our lives have been shaped by our beliefs.

On the darkest night, hope is not absent.

In the midst of the world's worst conflict, peace is possible.

In spite of despair, joy is real.

Love never dies.

And God is love.

With faith in God, let us live in love.

Merry Christmas!

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## December 26, 2008 – St. Stephen's Day



Rembrandt, *The Martyrdom of St. Stephen*, 1625, oil on panel. Musee des Beaux Arts, Lyons. from Robert Charles, *The Book of Days*, 1869.

The Christian calendar is filled with many radical changes, twists and turns. In many corners of Christianity, today, the day after Christmas is celebrated as the feast day of St. Stephen. Stephen, reported by the book of Acts to be the first Christian to die for his faith, was chosen as a deacon in the early church. As the early church began to grow, the process of administration of alms, given to distribute to the poor, began to be a large task. Seven were appointed as deacons to oversee the distributions and Stephen was among those named. His name indicates that perhaps he was of a Greek background, though there are no details about his origins in the Biblical record.

The part of his story that is probably best known is that he was killed by stoning. Supposedly the charge was blasphemy. His sermons about Jesus somehow led others to believe that he was speaking out against Moses and God. The crowd was riled and he was stoned to death. That is about all of the story that we know, aside from the reports in Acts of the content of some of his sermons.

It is like the Christian calendar to place the feast day of a martyr next to the birth day of Jesus. Feast days are not a commemoration of death, but rather a celebration of the life that was lived. In the Greek Orthodox tradition, the feast day for St. Stephen is December 27, the third day of Christmas, but the minor variation in day seems to have little practical application. The season of Christmas in both traditions has a day to remember Stephen. The problem with Stephen's feast day is that about all we know of

him is that he died, and the manner of his death. His role in the community is that of the first martyr.

Our culture doesn't really have much tradition associated with the day after Christmas. It seems that it will be a holiday for many this year simply because Christmas landed on a Thursday and a four day weekend can be had for the price of taking one additional day off. Of course enough people will spend the day shopping that there will need to be plenty of clerks and others who do not get the day off so that the businesses can remain open.

Throughout the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and New Zealand, it is a tradition for the day after Christmas to be a holiday. Known as Boxing day, it stems from a tradition of giving gifts to the less fortunate members of society on the second day of Christmas. Boxes of groceries and other items are delivered to those in need. The Greek tradition has boxing day as well, but it is not the same day as the feast of Stephen.

The question for us is how we continue the celebration of Christmas. It might seem that the day of gifts and feasting might be followed by a day that is a bit less indulgent. Engaging in acts of service to those who have needs seems like an especially appropriate way to invest the day. Retail outlets, eager to produce whatever revenue they can before the end of the year, are probably more eager to have people invest the day in after-Christmas shopping. And there will be more than a few to take up that activity. Our community delivers most of the Christmas baskets and other forms of immediate gifts to those in need during the week before Christmas day or on Christmas Eve. Share baskets and boxes are delivered any time in the week leading up to Christmas.

It might be a worthy investment to spend some time thinking about the costs of discipleship and how much we might be willing to sacrifice for our faith. But sacrifice is not a popular term in these days. Even with the economic crisis looming over the world, leaders are reluctant to use words like cut back, sacrifice, discipline or restraint. There seems to be a common wisdom that the end of recession somehow involves getting people to spend more and save less, counter-intuitive as it may seem.

All the same, we have no need of going to the stores today. We are not much for crowds and our home is filled with food enough to last out a week-long blizzard and then some. There is nothing we need that would require a trip to the store today. And the service projects that engage us the most - firewood delivery, habitat for humanity, and such - are all taking short holiday breaks. There is a bit of work that needs to be done at the church to get ready for Sunday, but it can be accomplished in an hour or so and it can be done today or tomorrow.

So the agenda isn't terribly full for today. Like many others, we are left with a day without much focus. As such it is a treasure. There will be time for a walk and perhaps a

leisurely cup of coffee; time to talk to family and perhaps play a game just for the fun of it; time to read a book and time to think. It is an uncommon luxury. Still, I feel a need to discover some act of service that I can do today.

Perhaps it is a day to sing the carol about King Wenceslas and his gifts to the poor on this occasion. The hymn dates to the mid nineteenth century, based on *Deeds of Faith*, published in 1849.

“Good King Wenceslas looked out on the Feast of Stephen,  
When the snow lay round about deep and crisp and even.  
Brightly shone the moon that night, tho’ the frost was cruel,  
When a poor man came in sight, gath’ring winter fuel.”

We live in a time and in an area where poor people are trying to find enough fuel to keep warm on cold winter nights. The Woodchucks will be splitting and hauling wood on next Monday and Tuesday to prepare for another run to Wanblee with additional heating assistance.

“Hither, page, and stand by me, if thou know’st it, telling.  
Yonder peasant, who is he? Where and what his dwellin?’  
“Sire he lives a good league hence, underneath the mountain,  
Right against the forest fence, by Saint Agnes’ fountain.”

The good King isn’t satisfied with the anonymity of the poor person. It isn’t enough to have someone in need visible from his home. He wants to know who the person is. We, too, would benefit from getting to know those in need in our community. We make walls of distance between ourselves - when we don’t know those in need by name, their need seems farther from our own situation.

“Bring me flesh, and bring me wine, bring me pine logs hither:  
Thou and I will see him dine, when we bear then thither.’  
Page and monarch, forth they went, forth they went together.  
Through the rude wind’s wild lament and the bitter weather.”

And so the delivery was set. Food and drink and fuel would be delivered regardless of the weather. And the King doesn’t just order his servant to make the delivery, but himself goes out to make the delivery. We have discovered the joys of making personal deliveries with many of our mission projects. Hands-on ministry can be much more meaningful than writing a check and placing it in an envelope.

“Sire, the night is darker now, and the wind blows stronger.  
Fails my heart, I know not how; I can go no longer.’  
‘Mark my footsteps, good my page. Tread thou in them boldly.  
Thou shall find the winter’s rage freeze thy blood less coldly.”

It is a strange song, really, but one that continues to speak to our time. The truth is that despite our Christian vision, we continue to live in a society that places a great deal of emphasis on class and privilege. We sometimes convince ourselves that our wealth is the product of our own doing and that those who have less somehow deserve less. The familiar Carol challenges our assumptions and invites us all to engage in deeds of service to others.

“In his master’s steps he trod, where the snow lay dinted.  
Heat was in the very sod which the saint had printed.  
Therefore, Christian men, be sure, wealth or rank possessing.  
Ye who now will bless the poor, shall yourselves find blessing.”

May you find blessing on this Feast of Stephen. And may you discover that it lies not in shopping, but in service.

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## December 27, 2008 – Three French Hens



Photo from flickr.com/photos.

“On the third day of Christmas, my true love gave to me:  
Three French hens  
Two turtle doves  
and a partridge in a pear tree.”

The traditional Christmas counting song is heavy on birds. Six of the verses refer to gifts of birds. Swans, geese, calling birds, French hens, turtle doves and a partridge are all offered as gifts of true love. The origins of the song are not known, but it has European roots. Some say the song originated in England, but Partridges were not imported into England until the 1700’s and the song appears to be older than that. Perhaps the song has French origins. One theory is that the song is connected to a game called “memory and forfeits,” where the leader gives a verse and the players repeat the verse. Each verse is added to a previous one until someone makes a mistake, whereupon that person forfeits a small prize to the leader, usually a sweet of some kind.

The Internet is full of interpretations of the gifts as Christian symbols. I have seen stories that name the song as a way of preserving Catholic faith under oppression from Protestant Christians. The same article, however, doesn’t attach any symbolism to the song that is unique to Catholics - the symbols would also be understood by Protestants. None of these stories itself can be traced very far back. The song was allowed to endure for centuries without the extra layers of interpretation which seem to all come from the last couple of decades of the 20th century.

It may be that it is just a fun song. And that some people have added meanings that have value to themselves. Three is a big number in Christian Theology. So the three French hens might represent the trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The wise men from the East brought three gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. There were three men of faith reported in the stories of the transfiguration of Christ: Jesus, Moses and Elijah. That event had three witnesses: Peter, James and John. There are a lot of trios in Christian Theology.

But the song doesn't mention any of them directly. It talks about French hens. Chickens have been domesticated from pre-historic times and would be a common food item in the diets of many people throughout Europe. There are three notable breeds of chicken that come from France: Crevecoeur, Houdans and La Fleche. It is possible that the song refers to three different breeds of chicken, but it is more likely that the phrase "Three French Hens" simply sounded good and fit the rhythm of the song.

Counting songs are common methods of teaching children to count and of playing memory games. Number chants and counting songs have been employed for centuries to teach young children numbers and their order. The song arises out of that tradition.

So, today, on the third day of Christmas, 2008, three French hens are merely a fun addition to the layers of tradition that surround Christmas. It is unlikely that we'll be cooking a chicken today at our house. We still have plenty of leftover turkey from Christmas day. And it is unlikely that we would find chickens from three different breeds in our stores anyway. Cornish chickens or breeds with Cornish in them are probably the most common in meat production in the United States. Leghorns are still preferred for egg production. There are plenty of other breeds around and small family farms are most likely to produce the more exotic breeds of chicken. Commercial operations tend to stick with the same breed for uniformity of production.

Today, however, is hardly a day to learn more about chickens, at least in our house. We are turning our attention from the joys of a leisurely Christmas holiday to preparations for worship tomorrow. The first Sunday of Christmas is a fun tradition in our church, when we sing a lot of Christmas carols. The children are invited to come to the front of the sanctuary, where we have a variety of different nativity sets, and they often play at the front of the church throughout the entire service. The service is informal, light and usually a fun time for all.

And we are beginning to think of the end of the year. There are reports to be made, paperwork to be completed and a long list of tasks that accompany the transition from one year to the next. Our church's fiscal year is the same as the calendar year, so we need to make sure that we have ordered supplies in such a manner that they are billed to the correct year of the church's budget. Soon we will have the information on how our church's fiscal year ended. December is usually a good year for income, so we are

hoping that we will come in close to our budget. We also have nominations and elections to put together for the annual meeting, which this year is just a month after Christmas.

It is easy to get caught up in anticipation of the work that needs to be done and the events that lie ahead.

But Christmas invites us to linger. It beckons us to savor the celebration and make it last for a dozen days. There will be time enough for the future later. There will be time enough for other tasks to be accomplished. The gift of the Christ child is significant enough to savor for a dozen days each year. And today is only the third day.

Merry Christmas. Don't rush to end your celebrations too soon.

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## December 28, 2008 – The Presentation



The birth of Jesus is reported only in the Gospel of Luke and in the Gospel of Matthew. The other Gospels take up the story of Jesus at later points in his life. And Matthew doesn't have much detail, focusing on the visit of the Magi and the flight to Egypt. In Luke, however, there is a detailed description of the night of the birth and the events of the next few days. Luke's gospel paints the picture of a devout Jewish family observing all of the rites that would be associated with the birth of a firstborn son, including presentation at the temple in Jerusalem.

It is a little bit unclear what the traditions were surrounding presentation of a firstborn son in the temple. The reminder that all children belong to God and that they are a trust from God had become a common ritual of presentation of a firstborn son to a priest was expected. Parents of non-Levite children paid some money for the support of the priests for the redemption of their sons. But Jesus' presentation in the temple in Jerusalem was a bit out of the ordinary. There is no mention in Luke's gospel of the payment of a redemption fee, simply of the dedication of the child to God's service. The report is reminiscent of the presentation of Samuel in the Old Testament.

It is our custom to read this report from Luke's Gospel on the first Sunday of Christmas each year. We are once again reconnected with the miracle of birth and the sense of gratitude that the family feels for the birth of a healthy child. And we are also reminded of the sense that the child belongs to a community - he is not just a private possession, but rather a member of a community and his presence affects all of its members. The

responses of Simeon and Anna to the child remind us of the responses of elders in our community to the birth of a new child.

Simeon's response has become known as the Song of Simeon, and is incorporated into many other worship settings in the Christian church. It is a common ending for many worship services:

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

The verse, sometimes with minor variations, is very common for the ending of funeral services in the Christian church. We seem to make lots of connections between birth and death in our faith. The mysteries of where we come from and where we go to when we die remain connected somehow for us. The birth of the baby brings some sense of completion to the lives of Simeon and Anna - the reason for their lives has been fulfilled in the birth of the Messiah.

The sacrament of baptism in churches that baptize infants carries a similar sense of presentation of a child to God. The parents make promises to raise the child in the Christian faith and the congregation promises their love and support to the one baptized and to the child's parents and extended family. In congregations where baptism takes place later in the life of the child, there is often a presentation or dedication ceremony for infants.

While we acknowledge the uniqueness of Jesus in all of history, we also acknowledge that every child is a child of God. Every child is a gift of God offered not just to one family or one community, but to the entire world. Each child is a sign of God's blessing and presence in the lives of humans.

Like the presentation of Jesus in the temple, our rituals for the presentation of infants are symbolic. The actions we take make connections beyond the simple events of the day. The meaning is deeper than just a few words and a few drops of water. Like every sacrament, we acknowledge that we are participating in something far bigger than ourselves.

So today is a day of remembrance of the dedication of Jesus at the temple. We know the unfolding story. We understand that his life was not simple or easy and we know that his parents faced grief and sadness in their lives. But at the moment of dedication, there was simple joy and gratitude. No matter what else was to happen, there was a sense of fulfillment and rightness about this birth and this new child.

The Gospel reports that the child's parents marveled at what was said about him. It is an overwhelming experience to dedicate one's child to God. Awe and marvel are a part of the experience.

May we continue to recognize the awe and to marvel at the potential of each new child who comes into our community.

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## **December 29, 2008 – Bump in the Night**

OK folks, no picture this morning. I don't have the energy to find an appropriate picture. Since most of the reader of the blog are church members, I'll try to get the most important information out first. The church was burglarized overnight. The thief or thieves didn't succeed in taking anything from the building. A suspect was arrested inside the building. One window was broken and that seems to be the total damage at this point.

I received a call from our security monitoring service that the glass alarm in the offices had gone off. Since there was no one who should be inside the building the the middle of the night, I had them call police dispatch and I dressed and headed into the church. An officer stopped me on Fulton Street, within sight of the building and asked me to wait until they had the building secured. I gave the officer keys to the building. I waited.

And waited.

And waited.

I could hear the police dog barking, and I could see several officers positioned around the building. There were both Pennington County Sheriff's officers and Rapid City Police officers. I could see the flashlights in the various rooms of the church and could tell that there was a room by room search in progress. Then I saw the lights go back through the church a second time, room by room.

A little while later an ambulance drove by. Then I noticed the officers who had been standing guard begin to talk and move about.

Finally, an officer invited me to drive around the front of the church and walk through the building. After checking my driver's license and asking me my phone number, the officers showed me the building as another officer took pictures. The window to my office was clearly broken and things were messed up inside the room. My office computer was near the West door, but still inside the building, and the big monitor was also there. Other valuables in my office appeared to be in place. The video camera, projectors, and other equipment were all there. Books and papers were strewn about and there was glass from the broken window and some furniture moved about.

My office needed a thorough cleaning before. Now I have a perfect excuse to get to the task.

After going through the building room by room, the officers let me lock myself in the building and get about the task of securing it for the rest of the night. I found a piece of plywood in the basement to cover the window. Securing it to the window was a challenge, as the window frame is metal, and the sill is marble. There is no place to

drive a nail. I ended up stacking a couple of heavy tables against the plywood, knowing that the alarm system would trigger if anyone were to push in the plywood.

By the time I got home, it was time to be up writing the blog. So here I am, still a wound up with the excitement.

We really got attention from law enforcement folks. I think I counted five Rapid City police vehicles, one Pennington County Sheriff's car and one State Highway Patrol car as well as the ambulance. It turns out that the burglar hid behind some boxes of books in the entryway and then resisted arrest. The burglar got bit by the police dog and one officer got hit by the man as they made the arrest. I don't think there were any substantial injuries. I was safely waiting in my pickup while all this was going on. The officers were courteous and respectful and concerned about the church. They had conducted a very thorough search of the building, including going into the basement, which was locked, the attic, and they had opened every closet door in the place. I'm sure that the person they found was the only one who was in the building. I don't know if they have information about a get-away car or any other persons involved in the incident.

It is always surprising to me that people try to burglarize churches. Having been a part of the church all of my life, I know that there is very little property to steal in a church. We don't leave cash in the building overnight. While we do have some computer equipment, video recorders and sound equipment, little of it is state of the art. We tend to have equipment that is a bit older and still serviceable. Churches, while having large buildings, are seldom places of wealth. Our wealth lies in our membership, not in the property we possess. I guess that there is some fantasy that there might be amounts of cash in a church following the Sunday service, but it is our practice to take the offerings to the bank immediately following services. Some churches have valuable altar ware and other items, but those things would be nearly impossible to pawn.

A church is not likely to be a lucrative place for a burglar. But then burglars rarely have fully thought through their actions. They are impulsive and seeking short term gain. Who knows what the burglar in our church was seeking? Probably something that might be quickly turned into cash. Not seeing cash, the computer seemed like the most valuable thing in sight. The burglar didn't know that the video camera and projector were worth more than the computer and apparently didn't recognize that there was a laptop computer in one of the briefcases. Who knows what might have happened had the burglar had more time in the building? Clearly the crime was interrupted by the police.

So, we'll get the window repaired in the morning and we'll be back in business as usual by the end of the day. As I mentioned before, my office needed a good cleaning anyway. Today will be the day. Life goes on and we haven't suffered a significant loss. The alarm system has once again justified the expense of the monitoring service and we'll probably be a bit smarter about prevention of such incidents in the future.

And now, I think I'll take a nap before heading back into the church.

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## December 30, 2008 – The Wind



Our house is pretty tight. We have 2 x 6 walls and good windows with storm windows as well. For the most part, we are comfortable despite the weather outside. That is one of the ways that I know when the wind is really blowing in South Dakota. By the time I can hear it from inside the house, it is whipping at a pretty good rate. The wind woke me this morning and I lay in bed for a few minutes listening to it. Wind usually means that there is a change in the weather coming, but there are no major storms in the forecast. The temperature is still pretty reasonable at 34 degrees and the snow has been really melting the last couple of days.

We're planning to haul wood from a place where it is pretty easy to get stuck today, so we'll be happy if we don't have new snow and the wind helps to dry things out a bit as well. If we have a large enough crew, it won't take long to haul the wood and we can start splitting this afternoon if we have energy.

I think that the wind might have been one of the hardest things for people of previous generations who lived on the plains. Dakota tipis are taller than those erected by the Crow, but they still can take a good blast from the wind. The oval shape allows the wind to blow around the tipi and if properly staked, the tipis can take a good blow. Buffalo hide is thick and the wind wouldn't penetrate. Dakota peoples used an ozan or inner cover over the sleeping area to add additional insulation. Water condensing on the inside of the tipi went between the outside walls and the ozan. In the most severe weather, a layer of ice would build up in the area, affording additional insulation. But they would have heard the wind and watched it ripple the walls of the tipi.

The settlers sometimes spend one or more winters in sod homes before obtaining logs or other timbers to construct more permanent shelter. Imagine living in a home without windows, where space was very limited, waiting out storm after storm with the sound of the wind blowing across the prairies as your constant companion.

I grew up in windy country. Big Timber is known for high winds. Wind-related accidents are common on the highways and people who have lived in that country know how to tie things down in windy conditions. And I have lived most of my adult life in places where there is plenty of wind. So I wasn't prepared for the ten years we lived in Boise, Idaho, where there isn't much wind. I didn't know, prior to moving there, that one could miss the wind.

When the wind doesn't blow in Boise, the air turns stale and an inversion traps a lot of pollution in the valley. Even a small breeze is much welcomed to bring refreshing new air into the area.

The ancients used the wind as a metaphor for the spirit. In both Hebrew and Greek, the languages of the Bible, the word for wind is also used as a word for spirit. In the first creation story of Genesis, for example, a translator into English has to choose whether to translate the phrase, "and the spirit of God was moving across the face of the waters," or "and the wind of God was moving across the face of the waters." At initial glance, the choice of word makes a big difference. But, like the ancients, we do experience God's spirit as free and unrestrained as a prairie wind. The meaning isn't totally lost on us.

When it comes to wind, this is probably my most favorite place to live. We have the shelter of the hills and pine trees are wonderful in the wind. They seem to know how to bend and how to diffuse the effects of the wind. We've seen the microbursts and other winds big enough to break the trees, but those storms are rare and more common are the winds that whistle by us without causing much damage.

I am glad to wake to the sound of the wind this morning. It reminds me that God is still active in our world. There is a spirit of change and a spirit of newness in this day. The work that we will do is not just the same old chores repeated, but rather new work - meaningful work - that responds to the needs of our neighbors and our community. We hope to be delivering another large load of firewood soon. The winter has already been cold and there is need for fuel out on the prairie. Partners in California have sent us a box of warm coats, hats, gloves and baby items to deliver. Those items help no one sitting in our church office. The sooner we deliver them, the better.

So there is much to do, but for a few minutes, I can pause and listen to the wind and be reminded that the wind of God continues to move across the face of this world, creating and renewing our lives.

May you feel the wind on your cheeks today and know that God continues to inspire the earth.

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## December 31, 2008 – More of the Story



I grew up in Montana and, like my classmates, studied Montana History in school. Our family had members in different towns in Montana and we traveled to see family and to attend various events. I had known of the existence of Fort Missoula and had visited the area when I was in high school. I knew that the fort had been constructed by the U.S. Cavalry to provide protection for settlers in the Bitterroot Valley. But when I visited the site, there wasn't much there. I assumed that it was like several other frontier forts in Montana, established during the days of settlers and later abandoned by the military.

There is more to the story, however. I never knew of the existence of regiments within the United States Army that consisted of African-American soldiers with white officers. One of those regiments was stationed at Fort Missoula from 1888 until the end of the Spanish-American war. The 25th Infantry Bicycle Corps was organized to test the military efficiency of bicycles as a replacement for horses. The corps made several local bicycle trips and even rode from Missoula to St. Louis, Missouri on one occasion. It was one of the first regiments called up when the Spanish-American War broke out in 1898. By the time I was growing up in Montana half a century later, the story wasn't being taught in the schools.

Recently, I also found out that Fort Missoula had been used by the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service as an alien detention facility during World War II. I know about detention camps for Japanese and German people, and I think that I had heard that some Japanese-Americans had been processed through Montana on their

way to other detention centers. But I didn't know that more than 1,200 Italian citizens were detained in Missoula from 1941 to 1944.

The story has recently come to light because one of the detainees, who continues to live in Missoula and has become a US Citizen, Umberto Benedetti, has written the story of the camp. *Italian Boys at Fort Missoula Montana* tells Benedetti's own story and the stories of other detainees. Benedetti was a ship's carpenter on *Il Conte Biancamano*, an Italian luxury liner that was stranded in the Panama Canal when war broke out in Europe. The crew of 512 was moored at the canal for nine months. Then, on March 30, 1941, months before the U.S. officially entered the war, Benedetti's ship and 68 others from Italy, Germany, and Denmark that were in American waters were impounded and taken into "protective custody." They were later refitted and used for national defense. The Italian crew members were also placed in custody, including 125 from Benedetti's ship. Italians were housed at Fort Missoula in Montana and at another site south of Bismarck, N.D. for the duration of the war.

Benedetti and his shipmates helped build the barracks and the fence around the camp. The detainees did most of the work of the camp, including cooking, cleaning, and providing maintenance. Detainees built a stage, organized an orchestra and staged several plays and operas.

Eventually detainees requested and gained permission to leave the camp in the daytime. Several landed jobs in town, found girlfriends and began to settle into the Missoula area. Benedetti went to work at Columbus Hospital in Great Falls upon his release. He later joined the U.S. Army, served two tours of duty in Korea, and became a U.S. Citizen. He returned to Missoula where he studied and taught calligraphy, art, and Spanish.

He has been a permanent resident of Missoula since 1970. Now at 97 years of age, he may have some brittle bones, but there is no bitterness. He recalls that the internees named the camp Bella Vista because the view was so beautiful and he has no unpleasant memories of the years spent in the internment center where roll call was taken at 6 a.m. every morning.

I am grateful for Umberto Benedetti for writing his book and telling the story of a place that I thought I knew well. There are many hidden histories in our communities and we all gain from having the stories told. Discovering those histories helps us to better understand who we are and how our communities have been formed. Official histories often only tell part of the story.

It is useful to look again at history. It is one of the reasons why we choose to study the Bible over and over again. We recognize that there is so much that has escaped our initial readings. Our story is more complex than it first appeared. Each time we look

there is another nuance and another piece of the story that is worth understanding.  
When hidden histories are brought to light, we gain new insights.

Who knows what new stories we may find?

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