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## August 1, 2017 – Summer Evening



At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, long before young people had access to automobiles and drive-ins, the vehicle for a young couple seeking some privacy was a canoe. Bicycling was available to many couples, but it didn't seem to afford the same kind of intimate get-away as the canoe. Canoe courting became so popular in places like the Charles River in Boston or at Belle Isle near Detroit. The sport was so popular that several writers commented that you could cross the Charles River without getting wet simply by stepping from canoe to canoe. At the height of the fad, there were policemen assigned to patrol by canoe as "morality enforcement." An article in the Boston Herald, in 1903, challenged the effectiveness of enforcement efforts: "It may not be wicked to go canoeing on the Charles with young women on Sunday, but we continue to be reminded that it is frequently perilous . . . The canoeist arrested for kissing his sweetheart at Riverside was fined \$20. At that rate it is estimated that over a million dollars' worth of kisses are exchanged at that popular canoeing resort every fine Saturday night and Sunday."

Old Town and White, among several other canoe companies, marketed specially-designed "courting canoes." The boats, generally about 16 feet long, had longer than

normal decks, leaving an 8-foot elliptical cockpit. The young man would furnish cushions for the woman to sit in the bottom at the front of the canoe facing backwards, while he would paddle from a seat, or sometimes sitting on the deck of the boat. Canoes were customized with pillows, lanterns, and picnic supplies. There were even models with built-in phonographs long before mobile music was available in any other vehicle. In addition to paddling, popular activities were singing and reading poetry.

In Minnesota, the Minneapolis Parks Department issued 2,000 permits for canoes and the limits was easily reached. The Minneapolis Tribune, in a 1912 article was concerned that "misconduct in canoes has become so grave and flagrant that it threatens to throw a shadow upon the lakes and recreation resorts and to bring shame on the city." A curfew was imposed in an attempt to keep couples off of the lakes after midnight. The parks board further began to refuse to issue permits to canoes with offensive names such as "Cupid's nest," "Ilgetu," and "Joy-tub." And we thought that text messaging was the source of clever abbreviations.

The fad faded in the 1920s as access to motorcars became more common and there were other ways to get away with your gal.

Still, I find myself in some ways to be an old-fashioned guy. So last evening, I packed a picnic lunch, got my favorite gal and headed to the lake with a rowboat. I've got plenty of canoes, but the rowboat seemed a good match for a lake busy with motorboats, water-skiers and other activities. I rowed her across the lake to a secluded spot, pulled the bow of the boat up onto the shore and we sat and had our supper in the boat. Cold fried chicken, potato salad and a couple of bottles of water made up the menu.

We didn't see any morality police on the lake.

We did see a few couples, much younger than us, cruising around the lake on jet skis, pontoon boats and other water conveyances. None of them appeared to be having any more fun than we oldsters with our tiny row boat and picnic supper.

In checking out the courting canoe fad, I ran across a copy of an advertisement for the H.N Fish Chocolate Company of Boston: "Two is a company, three is a crowd, but a box of Samoset Chocolates is always allowed. No canoeing party is complete without them." I discovered that ad after we had returned home from our evening adventure. Having neglected to bring chocolates on our boat trip, I found some chocolate ice cream in the freezer and we shared a treat before retiring for the evening.

It was a delightful evening and a good way to invest a bit of our time in the midst of what is turning out to be a long, hot summer here in the hills. As the week goes on the number of motorcycles and the amount of noise in the hills will continue to increase. We will need to be especially careful when driving around and allow a bit of extra time for the extra traffic. I filled our cars up with gas yesterday so we won't need to join the long

lines at the gas stations as thousands of motorcyclists fill up their machines as part of their annual tour of the hills. We see a lot of couples on motorcycles and more and more see couples who each have their own bike. I suppose for them the lure of the open road, the wind in their hair and the rumble of a powerful motorcycle beneath them is romantic. Somehow for me the quiet dip and splash of the oars in the water and the ease of private conversation is more appealing than the thrill of a motorcycle ride. As far as I can tell, my girlfriend agrees.

We're getting on in our years. We've been married for 44 years, more than twice as long as we experiences single life. And life has been good to us. We have enjoyed good health, a wonderful family and delightful grandchildren. We've traveled around the world together and gone on a lot of adventures. We've worked together and played together and had more years than many couples are granted. Still, there is a spark of romance left in the old couple. A little bit of free time, a picnic lunch and a trip to the lake makes for a delightful evening and reminds us of the reasons we were attracted to each other in the first place. An opportunity for an extended conversation without interruptions is a genuine pleasure.

I enjoy building boats and have been wondering what the next project might be. I may not be too old for a good old-fashioned courting canoe.

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## **August 2, 2017 – Life is Good**

We do not have central air conditioning in our home. We do not need it. We do have window air conditioners in the upstairs bedrooms and in recent weeks, when it has been really hot, we have run them. Like others who live without central air we are practiced in opening our house for the cool of the evening and nighttime and closing it up during the day. The system works well. When the temperatures climb above 90 outside, we are comfortable inside.

When it is really hot, we tend to eat our meals inside. The rest of the time, however, we enjoy eating on our deck and enjoying the pleasures of living in the hills. A couple of nights ago we had four deer fawns in our yard all at once. We frequently see twins and a third fawn, but having all four together was a treat.

Last night, the temperatures were a bit cooler. I came home from work, harvested a summer squash from the garden, washed and sliced it, and grilled the slices alongside a couple of pork chops. I cook with charcoal most of the summer. Having the cooking heat outdoors is another way of keeping our home cool. Beyond that, we enjoy the charcoal flavor and I have everything set up to make cooking outdoors convenient. A bit of potato salad from the refrigerator and we had supper on the table. We lingered on the deck for a while after supper, talking and enjoying the evening. After the dishes

were done I got out my mower and made the rounds of the yard around the house. I was mostly mowing weeds as the grass is going dormant from a lack of water. Each time the drought gets to our yard the weeds flourish and it becomes a battle to preserve the lawn for the next season.

It was all normal, everyday stuff. That in itself was a gift for me. It meant that there were no calls to respond to emergencies or crises, no special messages that needed to be composed and sent to reassure those who are deep in the midst of grief, no evening meetings to cause me to return to town. The evening was a delightful break from the sometimes frenetic pace of the last couple of weeks. I don't mean to complain. I like the excitement and much of what keeps me hopping is the result of decisions I have made about volunteer activities and the use of my personal time. But there are some times when it all gets a bit overwhelming. And things have been overwhelming recently.

Two evenings in a row of simply enjoying the place where we live and the natural world that surrounds us is a real treat. It is one of the reasons we live where we do.

I know so many stories of people who live in intense urban settings and who enjoy their lives and work, but have to travel to be in a natural setting. Some of them invest a lot of money and energy traveling to exotic locations to witness spectacular natural displays. Instead, we have chosen to live a bit closer to the natural world. We don't need to travel to be in the woods. We don't need to take days off from work to put a canoe in the water.

Every life has its rhythm. Before European settlers arrived in the place where we live, life was a difficult struggle for the indigenous folk. They had to follow the buffalo in order to earn their living. Their homes had to be portable and they moved multiple times each year. Everyday living was a struggle. They were able to come to the hills for ceremony and hunting during certain times of the year, but at other times they ventured out onto the prairies where there was less shelter and protection from thunderstorms and other severe weather.

Later miners, loggers and ranchers came to the area. Their days were long and the work was hard. Just surviving required that they pour their energies into work. A day off was a rare occurrence.

By comparison to other generations of people who have lived in this place, we have it quite easy. We work at jobs and, even though I haven't chosen a profession that is limited to 40 hours per week, I find sufficient time to just enjoy the place where I am. There is time for a short hike or a paddle. There is time to sit and watch our bird and animal neighbors. There is time to listen to the wind blowing through the pine trees, the chorus of the coyotes and awake to morning birdsong. Life is busy and it can become hectic, but we have a gift of leisure that wasn't available to many people who have lived in our area.

For me, taking time to appreciate the gifts of this life is an essential spiritual discipline. Gratitude is an essential element of religious practice. Even when we are experiencing hard times, there is much for which to be grateful. I need to give myself the time to express my gratitude in order to have a life of balance. Even in the moments of grief, there is an essential element of gratitude. I give thanks for the life lived at every funeral service. I am grateful for dedicated first responders in the midst of every crisis. I celebrate the beauty of sunrise every day.

It is possible that I have simply become an old fool, but if so, I count myself among the most fortunate of fools. I have been granted the grace to live in this place among good people. We don't always agree. We often have competing interests. We aren't always wise in the choices we make. But we are in this together and we need one another and we have somehow learned to live together with a degree of peace and harmony. Ours is not a perfect world. We have many unsolved problems.

One in a while, however, a peaceful evening at home is a refreshing gift to be savored and treasured. Life is good. God is good.

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### **August 3, 2017 – A Frightening New World**

Over the years, I have earned a small portion of my income from free lance writing. Writing for contract is kind of a strange relationship. The writer has a guarantee that if he or she provides acceptable material on deadline he or she will be paid a set fee for the work. The writer, however, receives no further rights in the contract. The material that has been written has been sold and belongs to the publisher. The publisher can use it as it sees fit, including choosing not to publish at all, publishing all or part of it under another name, reprinting without out further compensation, and many other possible outcomes. A free lance writer sells their creative output. Once it is sold, it simply no longer belongs to the writer.

Those who earn their living as free lance writers usually end up doing a lot of copy writing. They write copy for advertisements, promotional materials, corporate training and other purposes. The contract specifies the content and often gives very specific style guidelines as well. The Great American Novel will not be produced on a copy writing contract. Sometimes free lance work seems a bit demeaning for the skills and abilities of the writer. Those who are most successful at copy writing simply go for volume and don't worry too much about content. It isn't the most creative of endeavors, but it is a way to earn a living.

I was thinking about free lance work a couple of days ago as I listened to a recent podcast of Radiolab. Simon Adler reported on technologies that make it possible for

individuals to manipulate the speech of others. In some cases, they are able to produce manipulated video of a person saying words that the person never said. The technology is not yet fully functional, and the sample video posted by Radiolab is less than convincing, but it was enough to get me thinking. That was the intent of the podcast. Do we really want to live in a world where people can create fake videos and attribute false statements to others? Do we really have a choice as the technological advances continue?

The program included what is becoming a standard interview in technology shows. One of the engineers working on a program that will allow voices to be edited made the claim that she is a scientist and as such doesn't need to think about the ethical implications of her work. She is simply advancing the technology beyond current limits. How that technology is used is not her concern. As an ethicist and amateur philosopher, I am completely unconvinced by such arguments. Technologists have the same ethical responsibilities as other people. How a piece of technology is used does fall, in part, on those who developed it. If society didn't believe that, there would be no argument for arresting those who deal in illegal drugs. "I just provide the drugs, I don't make any judgements about how they are used." Trust me, that argument won't hold much sway in court.

Advancing technology combined with issues of ownership of creative work are creating a host of ethical problems as our culture and society move forward. The Internet is already filled with photographs that have been altered to change the perception of reality. It isn't just that photoshop is employed to remove blemishes or remove wrinkles from garments. It is used to place people in locations they have never visited and in situations that never did exist in reality. It can be a very sophisticated form of lying, but it is lying nonetheless. As the technology makes it more and more easy to edit voice and facial expressions in video, the power of the lie becomes even more sophisticated and possible.

The copyright laws of the nation are simply insufficient to protect against this. The software uses somewhere in the neighborhood of 80,000 vocal bits that can be rearranged. Obtaining those different elements requires between 20 and 40 minutes of speaking. In other words, they have to have a reasonable recording of the speaker's voice in order to create the basis for vocal manipulation. It is shockingly simple for them to obtain that recording of one's voice. For demonstration purposes, the podcast used former U.S. Presidents Barak Obama and George W. Bush. They have made countless public speeches and there are plenty of vocal recordings of both of them in the public domain.

The potential for additional false information and manipulation of elections is evident. But this software won't stop at politicians. It is fairly easy to obtain vocal patterns of everyday citizens as well. Anyone who has ever narrated an audio book has lost ownership of their own voice. The publisher owns the vocal recordings and the unique

features of an individual's spoken voice no longer belong to that individual. You can see why this reminded me of free lance writing. Once you don't own your own voice, others can use it for purposes far different than you intended.

It isn't just audio books, either. YouTube currently is experiencing upload rates in the neighborhood of 300 hours of video uploaded each minute. When a video is uploaded to YouTube it no longer belongs to the producer or actor. There are literally billions of hours of video whose actors and producers have been alienated from their rights. Most of those hours are pictures of everyday citizens who now have made it possible for others to edit, manipulate and twist their videos and use them for purposes far different than originally intended.

It has been called a "post truth" society. Some believe that we have moved beyond the existence of any truth at all. They are wrong. Objective truth still exists and will continue to exist even if it is overshadowed by fake news and outright lies. Just because the lie is the loudest voice in the room, and perhaps the only one heard, doesn't make the lie into the truth.

It is indeed a frightening world. Our grandchildren will deal with issues that we have not imagined. I'm no opponent of Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) education, but experts in those fields will not advance civilization without Theologians, Philosophers and Ethicists.

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## **August 4, 2017 – Give People Time to Grieve**

I'm pretty sure that the people who read my blog don't need to hear what I am about to say and I'm pretty sure that the people who need to hear it don't read my blog, but I've got to get this off of my chest: "Listen people! Grief is a painful process. It hurts to lose someone you love. Death has a deep and abiding impact on human lives. People don't get over it!"

I'm heading out to another celebration of life ceremony today. I attend quite a few of these. While it is true that the people whose lives we are celebrating are worthy of a celebration and they brought much goodness and joy to those who knew them, it is also true that those who were closest to them are in a world of hurt. Pretending that there is no pain, or sorrow or loss just doesn't make sense. It is as if we ask those who are grieving to suspend their grief in public. It is as if the public is unwilling to face the real pain of the situation.

It doesn't matter what you call the ceremony. I am not objecting to the title in the church bulletin or the funeral home flyer.

What shocks and alarms me is the proclamation of a form of Christian Theology that seems to exist in the absence of pain and death. I don't know how to speak of Jesus Christ without speaking of his death. It makes me wonder, have these people ever even read the Gospel of Mark?

"Let's get together and share all of our good stories." I'm in favor of that, but everything has its place. Why are these people so unwilling to allow a family to grieve?

In the past month I have been with a dozen people shortly after they learned the news of the death of a loved one. At least three of them were reduced to a weeping form lying on the ground (or floor). Their intense grief rendered them incapable of conversation for a little while. Their pain was so great that there was little I could do to ease it except to remain present, to offer tissues or a glass of water, and to wait for the most intense phase to pass. None of these experiences was unduly difficult for me. Being with someone who is grieving is a normal human experience. I did not feel some urge to run away. More importantly I didn't feel some urge to speed up the process so that we could tell jokes and remember pleasant memories of the one who died. There will be time for that. It is important to remember the good times. But there is no need to rush.

I have decided that there are some Christians who don't have a very highly developed theology of pain and loss and grief. I guess it shouldn't surprise me. I've noticed for a long time that there are people of faith who attend church on Palm Sunday and don't show up again until Easter. They like the big celebrations and the good times, but they aren't much for prayer vigils and the reading of the passion narrative.

The problem with this form of incomplete Christianity is that it doesn't enable those who look at the world that way to prepare for something that is inevitable.

We all will die.

Nearly all of us will experience the death of a loved one.

Grief is a reality of life.

But too many people don't seem to know about the great resources for living through times of grief and death that are a part of the history, tradition and theology of the Christian Faith. They have attended entertainment churches and heard "gospel lite" preached. The prosperity gospel isn't much help on the days when you have lost everything.

Don't say, "It's for the best," or "You'll get over this" to any of the three sets of parents with whom I have visited who have buried one of their children in the past week. And you can call the funeral anything you want, but I guarantee that none of them felt like they were participating in a celebration on the day of the funeral.

And, while I am on my soapbox, a note to my colleagues. Pastors, don't pretend that there wasn't a death when you officiate at a funeral. You are addressing real people who are really grieving. Pretending that this isn't so doesn't do anyone any good.

Paul wasn't afraid to quote Psalm 44:22 to the Romans: "For thy sake we are being killed all the day long." (Romans 8:36). You don't have to be afraid to say the word death or dying. Keep reading in Romans: "For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels . . ." Our scriptures are filled with references to death. The people who have come to the funeral are well aware that death has occurred. Most of them know that when death occurs there is real pain and grief. Why, dear preacher, are you afraid to preach the Gospel to people who are in pain?

This moment isn't about your sense of who does and who does not get into heaven. This isn't about your need to prepare people for your particular vision of eternal life. This is about people needing to hear that death is not the end. As painful and as miserable and as awful as this moment is, it is not the end. Love never dies. (1 Corinthians 13:8). And God is love. (1 John 4:8)

Being with people who are grieving is not a chore. It is a blessing. Those of us who are privileged to be there understand it better each time we witness the amazing power of grief and the amazing power of love in the midst of grief. There really is nothing to fear. There is no danger in speaking of the realities of this life.

Not every moment in the lives of the people we serve is a celebration. But each moment has the potential to be a moment of love.

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## **August 5, 2017 – Grieving Teens**

August is here and it won't be long before we turn the calendar page to September. As the end of August approaches, the articles, television specials and other media attention will turn to the 20th anniversary of the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. It was, at the time, one of the world's largest outpourings of public grief. Diana died on August 31, 1997. By the next day mourners had left so many flowers outside the gates of her Kensington Palace home that guards had to use a different entrance. There was a tsunami of blooms, teddy bears and cards. It is estimated that more than 12 tons of bouquets were left in her honor around the city. Mourners waited 11 hours and more to sign condolence books. Citizens wept openly in the streets.

And now, 20 years later, stories are emerging of the effect their mother's death had on her two sons, aged 15 and 12. Prince William, who was 15 at the time has spoken openly about the emotional impact the loss had on him: "The shock is the biggest thing,

and I still feel it 20 years later about my mother. People think shock can't last that long, but it does. It's such an unbelievably big moment in your life and it never leaves you, you just learn to deal with it."

William's brother, Harry, in April, gave an emotional interview in which he spoke of seeking professional help four years ago after years and years of struggling with the grief of his mother's death.

The British "stiff upper lip" mentality wasn't helpful to the teens as they struggled with their emotions and the shock of such a traumatic loss.

I've been thinking of teens and how they learn to deal with traumatic loss in recent weeks because I have been working with teens as they deal with the death of one of their classmates. Their mental health has been on my mind.

Of course the world is much different now than it was 20 years ago. When Princess Diana died, the Queen, with her grandsons at Balmoral Castle in Scotland, shielded the young princes from the media and ordered that all television sets be placed out of view. She insisted that the young princes lives run as close to normal as possible, including the family attending church services less than 24 hours after the princes received the news of their mother's death. The pastor was ordered not to mention the death during the service. To the nation it seemed as if the royals were being cold and distant in the face of the loss. The Queen was trying her best to protect her young grandsons.

It would be nearly impossible to shield teens from the media today. Within minutes of receiving the news of a shocking death, teens in our community were texting friends. Social media lit up with the event. Teens who weren't in the inner circle of friends began to make public displays of grief over the loss. Parents began to worry about their own teens as the emotion swept over the community. Groups of teens gathered to talk about what had happened, often without having access to the actual facts of the situation.

Still, I have an understanding of the desire of those who love teens to isolate them, even just a little, from social media. In the midst of intense grief, one of the things a parent might do is to suggest that the phone be turned off for a little while. As I worked with teens, I urged them to put their phones on vibrate and not answer voice calls, but they couldn't actually put down their phones and even, when I asked them not to send messages, they continued to read text messages as they came in. Their world is constantly connected and simply putting down the phone causes anxiety.

In retrospect, I wish a different choice could have been made about the place of the memorial service. A high school theater is a location of exaggerated emotion for teens already. It is the place where they act and exaggerate emotions as part of their learning and growing. Theater style seating is designed to focus attention on a stage, where all of the action is occurring. Putting the death of a teen on stage makes other teens

wonder what it might be like for them to be the focus of such attention. Having all of the youth clustered in the dark makes it hard for those who care to see their emotions. And the emotions of teens raise when they are with other emotional teens.

If we take the lessons from Princes William and Harry seriously, we understand that the events of the past week in our community have lasting effects on those who are involved. These teens will be impacted by this loss well into their thirties. Decades of learning to cope with grief. Many will need professional counseling to help them deal with the intensity of their emotions.

Shielding youth from public displays of grief is not the answer, despite our instincts to protect them.

What worries me the most was the large number of teens who came to the memorial service alone or in groups of three or four teens. Those who had a parent attend with them, had someone to share their grief and a model on how grief is expressed. Far more common were the teens who were sitting exclusively with other teens, who also had no experience of grief and were left with no adults to model the grieving process. I couldn't help but wonder where their parents were as they struggled with the intensity of their emotions.

The first few days after a loss, there will be plenty of gatherings and lots of attention. But society moves on quickly. Before long those same teens will be back at their summer jobs. Social media will light up with other events and happenings. Some of the teens will feel that they they are the only ones experiencing on-going emotions from this loss.

That is when we need to be there for them. I hope we are equal to the task. As the interviews with William and Harry revealed, how we deal with the grief of teens has lifelong consequences.

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## **August 6, 2017 – Being Found**

The view of the area where I live from space at this time of year looks like an island of green in a sea of brown. The surrounding prairies have dried with the hot summer weather and the pine and spruce tree-covered hills really stand out from the surrounding countryside. The hills themselves are a relatively small area of land, about 125 miles by 65 miles. It has been described by geologists as the oldest mountain range in the United States. The land is held as sacred by the indigenous peoples of the region, and several tribes used the hills as a place of ceremony and vision. Since gold prospectors arrived in the mid 1800's there has been a heightened sense of dispute over the land. The 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty recognized the area that includes the Black Hills as land belonging to the Lakota people, named as Sioux in that treaty. It was

an attempt to sort out indigenous lands by tribe and mentions land rights for Cheyenne, Sioux, Arapaho, Crow, Assiniboine, Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara nations. The subsequent 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty sought to protect the Black Hills from white settlement. In 1874, George Armstrong Custer led a military expedition into the hills and publicly announced the discovery of Gold in the hills. In what was later determined by the Supreme Court of the United States to be an illegal action, the Manypenny Agreement was imposed in 1877 removing the hills from Native territory.

People have been arguing about ownership of the land ever since.

I guess I am drawn to places where people have competing claims about the ownership of land. Prior to moving to South Dakota 22 years ago, we lived for a decade in Idaho. Idaho is relatively small as western states go, but 63 percent of the total land of Idaho is under federal control. It is especially attractive to people who argue that since the land belongs to all of us, they should have rights to occupy and use the land for all kinds of purposes including mining, logging and recreation. It is also attractive to people who believe that the federal government should not be in control of the land.

Prior to living in Idaho, we lived in North Dakota where the local people loved to argue about grazing contracts on federal pasture and disputes over the national grasslands was a regular topic of conversation over coffee.

About 25 percent of the total land mass of the United States officially belongs to agencies of the federal government. However, 89% of that land is in the West and the West is where I have lived most of my life. Out here we are practiced at arguing over ownership of land, and when we aren't arguing about the surface of the land, we are equally practiced at arguing about water and mineral rights.

Weekly when I head to the lake for a little rowing or paddling, I pass a sign that informs me that I am entering the Black Hills National Forest. My car and pickup have stickers on the windshield that show that I have paid my annual fee for recreational access to the area and I am entitled to use the parking lot and boat ramp at the lake. I might call it "my" lake, but I am well aware that it belongs to all of us and I have no problems sharing the lake with lots of other recreational users.

I would be pretty disappointed if access were denied.

When I take time to contemplate the land, however, I realize that all of this argument over who owns the land is pretty silly. The land existed before humans came along. After all, the Black Hills are the country's oldest mountains. They were here before there were any humans on the planet. They will be here when we are gone. Any illusion of ownership is just that - an illusion. At best you might say that we have temporary custodianship of the land.

Recently teacher and blogger Parker Palmer challenged his readers to meditate on a poem by Margaret Atwood:

*The Moment*

*by Margaret Atwood*

The moment when, after many years  
of hard work and a long voyage  
you stand in the centre of your room,  
house, half-acre, square mile, island, country,  
knowing at last how you got there,  
and say, I own this,  
is the same moment when the trees unloose  
their soft arms from around you,  
the birds take back their language,  
the cliffs fissure and collapse,  
the air moves back from you like a wave  
and you can't breathe.  
No, they whisper. You own nothing.  
You were a visitor, time after time  
climbing the hill, planting the flag, proclaiming.  
We never belonged to you.  
You never found us.  
It was always the other way round.

Thinking about this poem as I rowed across a completely calm lake in the early morning yesterday, I was reflecting on the man-made nature of the lake. At the height of the summer, with lots of heat from the sun, the vegetation in the lake is growing at a rapid pace. All around the edges of the lake, where the water is shallow, my oar blades bring up bunches of water plants with each stroke. Even in the middle of the lake, the algae bloom is evident. The water looks green because of all of the plants thriving on it. The lake is on its way to becoming a meadow. It continues to fill with silt, provide a good place for plants which complete their life cycle and add to the depth of organic material that is slowly filling up the lake reducing its capacity to hold water. It will take centuries, but the lake will one day fill in. Humans created the lake with a dam, but that did not stop the natural processes.

Even the lake proclaims that it never belonged to us. We own nothing. We are visitors, time after time, just as the poem proclaims. It was always the other way round. And I feel this truth each time I take time to experience the beauty and glory of this land.

It is indeed a joy to be able to go to a wild place and feel oneself "found."

## August 7, 2017 – Seeking Truth Together

I recently heard a story told by Neil deGrasse Tyson about an experience in a coffee shop. Tyson, who doesn't drink coffee, ordered a cup of hot chocolate with whipped cream on the top. When the drink was served, Tyson noticed that there was no whipped cream. He asked the server about it and got this response, "It must have sunk to the bottom of the cup." Tyson, ever the scientist and ever the communicator, responded: "Either the laws of physics have spontaneously reversed in this coffee shop, or there is no whipped cream in my hot chocolate." He then proceeded to suggest that they conduct an experiment on the spot. He instructed the server to get the whipped cream dispenser and put a bit more in the cup and observe whether it floated or sank. Of course the cream immediately floated to the top. Tyson, in telling the story said that this is how science is done. He proposed a theory: "Cream floats on top of hot chocolate." A skeptic questioned his theory: "It must have sunk to the bottom." He suggested an experiment to demonstrate his theory: "Let's put a little more to see whether or not it floats." The skeptic eventually saw that the theory was proven to be correct. Tyson goes on to say that he hopes that the server will be able to replicate the experiment in the future.

Of course the story is amusing. It may even have been embellished a bit in the telling as stories often are. The basic facts, however, are obvious. Cream does float to the top. Whipped cream on hot chocolate will not sink to the bottom. More interesting is what the story has to offer our society by way of how to conduct conversations when disagreement occurs.

It certainly seems as if the tone or rhetoric in our country has become one of people shouting at each other and rarely trying to find ways to reach common understanding. If you don't like the opinions expressed on a particular channel of television, grab the remote and switch channels. If you don't like what you hear on the news, declare that it is fake news and continue to be entrenched in your opinion. When people disagree, they simply accuse their opponent of lying and go on. Neither party is given any reason or incentive to change their opinion.

Neil deGrasse Tyson has used his position as the director of the Hayden Planetarium in New York City as an opportunity for public education and the promotion of science. I'm aware that he has his critics. Sam Kriss wrote an opinion piece in *Wired* in the spring of 2016 in which he accused Tyson of sucking the fun out of science and making everything boring. I think the Kriss piece is overstated, but there is probably a bit of truth in that. Tyson does spend much of his public time talking about things that are very obvious. Even his story about the incident with the whipped cream can be seen as a form of condescension. Was he really engaging the server or just making fun of him?

However you answer the question, the fact remains that we need to find ways of speaking with those with whom we disagree and together seeking the truth. Seeking

truth is the essence of education. Educators have not always been faithful to that task, sometimes placing imposing culture, presenting a particular bias, or imparting cultural values above the search for truth. We have tended to think of science as somehow more pure than some other disciplines, following established methods in the search for answers. But there is no lack of bias in modern science. The results of scientific endeavors often reflect the intentions of those who are providing the funding for the experiments.

Tyson has been quoted as saying “The good thing about science is that it’s true whether or not you believe in it.” His opinion matches that of others who portray science as objective and without bias or opinion. But it would be hard to deny that Tyson believes in science. He has placed his faith in a particular set of inquiries. I don’t disagree with him. I, too, believe in the value of scientific method and the contributions of scientific inquiry. But I would assert that we are incapable of complete objectivity in our observations. We always see things from a particular perspective and the more aware of that perspective we are the more completely we can understand what is going on in the world around us.

As we move forward as a society, we need people who are willing to stand up not only for what they believe to be the truth, but those who are willing to engage others in conversation that leads to discovery of new truths.

There is nothing to be gained from simply shouting that you are right and the other is wrong. Tyson’s story wouldn’t be interesting if it were only of him claiming that the server didn’t put cream on the chocolate and the server continuing to claim that he did. What we are interested in is that Tyson offers a story in which the issue is resolved without an impasse.

It makes me wonder what “experiments” we could propose for Senators so that they might consider the opinions of their opponents to be valuable. Might it be possible for members of different parties to come up with common agreements and work together for real solutions instead of resorting to win/lose scenarios? How do we, for example, reach beyond our common agreement that the opioid epidemic is a crisis and work together to propose solutions that effectively decrease the pain and suffering of those who are addicted? Might we propose an experiment in which we compare the costs and results of addiction treatment to the costs and results of imprisonment of addicts to see which produces the best outcome for society?

Maybe we could improve the quality of dialogue in our society by serving hot chocolate to those with whom we disagree. Don’t forget the whipped cream!

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**August 8, 2017 – Bear Problem**

It is a story that I have told many times before and I suspect I may even have told it in my blog, but one of the problems of growing older is that you don't always remember which stories were told in which contexts, so here we go. Or perhaps, here we go again.

Managing our church camp was a summer job for us for two years. It was a shoestring operation, with a short budget and lots of needs, especially when it came to maintenance. We had succeeded in getting a new well drilled the first year and plans were in place to build a new dining hall. A group was engaged in raising the necessary funds and meanwhile we were struggling to get the old building to serve for one more year. The year began with a myriad of water leaks. I became proficient at sweating copper pipe. At least some of the leaks resulted from improper draining of the system, but there were a lot fewer than had been the case the first year. I was learning. The kitchen had to pass state health inspection. We focused on food storage, making sure that all of our containers were insect and rodent proof. We scrubbed all surfaces with a bleach mixture to make sure that they were clean. We reviewed dish washing and knew this would be a challenge because we had no dishwasher, which was standard in most commercial kitchens. We still used a three-tank method with wash, rinse and sanitizing tubs.

After the initial stock-up trip in which we hauled groceries over 120 miles from Billings, MT, we did a weekly trip of 43 miles each way for perishables and other groceries. The camp pickup truck, 25 years old and suffering from a less than professional overhaul job, was in need of repairs beyond my capabilities so we were operating with a borrowed Chevy cary-all belonging to my father. It was only a dozen years old and started and ran reliably. We had removed the back seats so we could use it like a pickup to haul whatever was needed. During the week it was a work truck, used to haul firewood and construction supplies for our projects. On grocery day, I'd hose it out and get it as clean as possible and make the run.

Grocery day wasn't only for hauling groceries. All of the supplies we needed from town had to be obtained in a single trip. One day, I started at the lumber yard where I got several supplies, including a bag of patching cement to be used in repairing some stone work. Then I made the stop at the grocery store and finally stopped by the locker plant for the week's meat. I rushed back up the dirt road to get the supplies transferred to the kitchen. The meat was frozen so it would be fine when we arrived despite the hot day.

It was a long day and as soon as we arrived and got unloaded at the kitchen we had to scrub up and help with serving dinner and with the after-dinner clean up. I had everything unloaded from the truck except that bag of patching concrete. Darkness came and I decided to wait until the next morning to deal with that particular job. I didn't check the truck. The tailgate was closed, but the window above it was left open overnight.

The next morning, the inside of the truck was filled with cement dust. There was gray dust everywhere - on the seats, on the steering wheel, on the dashboard, on the headliner. Dust flew from the vents when the defroster was turned on. Fearing problems with water, I went to work cleaning with a broom and a big brush. It took quite a while before the truck was useable at all. That gave me time to figure out what had happened.

I knew that there was a bear that had been hanging around camp. We were taking our garbage a half mile away from camp and storing it in a bear-proof container to provide some separation between the bear and the campers. The smell of the garbage attracted the bear and there were some pretty impressive scratches on the container. That after dinner trip with the garbage had left some of the smell inside of the truck, which attracted the bear. Once inside, the bear did what bears do: used his claws to scratch at any potential source of food.

Two nights later I saw the bear, still gray from all of the cement dust on its back.

The story came to mind this morning as I read a story from the Durango Herald about a Subaru whose driver woke to find his vehicle crashed at the bottom of the hill at the end of his driveway after having run over his mailbox. The inside of the car was trashed, with the steering wheel ripped off and huge gashes in the dashboard. The gear shift lever, which he had carefully left in 1st gear, was in the neutral position. It didn't take long to figure out what had happened. Durango officials say that two or three bears get stuck in cars each week in the area. The bears, a bit hungry because of a lack of natural foods, have even learned to open car doors when they are left unlocked. And people eat in their cars. They smell like food to bears.

"Usually, I don't get up at 5 o'clock unless there is a bear driving a car down the street," the owner joked to the Durango Herald newspaper.

It isn't just Colorado and Montana. Bears have been roaming the streets in Romania scavenging for food. There have been so many that it has become a big problem. One witness reported that a bear had entered an old woman's house and ate her pancakes off of her table. "It was no problem," he said. "It didn't hurt her. It just wanted the pancakes."

As far as I know the only bears in the hills are in a tourist attraction, Bear Country USA. Still, I'm thinking it might be a good idea to make sure the windows are up and your car is locked if you leave it outdoors. I learned my lesson many years ago.

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**August 9, 2017 – The Importance of Solitude**

The need for solitude is embedded deeply in the history of intellectual thought. In "The Republic" Plato tells a story in which Socrates celebrates the solitary philosopher. The philosopher retreats to a cave where he is alone, but not lonely. Engaged in contemplative thought, the philosopher becomes attuned to the inner self and to the world.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was quoting Pythagoras when he wrote, "In the morning, - solitude; . . . that nature may speak to the imagination, as she does never in company." Emerson wrote that the wisest teachers press upon their pupils the importance of "periods and habits of solitude." He believed that solitude was required for "serious and abstracted thought."

Of course there are plenty of other teachers throughout history who remind us of the importance of solitude.

Hanna Arendt, a journalist who covered the trial of Adolf Eichman for the New Yorker, was surprised to find that Eichman was "quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous." She attributed his capacity to participate in the absolutely evil actions of orchestrating the Holocaust to his lack of imagination, his consummate conventionality. He was simply, "thoughtless." He couldn't stop and think and this inability permitted him to participate in mass murder.

She came to believe that evil dwelt in the person who had no capacity for being alone. The one who must always be a part of a group - a member of a crowd - is incredibly dangerous.

Her thoughts remind one of Edgar Allan Poe's "man of the crowd." "He refuses to be alone," Poe wrote, He "is the type and the genius of deep crime . . . He is the man of the crowd."

Thinking on a deep level requires a balance of solitude and interaction. Creative thought is born in taking time to be alone. Then the thoughts are refined in conversation with others. Decades ago, when I attended theological seminary, students were required to live at the seminary, to immerse themselves in the entire lifestyle of the institution. A schedule that provided for both times of solitude and community was designed into the program. We had access to private cells in the library that were designed for individuals to be alone in a very quiet place. We also were expected to discuss the books that we had read in private with our colleagues over meals and evenings of discussion and debate. The result is that I have continued ever since to seek times of solitude and times of community. I am eager to discuss the books I read with colleagues and have two meetings each week which are set up for collegial discussion and interchange. But I invest an equal amount of time in solitary activity. I read and think and pray and allow my imagination to soar.

These thoughts give me reason to worry about some teens that I know. I have witnessed teens who seem to be incapable of disconnecting from social media. One young person who was constantly texting as I was trying to converse with her told me that she keeps her cell phone right next to her bed so that she can keep up with what is going on. When I asked her if she could set it aside for a few minutes, she put it on vibrate and stopped answering voice calls, but continued to read each text message as soon as it came in. She would set down the phone, but pick it up as soon as it signaled a new message. I don't know if she has developed the capacity to be alone. Of course she is young and capable of learning a lot. But she is not alone in her constant use of social media.

It isn't difficult for me to remember before cell phones existed. I've driven tens of thousands of miles by myself with no telephone in the vehicle. I used to do it all the time. Sometimes I would listen to the radio, but other times I would simply allow my mind to wander over the events of the day. Driving alone was one of the ways I worked through the grief of my father's death. I still will turn off the stereo when I am driving and just listen to my own thoughts.

Today's teens, however, do not remember the world before portable phones and constant connectivity. A weak cell phone signal or a loss of wi-fi seems to them to be a crisis. They expect to remain constantly connected.

I am not predicting rampant evil. I don't know what effects this will have on individuals and society. I just think that we need to be serious about teaching young people the importance of solitude. I know a family that requires all cell phones to be put away in a common room when it is time for bed. I have been working with some of the teens of our church to practice silence. At first it was difficult for them to remain quiet for just a few seconds. After practice they learn to sit quietly for several minutes. It is a skill that can be taught and learned.

Arendt writes that if we lose our capacity for solitude, or ability to be alone with ourselves, then we lose our very ability to think. We risk getting caught up in the crowd. We become vulnerable to being "swept away by that every else does and believes in" - no longer able to distinguish "right from wrong, beautiful from ugly."

If she is right, and I believe that she is, the stakes for society are incredibly high. We must be serious about teaching the need for and the practice of solitude.

Not long ago I worshiped in a congregation that is very different from the one I serve. I left agitated by the constant noise and the frenzy of the activities. There was no time when the room was quiet. What was called prayer was a barrage of music and words. Congregants were expected to sit and listen to what seemed to me to be a concert with a bit of commentary between songs. I would be easy to get swept up in that crowd - in Arendt's words "swept away by what every one else does and believes in."

It gave me pause to think about how we practice our faith in our congregation and how important quiet is in the flow of worship. I hope that we will succeed in teaching our children the value of solitude.

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## **August 10, 2017 – A National Crisis**

It is ancient history for the youth of today, but one of the events that shaped the lives of people my age was the Vietnam War. Today a traveling memorial to those lost in that war goes on exhibit in Chamberlain at the rest area above the Missouri River. The location is known to all South Dakotans. It is the place where a huge sculpture, *Destiny*, is displayed. It has commanding views of the River below and is a common stopping place for those driving across our state. The “Wall that Heals” is a 3/5 scale replica of the memorial in Washington DC that contains the names of 58,220 men and women who died while serving in Vietnam.

I may not make it down to Chamberlain. The display is only going to be there for four days and it is 210 miles one way. And I have seen the original wall in Washington D.C. It is a moving tribute and the way that the wall is displayed in DC is very effective. As you walk along the wall, you go deeper and deeper into the ground, not unlike the feeling we had as the US became deeper and deeper in its involvement in Vietnam.

Most impressive to me, however, are the names. I know a few of the people who died. There is an attraction to looking for their names. The names are arranged by year of death, so it isn't too difficult to find a specific name. Still the mass of names is overwhelming. 58,220 is a lot of names.

It is a little less than the number of people who died from drug overdoses in the United States in 2016. It takes a long time to certify a drug death, so it will take several more months before the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will finish their calculations. The current estimate for 2016, is 59,000 to 65,000. To put that number in perspective, that is more than the peak year for U.S. Citizens killed by guns, 1993. That is more than the peak year for HIV deaths of US citizens (1995). That is more than the peak year for car accident deaths of US citizens (1972). That is more than the total deaths in the Vietnam War. And that is just one year. Furthermore, there is no intimation that the crisis has peaked. Preliminary estimates are that 2017 will be much greater in terms of loss of life than 2016.

It is the largest health crisis our nation has ever faced.

A special panel studying the crisis released its report this week. The commission's headline recommendation was that the President declare the opioid epidemic a national

emergency. Doing so would have a symbolic impact. More importantly, it would open up federal funds for states and permit federal agencies to take steps currently prohibited such as allowing Medicaid funds to be used for drug treatment in large-scale in-patient facilities. However, our President and his Health and Human Services Secretary, Tom Price, indicated in a news conference on the subject that the administration will not be adopting that recommendation.

In fact the President used the news conference to make a partisan attack on his predecessor, launching an attack on the Obama's administration's move to reduce drug prosecutions and shorten sentences for those convicted. It was, for many, a disappointing statement. The opioid crisis in America is not a partisan issue and it has, heretofore, brought Democrats and Republicans together. Whether or not you agree with the actions of the Obama administration, for most of the years of that presidency, the epidemic was growing through legal channels, starting with physician prescriptions. The Obama administration did clamp down on that through tightened national prescription guidelines.

Partisan politics aside, however, and meaning no disrespect to the office of the President or the current President of our country, it simply is not possible to arrest our way out of this crisis. We don't have enough space in prisons and we cannot afford the number of prisons it would take to arrest and give longer sentences to drug users and street dealers. Law enforcement must be focused on the illegal importation of fentanyl and carfentanil, much of which is coming from China and passes through Mexico on its way to the US market. Distracting law enforcement officers with increased arrests of users and petty dealers and tying up courts with thousands upon thousands of cases will lead to increased, not decreased illegal activity as decades of the war on drugs have already illustrated.

Drug addiction is an illness that can be treated. The number of fatalities can be decreased through prevention and treatment. Increasing addicted patients' access to inpatient treatment and medications combined with enhanced monitoring of opioid prescribing and improved training for health-care providers are proven methods of decreasing the impact of this tragedy.

In 2012 alone, physicians wrote enough prescriptions to give every American adult their own bottle of opioids. Four in five new heroin users over the past decade first became addicted by misusing prescription painkillers. This is all legal activity. For the most part, physicians do not have access to patients' prescription history when responding to complaints of pain.

Research indicates that opioid use is strongly linked to mental illness and economic insecurity. It will take more than changing drug prescription policies to address this crisis. The failure to provide adequate mental health treatment services costs more than

the patients who go without treatment. It has direct social costs as well. When we fail to treat illness, everyone pays through increased governmental costs.

Ambulance services and other first responders are reeling at the increased costs of naloxone, sold under the brand name, Narcan. The drug is very effective in reversing the effects of heroin overdose and saving lives. A dose of Narcan has gone from under \$7 to nearly \$18 in the past year. Easier to use solutions, such as profiled syringes (\$50 per dose) and atomizers (\$165 per dose) are outrunning first responder budgets. The Evzio auto-injector hit the market in 2014 at \$575. The cost today is \$4,500. Just like the Epi-Pen, the price has been raised as high as possible to increase profits.

This is a complex problem. There are no simple solutions. We don't have time to blame others or engage in political grandstanding. We all need to work together. So if our president is going to focus on enforcement, let's not spend any energy resisting him. We need that energy for prevention and treatment.

We could never afford a wall with the names of the victims of this crisis.

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## **August 11, 2017 – An Intergenerational Community**

I grew up in a large family. We were spread out enough that there never was a time when we all lived together at the same time. By the time my youngest brothers arrived, my oldest sister was out of the house. Still, we had enough to be five children at home most of my growing up years. And four of those five were boys, so the concept of having my own room was never a consideration except in the summers when we lived in a set of old tourist cabins by the river. I used to joke that I had my own house, but it wasn't a house really. It had no plumbing and wasn't livable in the winter, but for a few months during school vacation it was a bit of private space. We shared bathrooms in the "main cabin."

Having had a roommate all of my life, I was a bit surprised to find that college roommates were a challenge for me. I began my college career on academic probation, so my first roommate's penchant for bringing beer into the room was a threat to my academic career. We were both underage for legal consumption and the dormitory had a ban on alcohol. He and I had no classes in common and I wondered whether he was attending class at all some of the time. I learned to study at the library and return to the room only to sleep, which might have worked if his sleeping hours were anything near to mine, which they weren't. I switched roommates at semester break. My new roommate was a friend I had met at church camp and I thought it would work out well, but it turned out that our sleep and awake schedules weren't at all the same. I guess I thought that most people slept at night and got up in the morning, but this didn't seem to be the pattern with college roommates. I never did figure out how he got around the dormitory's

curfew, but that wasn't the only dorm rule that he circumvented. I went shopping for a new roommate. Roommate number 3 lasted to the end of my first year of college at which time I had filled out an application for a single room, a luxury I enjoyed for the next two years.

Having a private room in a dormitory isn't exactly the same as living by yourself, however. There are still shared bathrooms and sound travels from one room to the next very easily. Our college had a single dining room for all students so we were developing the skills of living together and adjusting to our differences every day. My place of solitude during my college years was the library. I obtained a work-study position at the library and became the person to open the building at 6 am. I usually had the whole library to myself for an hour or more each day. An occasional professor would wander through and find a specific item and the population would rise to five or six students during the panic of finals week. Other than that I practiced solitude.

After college, we moved to Chicago for seminary. I remember the first time I saw our apartment building. I arrived a few weeks before the start of the term and placed our household possessions, which weren't many, in a basement storage area. I had to have a key to enter the building and another one to exit the stairway at the basement level. All of that city security made me a bit nervous about our possessions which were in a pickup that could not be locked, but I accomplished the task without incident. There were people all around, but I knew none of them.

Soon we arrived, checked into our apartment and retrieved our possessions from the basement. I think I locked my keys in my car a dozen times that first semester. I became obsessed with all of the locked doors. But that first day in our apartment, we heard a knock on the door and two preschool faces greeted us. They were the children of neighbors and were going around our shared floor of the apartment building greeting everyone. They didn't know very much English, but they understood the word "cookie" perfectly.

It turned out that we were grateful to be living in an apartment building with children. There was a lab preschool on the first floor of the building and before long that school became an important part of our seminary education. Our classes were challenging, with a lot of reading and the books we were reading were dense and often required much discussion to understand the complex thoughts being presented. We got to know the other members of our class very well and most of them were near our age. The preschool offered contact with those who were younger than us and the director was older than our parents, so it gave our community a much-needed intergenerational flavor.

What I was learning was that I need to be a part of an intergenerational community. I need regular contact with those who are older and younger than I in order to develop perspective. Intergenerational community is something at which the church excels, so I

have been well suited to my vocation. Just last Sunday I had conversations with two people who are in their nineties and then was allowed to rock a one-month-old baby in the nursery for a few minutes. I get to get down on my hands and knees with preschoolers and sit at the table with residents of a senior living facility in the same day. I work with young adults planning their weddings and with couples who've been married for 50 years and more who are planning their funerals. I have watched the wonder on the faces of newly weds when they discover that we've been married 44 years. And this week I paid a visit to a couple who celebrated their 25th anniversary the year after we were married.

Community is best when it includes all ages and I am deeply grateful for the intergenerational nature of the church. It is a quality upon which I depend for balance in my life.

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## **August 12, 2017 – A Fresh Look at Old Stories**

This summer I have been enjoying following the Hebrew Scriptures that are a part of the Revised Common Lectionary. The track that we are following started after Pentecost with the stories of Abraham and Sarah and will continue to Christ the King Sunday and will take us through the history of Israel through the Exodus. I love these stories for many reasons, not the least of is that they show that from the beginning our people were flawed. The grandfathers and grandmothers of our faith made mistakes, misunderstood what they were being told, ended up in reconfigured and fractured families, got themselves into messes that were so convoluted and complex that they ended up wondering what was going on. Those things are very remarkable. More remarkable is that we treasured and kept these stories and are still telling them today, thousands of years after they happened.

Of course, like any stories that have been treasured for generations, there may be a bit of embellishment, and if not embellishment, then perhaps just a bit of having certain nuances lost in translation. There are puns that are obvious in Hebrew that are no longer puns when translated into English. There are phrases that made sense in the time that a particular translation was made and then the language shifted and meanings are not longer as clear. Words change over time. Vocabularies shift. Grammar rules are fluid. We don't speak the way that people did in Victorian England. We shouldn't be surprised if certain passages in the King James Version of the Bible don't flow easily off of modern tongues.

Still, there are basic truths that continue to come through our stories. There are compelling reasons to keep telling them. There are reasons to make fresh translations and to tell the stories in new ways.

A short time ago I ran across a piece by Sara K. Runnels in “McSweeney’s Internet Tendency that brought a smile to my face and reminded me that we need to continue to look at scripture in new ways. McSweeney’s is a humor site on the Internet published by the publishing company that was started by Dave Eggers. It often has really interesting and very funny bits of poetry, literature, short stories and more. I can’t describe Runnels’ piece adequately and it is too long to quote here, so I’ll do what I rarely do and provide a link to her piece. Chick it out at <https://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/and-god-created-millennial-earth>.

If you haven’t followed the link, this probably won’t make sense, but I really cracked up on verses 12 and 13: “The land produced vegetation; mostly ingredients for green juice and wine, TBH. Then there was evening, and there was morning - the third day. And God added it to his Instagram Story.” (Hint: TBH means “to be honest.”) I also think she got her paraphrase just right with verse 26: Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may SLAAYYYYYY over all the non-humans,’ which was a pretty savage thing to say.”

McSweeneys has published several other pieces inspired by the Bible. I hesitate to mention too many of them, just as I hesitated before including the link to this piece because some of them use words that we don’t use in church. They are a bit irreverent and I can understand how some faithful people might take offense at that kind of thing. That doesn’t mean that I didn’t laugh reading them.

The reason I bring up the article, is that I find myself regularly laughing at the Bible when I read it from a scholarly translation like the New Revised Standard Version. God’s people do some pretty strange things. We have kept some pretty strange stories about our people. Some of the heroes of our stories are real jerks. Take this week’s reading. God sense Joseph to check out what his brothers are doing up near Shechem. He was curious because those boys had stirred up some real trouble there before when they thought that someone from Shechem had messed with their sister. The problem was that the kid Joseph was only 17 and he didn’t have a clue. He couldn’t even find the place. He ends up wandering in the fields before he finally finds them. Finally he asks for directions and ends up in a real mess with his brothers. Sibling rivalry? Perhaps. At any rate the kid almost ended up getting himself killed, which would have really created a pickle, but in the end his big brother Reuben ends up saving his skin, although he may have been mostly motivated by money. The piece we read for this Sunday ends up with Joseph in shackles on his way to slavery in Egypt while his brothers soak his favorite coat in sheep blood and make up a story to snooker their father, who is the guy who snookered his own brother out of his inheritance by tricking his own father. Like father, like sons, they say.

It would be pretty funny if it weren’t so deadly serious. It is the beginning of the story about how the people for whom God intended for freedom end up being slaves in a

foreign land - a land where they were never intended to live in the first place. It isn't the first story of our people getting into trouble in Egypt and it won't be the last.

Anyway, I hope that we can retain our ability to laugh at the stories of our people. Our people could use a good laugh and I think that our ancestors had to have had good senses of humor to keep telling these stories on their ancestors. There are lots of people - and lots of religions that would have discarded some of these stories.

Furthermore, I pray that sometime in the future - generations from now - those who come after us might keep their sense of humor when they tell their children about our time on this earth. No matter how straight they hold their faces when they report what is going on in our generation, their hearers are sure to believe that it is all a joke and just something that they made up. Truth really is stranger than fiction.

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## August 13, 2007 – Praying for Peace



I went rowing early yesterday. A busy day and the slight shortening of days worked together to get me on the water in time for sunrise, an event that I have missed for several weeks. The humidity following a good rain shower on Friday and the chill of the morning meant that there was a mist rising from the lake. I love to paddle or row in the mist, but it is difficult to photograph in the low light conditions. Besides, I wasn't really into taking pictures yesterday anyway. I was out for the exercise and for the peace of the lake. I leaned into my oars and the boat quickly accelerated to the point that I could feel the chill on my back, which was turned towards the bow of the boat as I skimmed across the water. Rowing towards the west, I had a view of the rising sun on my way out across the water.

Out east, two time zones away, it was later. I suppose that some of my colleagues had finished up their early morning prayers as Charlottesville, Virginia, braced for another day of confrontation between white nationalists and KKK members who had paraded through the campus of the University the night before with torches and weapons. The clergy of the city had drawn together to offer training in nonviolence for counter protestors and planned to don vestments and stand in peaceful witness in Emancipation

Park where a 28ft statue of Confederate general Robert E Lee, slated to be removed by the city, has become the focal point of the largest gathering of the Ku Klux Klan in recent years and where David Duke, former grand wizard of the KKK was slated to speak to the mostly male, all white gathering.

As I sat in peace in a place of beauty, my spirit restored by the glory of nature and the gift of quiet time alone, others were preparing for what turned out to be a day of terror. Deputy Mayor Wes Ballamy of Charlottesville was allowed a brief moment in the park at the heart of the city before being whisked away under the protection of police. He has been receiving daily death threats. He has been told he will be hung from the statue. He has been told he will be hung from the trees in the park. With the history of lynchings, the police thought it prudent to take those threats seriously.

You can read about the violence in the news. I have no reason to repeat the reports here. The day did not turn out to be one of peace in Charlottesville. One was killed in an automobile attack against peaceful counter protestors that can easily be seen as an act of terrorism. The driver has been arrested and charged with murder. Two officers died in a helicopter crash. It took the Virginia State Police and the National Guard to restore order in the city.

Those pastors who had prayed and worked for peace in their city are likely already awake as I write my blog this morning. I'm running a little late as I struggle with the right words to write. They are up early, trying to find the right words to say to troubled congregations. We all are praying for peace.

Three years ago, Charlottesville was named America's happiest city by the National Bureau of Economic Research. "Joy Town, USA," the media called it. Spirits are somewhat lower this morning as reflection rises on the streets that yesterday were filled with chaos and violence.

Rev. Brenda Brown-Grooms is preparing to preach to her congregation. "I come from a people who were enslaved, and if you are going to make it through that misery, there has to be a spirit which allows you to see past what your eyes see in front of you and what your ears hear, and to understand how hope forms in your heart," she said. "As our people used to say, trouble don't last always. It might last all of my lifetime, but not always."

The fifth chapter of the book of Romans gives a bit of perspective on suffering; "we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us." (Romans 5:3-5)

These are days for endurance. We may not have gotten to the place of hope as a nation in the face of these tragic and violent events. The hatred and racism that we thought we had put behind us have once again reared their ugly head and brought violence to our streets. Terror held sway for a day and no one is sure when it will go away. But I feel a sense of solidarity with my colleagues way across the country. I sense their prayers as I pray for peace in their city. I was not physically standing with them yesterday, but I stand with them in spirit.

My sermon notes were prepared before the violence in Charlottesville. They were prepared before I took my little boat to the lake and enjoyed the beauty and peace that are a gift of God. And I am unsure of what I will actually say to the congregation I serve when I stand to lead them in worship today. By comparison, my task is light when compared to that facing my colleagues in Virginia. They are close to the center of yesterday's violence. They see the bitter divisions that lie in their communities. Their peace has been shattered in a way that it is difficult for them to find places of peace. They will walk the streets of Charlottesville as they prepare for worship today. Some are out there as I write these words.

I pray that they can feel the prayers and tears of their colleagues. I pray that they will know the support we offer. I pray they will know of our feeble attempts to share their pain. I pray that they will know that "trouble don't last always."

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## **August 14, 2017 – Numbers**

There are certain numbers that stick in my head. I can tell you the telephone number of our home when I was growing up and the telephone number of my father's business in those days. I know the street number of the apartment we lived in 40 years ago. One of the numbers that I have in my head is 4490. That is the elevation, in feet of the airport in Big Timber, Montana, where I flew with my father as a child and where I learned to fly as a teen. If you know the elevation of the current location of your airplane you can set your altimeter. In those days before GPS and other satellite-aided instruments, altimeters worked by barometric pressure. As you go up in altitude the barometric pressure decreases so you can have an instrument that will tell you how high you are. In an airplane this is an important measurement because you need to know altitude to avoid hitting obstacles and to make accurate estimates for landing. But barometric pressure is not constant. It changes with the weather, so altimeters need to be set on a regular basis at least at the beginning of each flight and often in route if the flight is covering much distance. Automated flight information radio services provide local barometric pressure for adjusting altimeters in flight. There is a little room for inaccuracy in flying by visual flight rules. The official altitude of the airport in Big Timber is 4493.9, but we set 4490 as a round number. We did the same thing in Billings, a nearby city, where the airport elevation is 3652, but we set our altimeter at 3650.

I also know the elevation of granite peak, the highest point in Montana. It is 12,808 feet above sea level. The airplane in which I soloed had a service ceiling of 16,500 feet which meant that it would, if conditions were right, be able to fly over granite peak. However, our practical limit was 12,000 feet because we didn't carry supplemental oxygen, so we never did.

I was thinking of elevation recently because I am reading Jonathan White's excellent book, "Tides." It is a comprehensive discussion of the rise and fall of tides around the globe. It is obvious, from reading that book, that sea level is a theoretical number not an actual place. In the first place the sea is never level. It sloshes around the planet affected by a lot of different factors including the moon's gravitational pull, the sun's gravitational pull, friction of water moving over the sea floor, which itself isn't level, geographical features on the coastlines, the amount of the earth's water that is currently in the form of ice, the rotation of the planet, and a host of other features.

Because of their interest in the movement of waves and tides, scientists have long employed devices called stilling wells to measure the level of water in a particular location at a particular time. The device is essentially a big pipe that is placed vertically so it extends above the water level with a small hole below the water line to allow water to enter the pipe and rise and fall without having the surface disrupted by wind or other factors. Even though waves are changing the level of water on the outside of the pipe, inside the gauge the surface of the water is calm.

By measuring with a stilling well at multiple locations over a long period of time, an average can be measured. The scientific community has come to a mutual agreement of a theoretical point labeled sea level and the height of features on land as well as the depth of the ocean are based on variations from this theoretical point. These days satellites are deployed to make accurate measurements of geographical features.

The concept of measurement of any thing is based on direct observation within the parameters of some basic assumptions. We measure the height of mountains or buildings because we have made an assumption about the location of a theoretical sea level. It works because we have agreed to all use the same starting point, as opposed to someone living on the Bay of Fundy using a local number and someone living on the Indian Ocean using another. All around the world, elevation is measured from the same theoretical starting point. We do this with all of our measurements. Time is measured by dividing the earth into time zones and agreeing on a "prime meridian" which runs through Greenwich England. That same location is used for measuring latitude and longitude around the globe. Everything we measure has an agreed-upon starting point.

Of course these measurements are made from the perspective of living beings who occupy a moving planet in the midst of a moving solar system on the edge of a moving

galaxy in an expanding universe. Nothing is really static. Everything is in motion, even features such as mountains that appear to us to be static and fixed.

These days I use numbers for a wide variety of different purposes. The digital locks on my home and the church require four digits. I routinely use another lock at the Juvenile Services Center that has a six digit code. I have Personal Identification Numbers (PIN) for my bank card and access to my voice mail. Sometimes I use previously memorized numbers, though not the ones mentioned in this blog post, to facilitate remembering my PINs. These numbers appear to be more random than the measurements we make for altitude or distance. However, if you figure that most people are choosing numbers that they can remember and that we remember specific numbers like addresses and dates better than other numbers, any given pin is probably not quite as random as you might expect. I suspect that there are more addresses, phone numbers and birth dates employed as PINs than completely random numbers.

I suppose that at some point as I age I will begin to forget some of the numbers I know. In the meantime, it is nice to know a few elevations and heights. After all, if I forget my PIN, I won't be able to access my computer to check Google to get the numbers I need.

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## **August 15, 2017 – A Busy Life**

The tomatoes are starting to come on in the garden. We've had a few and the plants are healthy and filled with ripening fruit. For the next several weeks, we'll be able to harvest a few each day and, if the weather holds, we'll be eating tomatoes fresh from the garden well into September. The tomato plants like it best when it stays warm, with overnight lows around 60. When it gets much colder than that, they slow production of fruit. The last few weeks have been nearly perfect and in the last week, afternoon showers have even watered the plants for me. So far we've avoided hail, but that is always a possibility in the hills. We heard of others who saw hail yesterday. We got a couple of very healthy rain showers and avoided the hail. Not bad for the middle of August.

There is something about a garden tomato that is a taste of summer for me. You don't have to be a gardener to get that flavor. Both the food coop and the farmer's market have tasty local tomatoes this time of year. But the flavor difference between a home-grown tomato and those that are sold in the supermarket is dramatic. I find myself snacking on tomatoes and cutting thicker slices for my sandwiches. And when I go to the garden to pick the cherry tomatoes, I always pop a few directly into my mouth. I've been doing it for years and so far have suffered no ill effects from not washing the fruit first.

What I am best at growing in my garden are weeds. They seem to get ahead of me every year and of course they are constantly reseeding new weeds for coming years. I know that a dedicated gardener wouldn't tolerate them and would find ways of controlling them, but I have so many other summer hobbies that I often neglect my garden. The plants that do best in my garden are naturally tough and can compete with weeds.

I grow a lot of sunflowers. They don't have much practical value, but they produce seeds for the next year and they really attract birds. It's kind of nice to have natural bird feeders in the garden. Sometime in late September or October the pinion jays will arrive in mass at the garden and finish the harvest for me.

Regular readers of this blog know that I love to take a canoe, kayak or rowboat to Sheridan Lake a couple of times each week. I also build boats and have a project in my garage that is at an exciting phase, attracting me to work on it most days when I have a little time.

Then there is the "hobby" of community service. I volunteer as a chaplain for the Sheriff and I am a member of our L.O.S.S. Team. The L.O.S.S. (Local Outreach to Suicide Survivors) Team program started with a handful of people who had lost a loved one to suicide and wanted to provide support to others experiencing such a loss. Suicide grief is unique in some ways and having information and resources early in the grief process is a big help to those who are suffering. For more than ten years now, the L.O.S.S. team has been partnering with the Pennington County Sheriff for rapid team deployment by Sheriff's dispatch. This means that we have to be organized into teams of two or three members ready to respond to calls 24 hours a day, seven days a week. My Sunday obligations mean I can't be on call for seven days in a row, but I frequently am on call six or more days each month. This month that number is doubled due to traveling team members and increased demand. The past two months have been uncommonly busy for our team.

Which is why I was headed to the lake yesterday when my cell phone rang and why I pulled into the Whispering Pines Fire Department parking lot to take the call and turn around. Within a few minutes I was in my car heading to pick up another team member and drive to a rural area of our county to join Sheriff Deputies in responding to a call.

And that is how I spent over six hours of my day off: comforting the bereaved, assisting with notification to family members, providing resources and counseling, making phone calls to employers and generally assisting people on what they will always remember as one of the worst days of their life.

I'm just saying that I have a pretty good excuse for all of the weeds in my garden. At least that's the way I look at it. I suppose that there are other citizens who are also

dedicated volunteers who find the time to keep their yards and gardens pristine. I admire them, but I haven't figured out how to imitate them.

I'm not complaining. At least I think I am not. I have a very good, full, rich and meaningful life. I understand that my priorities for the use of my time are the result of decisions that I make. No one is forcing me to invest my time the way I choose. But the lifestyle I have chosen leaves me with a pretty constant feeling that there just isn't enough time for all of the things that I would like to get done. As a result, I frequently go to bed with undone tasks.

My desk at my office doesn't look any better than my garden. It is prone to clutter and sometimes projects get buried beneath the current work that I have going. I prefer to plan worship with a half dozen resources at hand. I'll get multiple windows open on my computer monitor, which is usually cluttered with lots of items on the screen. I'll have a couple of books open on my desk along with several sheets of paper notes. It is how I work best, but it isn't a model of neat organization.

Someday, I say, I'll retire. That'll force me to clean my desk and give me time to keep my garden better. But that is someday. Today I need to find my notes for the meetings that lie ahead and hope that my phone doesn't ring.

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## **August 16, 2017 – I Cannot be Silent**

As I sit down to write this morning, the website of the Rapid City Journal shows op ed pieces by Governor Dennis Dugaard,, Senator Mike Rounds, Senator John Thune, and Representative Kristi Noem. All show the date stamp of one hour ago, or roughly 4 a.m., meaning that they were probably sent to the Rapid City Journal sometime last evening. It is obvious that the leaders of the Republican Party are engaged in a concerted public relations effort and that elected representatives of that party have been instructed to get to work and get their names in the news.

Not one of those op-ed pieces mentions the events in Charlottesville, Virginia over the weekend or President Donald Trump's controversial responses to those events.

I understand partisan loyalty. I am aware that the Republican Party holds our Senate, House and Governor's seats. I am aware that the party holds overwhelming majorities in the state house and senate. I have a lot of friends who are members of the Republican Party and I am in regular conversation with them. The organization of the Republican Party is impressive and it has led to many election victories in our state and around the nation.

However a torchlight parade of white nationalists and neo-nazis heavily armed with automatic weapons and riot gear through a peaceful college town and the use of an automobile as a weapon of terror against unarmed citizens is not something we can ignore.

The organized flurry of words trying to distract the attention of the citizens of South Dakota from the events in Charlottesville and the clear statements of our President in support of the alt-right organizers of a display of racism and hatred is, pure and simple, a shameful failure of courage on the part of our elected representatives.

We need our leaders to stand up in the face of hatred and violence. The parade of submissions to the newspaper, clearly organized and timed to arrive at the same time, is a clear failure of courage on the part of our leaders.

I am not prone to make political comments in this blog. I am not prone to making political comments in worship. But there are some moral lines that cannot be crossed in silence. It was the silence of religious leaders that contributed, in part, to the rise of Nazism in 20th Century Germany and yielded the result of a Holocaust that claimed six million victims.

We can no longer afford silence.

The events in Charlottesville were not a case of two sides with equal moral standing as our President has implied with his statements about “both sides.”

Racism is wrong.

Our nation is founded on the absolute conviction of certain basic assumptions: “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

When our President puts Nazis on the same moral plane as anti-Nazis, he is wrong. When our President compared Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson to George Washington and Thomas Jefferson he was wrong. With all due respect, Mr. President, the father of our country and the author of the Declaration of Independence are not on the same moral plane as two men who made war on America.

I struggle to find words for my disappointment and sadness that the President of the United States would so denigrate the office to which he was elected. For our Governor, Senators and Representative to lack the courage to stand up to the President is even more disappointing.

Violence is wrong.

Blaming the victims is wrong.

I love this nation and the principles for which it stands. I respect the offices of our leaders and the electoral process by which we have chosen them. And I am called to serve a church that has many supporters of these elected officials. But this is a sad time for our nation. Our president has all but declared that he will protect the KKK, neo-Nazis, and white supremacists. I acknowledge the rights of people to engage in peaceful demonstration. A rally where swastikas and semi-automatic weapons are born and racist and anti-Semitic epithets are hurled is not, however, a peaceful demonstration. I do not advocate taking away the rights of those people no matter how abhorrent their rhetoric.

The only morally justifiable reaction to such a demonstration is disgust.

When our President fails to see this, I fear for the future of our democracy.

When our locally elected governor, senators and representatives fail to speak out in the face of this outrage, I weep.

There are reasonable arguments to be made for the preservation of the statues of Confederate generals. There are good and moral citizens who believe they should remain. There are good people who fear a loss of the history of our nation if we take down all of the monuments. I understand their point of view and I believe that there is a reasonable public debate over our history and how it should be remembered and taught. But in the face of death and terror, this is not the time for that debate.

This is a time for mourning.

I am disappointed that our President has not called the family of Heather Heyer, the young woman mowed down on Saturday. I am disappointed that he has not expressed his condolences too the 20 people who were wounded. We look to our leaders to help a divided nation heal. Our president seems intent on making the wounds and divisions deeper. Our South Dakota elected officials seem intent on backing that effort.

Senator Thune, you are very popular in your home state. You are secure in your position. Would it be all that difficult for you to just once act with courage and stand up for what is right instead of remaining lock step with your party's directives?

Governor Dugaard, you are governor of citizens who are white and black and Native and Hispanic. You are governor of Jews and Christians and Muslims and Buddhists and those of no faith. Couldn't you at least acknowledge the existence of the minorities in the state you serve?

Today is not a day for making political gains. It is a day for mourning and weeping. It is a day to stand with the family of Heather Heyer and all of the victims of the attack in Charlottesville. Our nation has been wounded. Healing will take time and energy.

That healing is made more difficult by leaders who fail to lead.

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## **August 17, 2017 – Remembering Lincoln**

Note: In Yesterday's blog, trying to make a point about false equivalencies and the absence of moral equivalency, I criticized the President's comparison of Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee to George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. While my criticism stands, I did not mean to imply that either Washington or Jefferson were somehow perfect people. Both were slaveowners. Jefferson raped one of his slaves. I also did not mean to imply that we had fully fulfilled the vision of the Declaration of Independence. Equal rights for women, Native Americans, African Americans and many others have been slow in coming. We haven't yet achieved the vision of our founders. The main point of the blog, however, stands. These are critical times for our country. As BBC presenter Katty Kay wrote, "I've just returned to Washington after a few weeks in Europe. In 20 years of living in the US, I've never returned to a country so dispirited, nor so dismissed."

I have had the privilege of climbing the stairs and standing at the base of the pedestal and looking up into the gigantic statue face at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. I've wandered around the space and read the words etched into the walls. I have imagined the tensions and strains that this great American leader faced as citizens of this nation took up arms against one another and fought bloody battles. I have contemplated the terrible cost of the U.S. Civil War. I have also been moved by the monument and its role in the story of our country. Two years after my first visit, I could still remember the feeling of that place when we sat in the living room of our home and watched television as Dr. Martin Luther King delivered his now famous "I have a dream" speech to the crowds overflowing the capital mall.

I remember thinking, as a child, that the statue seemed to express different moods. When we visited the monument and walked in that echoing chamber with people who spoke in whispers and muted tones it had seemed to me that the statue was sad. President Lincoln wasn't crying, but the mood seemed somber to me. Perhaps it was that I had been told the stories of the assassination of the President. Perhaps it was that my parents would sometimes express a sense of how things might be different in our time had President Lincoln lived to serve his entire second term.

When I saw the statue on television as a backdrop for a powerful orator making a mighty speech, it seemed to me that President Lincoln was demonstrating great

courage as he looked out over the huge crowd. It looked almost like he was winking - much more like the president in the portrait that hung in our classroom at school. For much of my elementary years, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln were the only presidents to grace our classroom walls, one on each side of the flag that stood in the corner. It always seemed to me that Washington was the sterner of the two, with no hint of a smile.

I think that I understand the somber Lincoln these days. In fact, I think that he may be on the verge of tears. It isn't because he received hate mail when he was alive. It isn't because John Wilkes Booth shot him in the head as he sat watching a play at Ford's Theatre on Good Friday in 1865. It isn't because some idiot vandalized the memorial with a spray painted curse word on Tuesday.

I think I understand a little bit of the burdens of the 16th President. More than the expressions of anger and hatred that he suffered; more than the adversarial relationships he had with legislators and even members of his own cabinet; more than the secession of states and the illegal seizure of federal property; perhaps even more than the grief over the death of his son Willie or the ongoing struggles with depression suffered by his wife - I think that I understand in a way that I did not previously that Lincoln wept because of the grave responsibility and deep cost of sending troops to war.

I memorized Lincoln's Gettysburg Address when I was in elementary school. I think I knew, even then that the line, "The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here" had been quoted at Lincoln's Funeral. Senator Charles Sumner said, "Rather, the world noted at once what he said, and will never cease to remember it. The battle itself was less important than the speech." Lincoln might not have been confident of the power of his words, but he was deeply aware of the power of sacrifice.

Presidents need to learn the power of sacrifice. Some never do.

Lincoln knew something even deeper. More painful than the costs of sending warriors off to engage in danger and face death are the costs of turning your citizens into warriors. We not only ask soldiers to face death, we also ask them to kill. This is a burden that, when deeply considered, would bring any person to tears.

Across our nation mayors are scrambling to figure out how to prevent their cities from becoming the next Charlottesville. Their strategies are not just focused on training police and making sure they have adequate force to stand up to armed protestors. They are trying to figure out how to avoid conflict. Even if it is just throwing fists as was the predominant mode of conflict in Charlottesville before a young man committed an act of terror with an automobile as a weapon, the fighting is not a pretty sight. They understand, however, that the forces of evil cannot be ignored. Racism, hatred and

bigotry are not our values and we will not be silent when they are spewed in our streets and parks.

I keep president Lincoln in my mind often these days. He is a mentor and a guide to my thinking. I long with him for the fulfillment of a vision: "That this nation, under God, shall have new birth of freedom - and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from this earth."

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## **August 18, 2017 – I Blame Snapchat**

I know that I am older than most expert users of computers, smart phones and media. I am one of those folks who grew up with books that had covers and pages and who still has a printed newspaper delivered to his house every day. My wife and I made it through four years of college and four years of graduate school with an Olympia manual typewriter. Which, by the way we still own. Which, by the way can be ordered from Easy for \$75. I have no idea whether or not the ribbons for such a machine are available. Today is a rummage sale at the church and that typewriter almost ended up on the sale, but i couldn't bring myself to do it, yet. I don't know why.

However, I don't consider myself to be a luddite. I was an early adopter of personal computers and had a laptop years before many of my colleagues. I carried a personal digital organizer before smart phones existed. I have a fairly up-to-date smartphone and i know how to use it fairly well. I know a little bit about social media. I have a twitter account which I mostly ignore and a Facebook account which ignore almost as much. I do however write a blog and I know enough about coding to keep this website running. I even have a fairly early model tablet that I use for reading books. I now use that same tablet for leading worship.

But the truth is that I don't keep up with social media. Part of the reason that I don't is that it isn't a priority for my time. I don't much enjoy reading snippets of other people's opinions. I like Facebook for catching up on my nephews and nieces, especially when they are traveling. I like catching up with old friends from time to time using Facebook. However, I don't bother to check it every day and sometimes a week or more goes by without my having looked at it. Friends who send me messages over Facebook or Facebook Messenger are often disappointed with the slowness of my responses.

I don't do Snapchat. I understand the basic concept of an image messaging service that allows for pictures and videos. I know that the app has a self-deleting feature that means that photos and videos disappear after they are received, which has made it a platform that is used for sexting by some. It is most popular, I think, among millennials and those who are even younger.

I think that the world looks different to teens than it looked to me when I was their age. If a person is fifteen years old, he or she was only 5 when smartphones were invented. They don't remember a world before portable cell phones. They have grown up accepting social media as a natural way of communicating and staying in touch. They probably appreciate Snapchat and use it frequently.

In recent months I have had multiple occasions where I was helping families deal with sudden and traumatic loss when the continual use of smartphones was a real distraction to me. While I kept my phone on vibrate and never pulled it from its pouch during the visit, teens with whom I was visiting couldn't put down their phones. When I asked them to put the phones on vibrate and not answer during our conversation, they still couldn't resist looking at texts, tweets or snapchat messages. Constant connection is simply a way of life for them.

That means that news, whether accurate or not, travels fast. It travels so fast that it makes my head spin. Yesterday we were rushing to meet police officers at the scene of a tragic event in our community. As we traveled, my partner's phone rang. The call was accepted because it was from an official with the school. The official was making an inquiry about the call towards which we were rushing. Think about that for a moment. As first responders rush to the scene, the news has already traveled through the youth of the community and from them to the school officials who are calling to ask us information about a call that we haven't even made.

And the truth is that the call is not our story to tell in the first place. We adhere to strict rules of confidentiality. We couldn't do our work if those we serve thought that we would broadcast private information. The school official knows that. The call was just a gut reaction to the rapidly-traveling social media and the first response was to see if we might be a source of additional information. The story wasn't then and isn't now ours to tell. Even if we didn't keep strict confidentiality, we could hardly tell what happened on a call that we had not yet made.

I blame Snapchat.

I don't use Snapchat. I could blame Twitter or Facebook or text messages.

In the days of our manual typewriter, news traveled fast. These days its speed is blinding.

I am aware that these marvelous devices that we all carry do provide some important things for us. They do enable us to remain in constant contact with loved ones. They allow pictures of my grandchildren to be shared as they are taken. I love that. I love using video chatting and conferencing with our daughter in Japan. I love having my calendar at my fingertips. I love being to give voice commands to my phone while I am

driving. The same phone on which my partner was talking to the school official was giving me directions to get to the address to which we'd been summoned.

But I fear for youth who receive news in inappropriate ways. I fear for youth who know the news but not what it means. There is some news that shouldn't be transmitted through social networks. Some things are best when told face-to-face by another human being.

I just don't know if my convictions on this subject are the result of my age. It seems possible to me that this whole blog post is meaningless to those who have never known a world without smartphones.

I blame Snapchat. Perhaps I should learn how to use it.

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## **August 19, 2017 – Water**

The name that humans most frequently employ for this planet where we live is "earth." Its origins are far older than the understanding of our place as an orb with a moon revolving around it that itself is revolving around a sun along with other planets. The sun is moving through a galaxy which in turn is in motion in an ever-expanding universe.

People didn't always think of it that way.

One ancient cosmology that can be seen by biblical scholars is the view that the earth is dry land that is beneath a dome of heaven across which the sun, moon and stars move. Under the earth and above the dome of heaven is water, as if the earth were floating between "the waters below and the waters above." It is actually from that type of worldview that our name for our planet came. Earth designates dry land. The word means dirt, soil, humus. In Biblical Hebrew the word is adamah - very close to the name that is given to the first human who is literally sculpted from the earth.

Of course the use of earth as the name of a planet requires having the idea that a planet exists. It took centuries of learning for humans to gain a bit of understanding about this place where we live and its place in the larger universe.

From around 1400, more than 600 years, we've been calling our planet Earth.

We might have chosen a different name had we waited until we were able to send humans into space to view and photograph our planet. Viewed from above the planet appears to be mostly water. Roughly three-quarters of the surface of the earth is saltwater.

Water is an interesting name because the word can be both a noun and a verb. We drink water. We water the garden. For a while, in our explorations of the nature of the universe we thought that water might be unique to our planet. We know that there are other planets even within our solar system that have far less water than the one we call earth.

I suppose that any name for a planet is in part arbitrary. Seen from the perspective of another galaxy, it might make sense for our planet to be identified by a number system in place of a word, as we do to distant stars, solar systems and planets.

I know that the physical features of what we call dry land are in motion. I understand a little bit about tectonic plates and the process of the rising of mountains and erosion of the physical features of the land. But from the perspective of my short lifetime geological time is incredibly long and the hills of my home seem to be somewhat fixed when compared to what an ocean looks like when I stand on a beach and view the constantly-moving surface of the water.

I am mesmerized by the ebb and flow of waves. I am fascinated by the rise and fall of tides. And before I had ever visited an ocean, I was enthralled by the flow of the river. I have invested some substantial blocks of time looking at rivers. The water over the rocks has both a visual attraction and a sound that is music to my ears. I grew up next to the river and the river always signals home to me even though my house has been on top of a hill a long way from a river for more years of my life than those when I lived right by the river.

The attraction of water is so strong that I make boats and take them out on the surface of the waters. I have paddled in lakes and rivers and along the edges of oceans. I have skimmed across the surface of the Bay of Fundy where just hours previously I had walked on the beach 20 feet below the place I was paddling. I have surfed in the waves at the age of Lake Superior, marveling at the size of the body of fresh water and its obvious comparison with the saltwater oceans of our planet. I have paddled down the Boulder, the Yellowstone and the Missouri, all parts of a great system of streams and rivers that carry snow water melt from the high country of the Rocky Mountains to the Gulf of Mexico. I have stood next to a snow bank on the continental divide on the border of Idaho and Montana and watched as some drops of water began their journey to the Pacific and others headed East eventually to reach the Atlantic. I've wetted my toes in the Missouri whose waters lead south on the same day that I placed my hand in the James which heads north towards Hudson Bay.

I am drawn to water.

Although I have tasted a bit of the frightening power of water, I am not afraid. I've swamped a canoe in the river dumping out my wife and daughter. I've capsized a sailboat on the lake. I've been dumped off of a raft in to raging whitewater. I've been

rolled by waves. But I know these experiences are trivial compared to the true power of water.

I know that I am made of water. About 60% of the human body by weight is water. Our brains and heart are even more water intensive, about three-quarters water. Our lungs, which fail when filled with too much water, are themselves over 80% water. We don't exist without water, even though we know we could die from too much water. There is oxygen suspended in water, but we cannot breath liquid water.

I don't expect us to start calling our planet "water," but I know that we can't afford to ignore the water, either. Like it or not, the water is rising. The polar ice caps are melting. Glaciers are receding, The sea is rising. So far the rise is measured in inches and feet. There won't be water lapping at the doorstep of my home, which sets nearly 3,900 feet above sea level, any time soon.

We may not be willing to call our planet "water," but we cannot afford to continue to ignore its waters.

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## **August 20, 2017 – Sabbath**

Here is what didn't make the news this week: At our church volunteers turned out every day for the entire week to stage a rummage sale. Starting a week ago today, on Sunday, 30 to 40 volunteers turned out every day to sort, display, price and sell items. They moved furniture. They carried things up and down stairs. They went out and picked up donated items from homes. They put up and took down signs. It was a tremendous effort. All of the proceeds go to charity. This isn't about institutional maintenance. We have a budget, based on the generosity of our members that sustains our institution. This effort is about supporting a wide variety of local charities. It is about the goodness of the hearts of everyday people.

That's the thing about living my life in the church. I spend most of my time in the midst of people who are selfless, serving, caring and loving. I spend most of my time with people who are generous and giving.

I read the news and I spend a fair amount of time being disgusted with politicians. The business seems to be totally about money and the use of large amounts of money to exercise power. All of that money and power, however, isn't making people happy.

Our little church, by contrast, doesn't have much money or power. We live by the grace of God and the generosity of our people. It is important to understand that these are really generous people. That does not, however, translate into a rich church. Our budget is modest. Then again our needs are modest. We have no desire to have the biggest or

most luxurious building. For example, we've been talking about getting air conditioning in our building for at least the last 20 years. We even have started a fund to save for it. But there are other priorities that take precedence. I think we're going to accomplish that goal within the next few years, but we haven't gotten there yet. In the meantime, there are a few hot days in the summer. But we don't suffer and we know that we aren't suffering. We can be a joyful congregation with out air conditioning.

Because we serve our community, we get out into the world. I think that in the past week I have spent at least as much time with people who are not members of our congregation than with those who are. While this is unusual for me, it isn't impossible. And so I've been to homes where the people don't have a church community. I've tried to provide support to those who seem to be lonely and isolated. I've brokered a bit of help for those who need it. I've sat and talked with teens who don't know that there are adults that you can trust in this world. I've comforted grieving people who don't even know the names of their neighbors.

This world can be harsh and it can seem cruel.

Meanwhile, back at the church, while I was out doing all of these other things, the volunteers were enjoying each other's company. Each day sufficient food showed up to feed everyone. Each day there was laughter and joking and camaraderie. A grandson was born and everyone celebrated. A brother died and all comforted the grieving. And yesterday, in the midst of all of the other amazing volunteer work, a couple of additional volunteers framed out a small bathroom remodeling project. The project is part of our congregation moving forward to remove barriers to participation to welcome those with special needs.

It has been an amazing and wonderful week. And it didn't make the news.

It isn't that we need the press. It is that we don't know how many other good things are going on in our community and around the world. You see, we are not unique. All around the world people are gathering together in communities and doing the hard work of taking care of one another. It feels to us that our church is unique because we don't know what is happening in other churches.

Early in my life, in the midst of the hectic and busy pace of being a graduate student, I learned to choose my sources of news carefully. With limited time to obtain and digest the news, I needed to be able to evaluate news sources, discern who could be trusted to be accurate in reporting and discover ways to use multiple sources to gain multiple perspectives. It is an entirely different process than what is employed in homes where there is the same channel on the television every day.

One of the gifts of the past year in my life is that I am learning to limit my intake of news. I still need to keep up with the major events of the world. I have no intention of living

disconnected from the rest of the world. The Gospel message pushes me to be continually engaged in the world. But I don't have to scan the headlines at first waking. I don't have to scan them at bedtime. I don't have to scan them multiple times throughout the day. I own the technology that could me constantly connected and I am learning to turn it off or set it aside. I am learning that quiet, contemplation and meditation are essential. I am learning that I don't always have to be the first to know.

I am learning that there is more essential information than what makes the headlines of the major news outlets.

Just as I can benefit from knowing a weather forecast but still have to pay attention to the real conditions by going outside and looking at the sky, I can benefit from reading the reports of others, but still need to engage my community with my own presence.

There are quite a few folks in my church who are tired. They've been working hard. They have accomplished a lot. They deserve a rest.

You won't read about it in the news, but today is Sabbath - a day of rest. There will be time for the world's clutter tomorrow.

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## **August 21, 2017 – Predictions**

For the record:

- I do not believe that your dog will go blind today.
- I do not believe that there will be a supervolcano eruption today.
- I do not believe that a large meteor will strike the earth wiping out life as we know it today.
- I do not believe that God will use aliens coming to earth as a way of communicating with humans today.
- I do not expect Creationists to suddenly become capable of predicting weather or explaining DNA today.
- I do not think that we will see a clear sign giving a date to the second coming of Christ today.
- I do not believe that our government is hiding secret information about the nature of the universe from us that will be revealed today.
- I do not expect the world to end today.

However, if it does, there will be no blog tomorrow.

For you Biblical scholars, Joel 2:31, which is quoted in Acts 2:20, says "The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord

comes.” It does not say the moon will temporarily pass between the sun and the earth causing a shadow to fall in some places on the earth.

And for other Biblical scholars, the book of Revelation is not a book of prediction of the future. It is the vision that came to John as he was on the Island Patmos in the first century. And for those who like to use the symbolic language of the book of Revelation to get people to make big contributions in response to your made-up predictions of the future, just remember how many times those who have made those predictions have been wrong.

If you want to do a bit more digging, I suggest the Talmud, which discusses eclipses directly. Here are a couple of examples for your consideration:

*III.2 Our rabbis have taught on Tannaite authority: When the lights are in eclipse, it is a bad omen for the whole world. It is to be compared to a mortal king who built a palace and finished it and arranged a banquet, and then brought in the guests. He got mad at them and said to the servant, “Take away the light from them,” so all of them turned out to be sitting in the dark.*

or

*It has been taught on Tannaite authority: R[abbi] Meir did say, “When the lights of heaven are in eclipse, it is a bad omen for Israel, for they are used to blows. It is to be compared to a teacher who came into the school house and said, ‘Bring me the strap.’ Now who gets worried? The one who is used to being strapped” [T. Suk. 2:6H-D].*

Now, I’m not sure which metaphor is better, a banquet crowd left in the dark or students when the teacher calls for the strap. Maybe we should go with the banquet because we have a picnic planned for today already. Both quotes are from the Babylonian Talmud and appear back-to-back there. The next one discusses the difference between a solar eclipse and a lunar eclipse:

*III.3 Our rabbis have taught on Tannaite authority: When the sun is in eclipse, it is a bad omen for the nations of the world. [When] the moon is in eclipse, it is a bad omen for Israel, since the gentiles reckon their calendar by the sun, and Israel by the moon. When it is in eclipse in the east, it is a bad omen for those who live in the east. When it is in eclipse in the west, it is a bad omen for those who live in the west. When it is in eclipse in-between, it is a bad omen for the whole world.*

All of these references talk about omens and I’m not very good with omens. It is, however, my understanding that natural phenomena that aren’t common were often seen to be omens by ancient peoples.

I am expecting some unusual natural phenomena during the eclipse today. I think there will be some strange shadows. I expect that birds may calm down and even roost during the eclipse. I don't know if nocturnal animals will increase their activity when it gets dark, or if they'll sleep through the entire event. I'll try to pay attention, though I might not be in the best place to observe animal activity given the fact that we plan to watch the eclipse from the parking lot of the Lutheran Church in Alliance, Nebraska. I don't want to pay for parking at Carhenge and I think it is likely that I won't be able to get a clear shot of the solar eclipse over Carhenge anyway. At least there will be a lot of others looking for that shot. I'm thinking the steeple of the Lutheran Church might be a bit less popular when it comes to camera angles.

If we are lucky the Lutheran church will be holding a luncheon as a fund-raiser. After all they say a lot of people are heading to Alliance, which brings me to another of my predictions like those with which I began today's blog.

I don't believe that there will be a traffic jam that turns the highway into a parking lot anywhere between here and Alliance, Nebraska. If I had, I might have considered going down last night, which I couldn't have done because I didn't make campground arrangements three years ago, and the motels are all full.

There might be a bit of exaggeration in some of the predictions.

For what it is worth, I did end up with some certified eclipse glasses. I do have the proper filter for my camera, though I'm not the world's most accomplished photographer and I suspect that I might not end up with the best photos of what is supposed to be history's most photographed celestial event.

Oh, and I do have a lunch packed just in case the Lutherans decide not to prepare a lunch.

I do hope, however, that they'll let us use their bathrooms. I couldn't, however, find any place in the Bible that commands them to do so. If I get desperate enough, I could offer to give them a pair of eclipse glasses for their dog.

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## August 22, 2017 – Looking Skyward



Well, the world did not end yesterday. Something much more marvelous happened. I am grateful that I was able to make the drive to Alliance, NE, for 2 minutes and 30 seconds of totality. Of course the experience was more than just the brief time of darkness. We enjoyed the hospitality and the cinnamon rolls of the people of St. John's Lutheran Church. We had a lovely spot on a well cared-for lawn to set up our chairs and cameras and watch as the moon passed in front of the sun. For two hours and 49 minutes we were able to see that the moon was at least partially in front of the sun by viewing it through our special glasses. Of course we didn't stare at the sun all of that time. We had time to visit and to observe a lot of other natural phenomena. The temperature got cooler. The chickens in a nearby yard were confused by the dusk followed by dawn phenomena. The rooster crowed for a couple of minutes as it started to get dark and crowed again as it got light. Dusk didn't descend in the manner in which we are used to it - coming from one side of the horizon to the other. Instead, with the sun overhead in high noon position, it fell quickly from no apparent direction. There were a few clouds in the sky, but they didn't prevent our seeing the total eclipse. The experience is difficult to describe, but I'm glad we were there to see it.

It was a dramatically different experience than we had in 1979 when we viewed an eclipse from a place where the sun was more than 90% obscured but which didn't experience totality.

The experience was especially appreciated because it provided a distraction for us, and perhaps for the entire nation, from the daily headlines of turmoil in the world. In our constantly-connected world, it was a gift to take a day to turn our thoughts to a celestial phenomena and, for the most part, ignore the politics and other news topics that normally dominate our conversations. We were aware that the shadow of the moon crossing in front of the sun was making its way across the nation and that our focus on the skies was shared by millions of others.

It is even nice to wake up this morning and know that the eclipse made headlines in the places that continue to report other news such as a major policy statement on the war in Afghanistan, missing sailors after a collision of ships, the investigation of the Barcelona attacks, the ambush of a judge in Ohio and the usual catalogue of crises, tragedies and worries.

Of course life goes on. I have three important meetings today and I'll spend a couple of hours this evening with area teens who are reeling from the second death by suicide of a high school student in a short amount of time. Yesterday's eclipse didn't interrupt the grief of those who have lost loved ones. There were funerals yesterday and there will be funerals today. For those in the depths of grief, the luxury we enjoyed of a day to focus our attention on the skies simply wasn't available. They might have glanced at the sky, but they didn't have the ability to allow the eclipse to divert their minds from what was foremost in their consciousness: the pain of loss and the hard work of grief.

For some of us, including the five bus loads of students from Pine Ridge who shared the park next to the church where we viewed the eclipse, however, yesterday was a day set aside. It was a time to be reminded once again that we are a part of things that are much bigger than ourselves. The movements of the planets and moons and solar systems in our galaxy take place on an enormous scale with distances that boggle our imaginations. And yet we have been given the unique opportunity to have an incredible vantage point of observing what is going on. And we had the added bonus of careful science and engineering to aid our experience. We had special glasses that enabled us to view what otherwise we would not have been able to see without damaging our eyes. We had the results of careful observers who predicted when and where the viewing would be best. We had scientists to interpret the things we were seeing and give us information about what was occurring. We had the luxury of being able to take a day off from work and have a car and gas to make the trip to where totality was visible. We even had a contingent of dedicated law enforcement officers to direct traffic at a few busy intersections to help with the flow of automobiles to and from the areas of totality. There are a lot better photographs of the eclipse than the ones I was able to capture. It is easy to see some really dramatic pictures in many different places on the Internet. I'm including one of the pictures I took with today's blog because it is a reminder to me of the incredible experience that I was able to have.

The ancients understood that natural phenomena show us a bit of our place in this world. Even though they did not have information about the vastness of the universe. We have inherited a few of their words that describe their sense of wonder. Psalm 19 begins with a phrase that was a part of my consciousness yesterday as I gazed towards the sky: “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.”

Glory seems to be just the right word for what we witnessed yesterday. I was trying to describe the experience to a friend who was unable to be in the path of totality and was well aware that my words fell short. But it was good. It was very good. We have been blessed.

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### **August 23, 2017 – Many Different Families**

I grew up in a family that was blended together of children who were adopted and others who were born to the family. It seemed very natural. We had wonderful parents who reveled in their roles in our large family. I enjoyed having multiple brothers and sisters. I knew other children who had different kinds of families. Most of the families in our school were a bit more conventional. I felt sorry for the kids in our class who were the only child in their family. That seemed a bit sad to me.

There are simply a lot of different ways of being family. I know a family where six siblings all share one parent, but no two have both of their parents the same. The brothers and sisters sometimes all live together in the same house and at other times live in several different houses. They seem to have positive relationships not only with their own parents, but also with those of siblings. A recent family gathering brought together four adult couples in addition to the children. I know another family that is a second family for a couple who raised the children who were born to them and now are raising their grandchildren. The fact that the parents of the family are older than their friends' parents doesn't seem to be a problem for the children who are growing up in a stable, loving environment. I have friends who are couples who have no children and who are happy with their situation. There are single individuals in our church who are dedicated church volunteers and who really enjoy being with and serving other people. We even have families with parents in long-term marriages and just a couple of kids. We have families where grandparents live close and are actively involved in families. We have other families where grandparents live far away and are less often seen.

This great diversity of family types and styles is not something that is new. As our congregation has been reading through the stories of Genesis in this cycle of the lectionary, we are being reminded of how many different types of families there are in our shared story. Abraham and Sarah have only one son, but Abraham fathered another son with another woman. Isaac has two sons who upend the usual inheritance

rights. Jacob is father to twelve sons and a number of daughters with four different mothers. And that is just the beginning of the story of our people. If you go through all of the characters listed in Matthew's genealogy, you will find all kinds of different families including a widow who has a son for her mother-in-law with a relative chosen by that mother-in-law.

There is no single "right" way to be a family.

There is no single right answer to the question, "How many children should a couple have?"

Sometimes I think of all of the different shapes of families when I am working with couples who are planning to marry. I often get to spend more time with young couples who are preparing for first marriages than I do with couples who are older or those who have previously been married to another. I delight in the honest intention of young people to remain with a single partner for all of their lives. I have had the good fortune of marrying young and discovering a very meaningful life-long relationship. It seems like a very good way to live and I have no problems wishing that these young couples will be able to fulfill the promises that they make and have long and healthy marriages. And I've been officiating at marriages long enough that some couples whose marriages I helped celebrate have remained married for several decades now.

Other couples who seemed to me to have equal intentions of forming life-long marriages have ended up becoming separated or divorced. Some have formed unique blended families. So far I have never been asked to officiate at multiple marriages for the same person. I think such a request might yield an interesting set of discussions, but I have officiated at many marriages where one or both of the partners have been previously married. Some of those marriages have been very successful and deeply meaningful.

Not long ago I met a family for the first time that was so complex that I was tempted to pull out a notebook just to record all of the names. I tried, after meeting them, to diagram the family and ended up with a couple of people whose relationships were uncertain to me. It seems to work for that family, however. The children don't seem to need to use a notebook to keep track of the various players. They seem at home with living in multiple households with different configurations and different siblings in different homes.

Our church family is a very big and very confusing family. We share love of elders and infants, teens and young adults, school-aged children and middle-aged couples and singles. Each week when we welcome all with the words, "No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here!" we really have people at all sorts of different places on their life journeys. Compared to some congregations in our community that serve congregations that are more similar in age and life circumstances,

our collection is a very diverse crew. We like it that way. As a grandpa whose grandchildren live many miles away, I enjoy being able to hold an infant from time to time. I am honored to get down on the floor to speak with preschoolers. I treasure my conversations with elders. I enjoy friends who are of a similar age to me. I appreciate the contributions and leadership of those who are young enough to be my children. I feel grateful to participate in this wonderful church and pray that it will continue to be a place for people of all ages and life stages.

I suspect that there are still more surprises in store for our congregation as we travel through the decades together. May we continue to be open to the new things that God is showing us.

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### **August 24, 2017 – Another Funeral**

Sometimes, when I worship in a congregation other than the one I am serving I am able to relax and participate fully in worship. These are wonderful experiences for me. I need to worship as much as any other member of my congregation and sometimes the process of leading worship can interfere with genuine participation. When I am leading worship, I have to keep thinking of what is coming next, of the timing of events, of how people are reacting, and many other different things. I love to lead worship, but it isn't always relaxing.

Sometimes, however, when I am worshipping with others I find myself doing a bit of a critique of the worship instead of simply allowing myself to be immersed in the experience. I suppose it is one of the risks of my profession. In the back of my mind I am always evaluating each worship service with an eye towards how it might be improved.

When I am at a funeral in support of those who have lost a loved one to suicide, I have a special heightened sense of awareness of those who are grieving. I watch for signs of how things are going with them. Yesterday I kept scanning a room with many teenagers looking for those who were especially distressed, mentally noting those who might need a bit of extra support following the service. At the same time I was listening to what was being said by worship leaders and trying to be a respectful participant. My mental state, however, was far from relaxing and allowing myself to be swept up in the worship.

So it isn't my place to criticize what occurred. Despite my own mental list of how I might have done things differently, it is important that I look for the places where God was working through the worship leaders to bring healing and hope to our community.

Yesterday's experience reminded me of how different people, living in close proximity to one another, can have very different experiences. We live in a city of about 74,000

people and we are reeling with two funerals for teens in a month. 110 miles southeast of town is the community of Pine Ridge, with only 28,000 residents, where it is not at all uncommon for them to have multiple teen funerals in the same week. My colleague in Bridger, also about 100 miles from Rapid City, where the population in town is only about 35 people, and the surrounding country is home to under 500 people, leads 30 or more funerals every year. While I am scanning a congregation in our community for youth for whom a funeral and the process of grieving is a new and unfamiliar experience, pastors in communities close to ours are deeply aware that their youth attend all too many funerals. There is a definite privilege that we enjoy from the circumstances of our community that is hard to put into words, but fairly easy to observe.

The pastor officiating at yesterday's funeral serves a large congregation where funerals are relatively rare. My congregation is a fraction of the size of the one served by that pastor, but we have many times the number of funerals each year. This is due, in part to the average age of those who participate in the congregations. It also has to do with differences in style of ministry, that are beyond the scope of this particular blog. Still, it was a bit surprising to me that the pastor was unfamiliar with funeral traditions and practices that are a part of the culture of our area. Maybe that is just a sign of my age and the length of time that I have been serving in this community, but I was aware of the big difference between my experience with funerals and that of the pastor who led yesterday's service.

Less experience does not, however, translate into less meaningful worship. The pastor's words were heartfelt and helpful to the grieving congregation. He offered hope to those who are having trouble finding hope. He offered comfort to those who are feeling very uncomfortable.

Later, after the service, I was diffusing the experience with a colleague who also attended the service to provide support to the grieving congregation. We attend a lot of funerals - more than your average person because of our role in the community as suicide first responders. We have a catalogue of past experiences for comparison. In our conversation we noted that the experience was much better than some funerals we had attended where the officiant didn't seem to understand the unique nature of suicide grief, the stigma that is sometimes attached to suicide, and the need for suicide response to always focus on prevention of additional suicides. At one point in our conversation, it seemed to me that we were almost rating the service: "Well it was way better than . . ."

I wonder if others who came to the funeral were using similar comparisons. Of course some of the teens have limited experience with funerals, but adults would have attended more services in their lives and would have more experiences with which to compare.

In reality, the experience is beyond comparison. If you think of the prospective of the parents who were going through the funeral of their son, no experience in their lives compares to or could prepare them for this one. Yesterday was unique in all of their lives. They will never get over this loss. They will always see themselves in terms of “before” and “after” this experience. The young man who has died was unique in all of the world. He is not a statistic. It is unfair to compare his death to any other death. He is an individual with circumstances, experiences, and pressures that were unique to him.

It is important that we, who are involved with the deaths of others, not become hardened to the experience and insensitive to the uniqueness of each situation. We need genuine worship as much as any other member of the congregation.

So I am grateful to the pastor and to the congregation that provided the funeral. I am honored that I was able to attend. And I pray that funerals continue to be rare for this pastor and congregation.

Somehow, however, I can't avoid a bit of an evaluation, even if it is the evaluation of my own participation in worship. It is the way I think.

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## **August 25, 2017 – Changing Convictions**

There are things about which I used to be certain that I sometimes question. There are other convictions of my youth that I continue to embrace and hold tightly. I suppose that it is simply another expression of my humanity. Sometimes I am right. Sometimes I am wrong.

I was passionate about marriage and absolutely convinced that it was the right thing for me. I was right. After 44 years of marriage it is abundantly clear that life inside of a covenant - making and keeping promises - suits me well. I have been nurtured and strengthened by marriage. The promises I made back then are just as relevant and meaningful in my life as they were back then.

I am equally committed to my vows of ordination. The promises I made when I was ordained are promises worth keeping. They influence my daily life and practice as powerfully today as they did back in 1978 when I took those vows. They are relevant and meaningful.

I do not feel bound by the promises I have made, though I fully intend to keep them for all of my life. Rather I feel freed by those promises. Making absolute commitments has given me freedom to live my life fully.

But,, as I have said, there are other things about which I used to be passionate and believe deeply that I now question. I remember long arguments about mission budgets early in my career. Members of the churches I served would, from time to time, question the amount of money we would send to the church's Conference and national settings. I would argue that we needed to give. If we want our members to live generously, we must live generously as an institution, making our gifts to the wider church as the first commitments of every month. I was a proponent of proportional giving for Our Church's Wider Mission. I still believe in giving. I still believe it is important for a congregation to be generous as a first priority. However, I have learned over the years that much of what is called mission is not outreach at all, but rather a form of institutional maintenance. National and mid-level judicatories of the church are at least as much, if not more so, focused on simply maintaining themselves rather than on mission and outreach. Local congregations are frequently more effective in outreach when working through local partnerships and reaching beyond their walls in relationships with other congregations.

I used to believe that there was a proper sequence to church affiliation. That sequence began with baptism, followed by confirmation, followed by a deepening commitment to the church. But some of our members come and participate fully in the church, including serving on committees and doing the work of the church before they become baptized. Some very active members have not yet been baptized. The sacrament which is so central and means so much to me is less central and less meaningful to some other people. Delaying a baptism, however, doesn't mean that it is somehow less powerful or less meaningful to a believer. On Wednesday I had a conversation with a mother about baptizing her children. She has two and I thought that she would want to baptize them when they were born, but that didn't work out for her. There was always some reason she wanted to delay. Now that there are two, we spoke in June of having them both baptized at the end of the summer. We even selected the date. As the date neared, she decided to delay for another year. I am puzzled by the delay, but she is convinced that she needs to have the baptism when all of the aunts, uncles and grandparents can come, some from great distances, and gather for the event. I worry that the events of life will stifle her plans. It is possible that an elder might die. It is possible that something else could happen. But I am more patient with her sense of timing than I would have been earlier in my career. I am learning to trust the Holy Spirit to follow a timetable that is different from my own.

Because my ordination vows and the process of preparation for those vows was so important to me, I used to be rigid in the distinction between those who were ordained and those who are not. I was an ardent defender of challenging and difficult educational requirements for ordination. I was a passionate defender of difficult procedures for licensing ministers and for quick revocation of licensure when specific duties were fulfilled. I was critical of those who didn't follow denominational rules about administration of sacraments to the letter. I became a bit of an educational elitist, challenging those who hadn't had the benefit of graduate theological study. I think I was a bit of a

challenge to those who appeared before the Committee on Ministry back in the days when I served on that committee. These days I have learned to recognize that there are multiple paths to Christian ministry. I understand that there are inspired preachers who are not academicians. I no longer believe that there is a “right” theology for those who administer sacraments. I don’t have the same range of questions for those seeking standing as ministers. I am more interested in capacity to learn and grow than in achievements already accomplished. I would be a different voice on the committee than once was the case.

I once thought that when I became an elder, I would have great wisdom. I would have knowledge that was worth sharing and others would come to me for answers. Although I’m at more of an awkward age than a true elder, I am discovering that those of us who have been around the church for many years are better at questions than we are at answers - at least that is true of me. I understand now, in a way that I could not when I was younger, that some of the great questions of life remain. Possessing the answers is not required of those who would be truly wise. Living the questions is an honorable life. It is good enough for me for now.

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## **August 26, 2017 – Remembering Cecil Andrus**

People who live in more populous places never quite believe the way things are done in the places where I’ve spent most of my life. When we lived in Idaho, what is called an inaugural ball in most states was called “The people’s ball.” It took place in the state capitol building and was open to the public. You didn’t need a ticket. You just went if you wanted to mix with cowboys and miners and ranchers and people just off the street. I remember leaving a governor’s prayer breakfast once. I was eager to get out of the parking lot and back to work and a bit worried about the left turn onto a street. There across from me was a nondescript black sedan, whose driver was waiting for and yielding to the left-turning cars speeding our exit from the parking lot and getting us on our way to work. Like other Idahoans, I recognized the driver and waved. He waved back graciously. Even if I hadn’t known him, I might have guessed his identity by the license plate on his car. It had only a single digit: 1.

That story probably says more about the personality of the man than about the rural friendliness of western states. Cecil Andrus had just returned to Idaho and was re-elected governor of the state after serving as Secretary of the Interior from 1977 to 1981. There were those who were urging him to run for the United States Senate after his stint in the Department of the Interior, but he calmly stated that he had done his service to the nation, “Four years in Washington, D.C. is enough sacrifice for one person. I plan to live the rest of my life in Idaho.” He did.

Known to most Idahoans as simply "Cece," he had a long reputation in Idaho politics. In the 1950's he had worked in the logging industry up in Orofino. In those days they skidded logs down streambeds, destroying salmon habitat. They simply didn't know any better. It was an inauspicious beginning for a man who became one of the world's greatest champions of wild lands. He will forever be remembered for the 1980 Alaska Lands Act, which protected more than 100 million acres as national parks, wildlife refuges and wilderness. The move wasn't popular with all of the folks in the west, but because of Andrus' active involvement future generations will be able to see part of the wilds of Alaska in their natural state. That is also true of the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area, the Morley Nelson Birds of Prey National Conservation Area, and the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness. All had Cecil Andrus as their champion. He waged a lot of hard fought battles to preserve public lands for future generations.

His start in politics wasn't all success. After serving in the Idaho senate, he made a bid for the governor's office in 1966. He lost the Democratic primary to Charles Herndon. When Herndon died in an airplane accident, he became the party's candidate and lost the general election to Republican Don Samuelson by 10,000 votes, being the only person to lose two elections for governor in the same year.

When we lived in Idaho, one of his priorities was education. His constant appeals for the children of Idaho created a kind of bidding war for both parties to demonstrate their care for kids and increased school funding occurred until he left office in 1994. The contrast between bipartisan support for education in Idaho and the single-party neglect of education in South Dakota was striking when we made the move between the two states and continues to be obvious to this day.

Cecil Andrus was targeted by the National Rifle Association, a quirk of history and policy that never made sense to me. He was a lifelong hunter and gun owner. One of the stories Idahoans love to tell is about the time in 1991 when he was on his annual elk hunting trip. Andrus had his mule, Ruthie, along to help pack out the meat. He field dressed his elk and grabbed a halter to load up Ruthie. Ruthie didn't like blood and she kicked him and a hunting companion. Andrus had a broken nose, a fractured skull and had a gash above his eye. His companion was unconscious. They had to walk out to a trailhead where they received transport to a medical center. Republican Senator Steve Symms, a longtime political opponent of Andrus said, "Hell, when I found out he was kicked in the head I knew he'd be all right." Andrus had a reputation for being tough and hard headed when engaged in politics.

Cecil Andrus died Thursday, one day shy of his 86th birthday, from complications of lung cancer.

Whether or not you agree with his politics, his legacy is great precisely because he dedicated his life to those who will come after him. He preserved wild places for future

generations. He made education a statewide priority for the sake of future generations. He will be remembered as the champion of wilderness and kindergarten.

It seems that we currently live in a time when politicians have little concern for the future beyond the next election cycle. Few can think in terms of decades or generations. President Theodore Roosevelt preserved the Grand Canyon because he believed that wilderness echoed and nourished the wild character of our nation. President George W. Bush spoke of the moral call to conservation and a “duty to be good stewards of the Almighty’s creation.” There was a time when preservation of public lands was not a partisan issue. These days, contempt for future generations appears to be the norm as the administration seeks to scale back protection of archeological sites that are sacred to Native Americans, the places where Geronimo and Billy the Kid hid out, and the ocean and coral reefs that surround our nation. Logging in a national monument in Maine and commercial fishing in protected marine areas is being promoted without regard to the costs to future generations.

We’re gonna miss you, Cece. I hope it won’t take getting kicked by a mule for our nation to recover its ability to forgo short term profits for the sake of future generations.

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## **August 27, 2017 – Random Thoughts of Weather**

Some years the hail comes in June. Last year it was July. This year we escaped hail at our home until August 26. Now a little hailstorm isn’t really severe weather. It seems a bit trivial when compared to the destruction wrought by Hurricane Harvey in Texas. We got mostly pea-sized hail with a few marble-sized chunks and even a few larger than that. The cherry tomatoes shed their fruit in droves. We gathered up a large bowl of green tomatoes from the ground. But the plants kept their leaves and there are still plenty of tomatoes still on the vine. The big tomatoes weathered the storm pretty well. We may see a bruise or two, but those plants look fairly healthy. It surprised me how good they looked after watching from inside the house as the hail piled up deep enough on the deck and in the yard to take several hours to melt. I noticed a few dings in the hood of the pickup, but probably not enough for an insurance claim. I’ll have to go to the body shop one of these days and get an estimate. Looking up from the ground it appears that the roof weathered the hailstones without problems.

Hailstorms can be very destructive and when the really big hail comes it can really make a mess. But the swath of a hailstorm is usually fairly small. One place can get it really bad and another place a few miles away can miss the hail entirely.

Along with the hail, we got a heavy rain. Although a lot of the rain ran off, the ground absorbed enough to keep the grass green for a couple of weeks. The trees, remarkably adept at surviving all but the biggest hailstones, thrive on the moisture. The hailstones

allow the water to seep into the ground by piling up in drifts and melting slowly. All in all we've been very lucky in the weather department.

Our thunderstorms are too small to garner their own names. In recent years they have taken to naming especially large winter blizzards, but most of the weather around here goes without a name. That may be one of the factors that makes this place such a wonderful home. We don't suffer from adverse weather as much as some other folks.

The forecast calls for the waters to rise in Texas and some may see additional destruction caused by rainstorms that have stalled and are depositing enough rain to be measured in feet instead of inches. In addition to the force of the category 4 storm with winds over 130 mph, the storm also spawned tornadoes that added to the destruction. All in all the Texas coast isn't the most comfortable place to be right now.

Back in the 1970's there was a commercial for Chiffon margarine in which an actress with flowers in her hair declared, "It's not nice to fool mother nature!" I don't know whether or not that was the origin of the quote, but ever since that time, the image of the actress portraying someone's image of what mother nature might look like comes to my mind from time to time. Of course personifying the larger forces of nature is a limited way of thinking about the realities of this world. And the power of nature doesn't lie in some kind of capricious magic. Weather is a huge and powerful dynamic, with many different potentially destructive dynamics. Lightning can cause great destruction not only from the force of a single strike, but also by igniting wildfires that rage beyond the capacity of humans to control.

The invention of margarine probably isn't the biggest impact that humans have had on natural forces and processes. There has been much press given to global warming that is due in part to the overconsumption of fossil fuels and the emitting of excessive carbon into the atmosphere. We also are aware how the use of antibiotics is effecting the natural bacteria that inhabit this planet and not only cause disease, but also are essential to healthy living.

For the most part, our ventures into manipulating and altering nature have come as the result of mistakes, not conscious efforts. Human impact on the environment is largely from unintended consequences of attempts at improving the human condition.

The bottom line is that our actions have consequences that are often far distant from their intended results. The ecosystem is sufficiently complex to make it very difficult to analyze cause and effect. There is room for argument about which factors are the most decisive in the phenomena we observe.

Certainly one of the factors in the destructiveness of weather is the increase in the population of the world. When a storm strikes in a place where there are few people, there is, obviously less injury and loss of life. As human population grows and people

tend to settle in larger and larger cities near to coastal areas the potential for storms that are catastrophic in human terms increases.

We live in a world with forces that are far greater than us. As hurricane Harvey has illustrated in the last couple of days, there is little we can do to avoid the destruction of nature's mightiest storms.

I don't have much to complain about with a little hail.

Besides, the hail has a certain entertainment value. As long as we are safe inside our home, we enjoy watching the hail bouncing off of the ground. Some of the hailstones will bounce three or four feet up from the grass. That demonstrates the force with which they are falling. It wouldn't be pleasant to be out and being hit with those chunks of ice. We notice that the deer and turkeys are very adept at seeking shelter. Yesterday we enjoyed watching a doe and two fawns under the trees in our back yard. Their area was fairly small and one of the fawns was a bit restless. He kept jumping over the backs of his sibling and mother and was eager to check out the hail. He would like the hailstones to see what they were and a couple of times ventured out enough to be struck by a few before returning to the shelter.

I'm glad we don't have the power to control storms. We might not be very good at exercising such power. All in all we're pretty lucky in the weather department. And there'll still be tomatoes in the next few weeks barring a bigger storm.

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## **August 28, 2017 – Getting Away**

To those who check for my blog every morning at the same time, sorry for the late post today. There are no troubles. We just got the opportunity to get away for a short trip and decided, somewhat spur of the moment, to camp in the Big Horn mountains of Wyoming last night. So here we are, with no cell phone service and no Internet connection in an absolutely delightful, very peaceful and remote campground in the high country, not far from highway 14. US 14 makes its way through the Big Horns by way of a very steep ascent from both the east and the west between Ranchester and Graybull. There is a junction at the top where you can take 14A to Lovell, which is the route we will take. We're headed to Red Lodge, Montana today to visit family. Then we'll go on to Big Timber and be back in Rapid City on Wednesday. It is a quick trip, but it is giving us some much-needed R & R before heading into the busy fall season. School starts in Rapid City on Wednesday and church programs will be firing up as well.

You would think that I'd know my way around Wyoming quite well, having lived much of my life in three of the states that border Wyoming: Montana, Idaho and South Dakota. Wyoming is a very interesting state. It has some gorgeous mountains. And it has a lot of

sagebrush - a LOT of sagebrush. Our daughter attended Western Wyoming Community College and during that time I made several trips from Rapid City to Rock Springs and back. Rock Springs is in the southwestern corner of the state. My preferred route for that trip was to enter Wyoming near Newcastle and take the good two-lane road through Wright to I-25 just outside of Casper. From Casper, I'd take the road across the open country to Muddy Gap and then down to I-80 for the last little run into Rock Springs. Like many of the routes I take, there wasn't much Interstate driving involved. It is possible to take I-80 all the way across the state, but there is a lot of truck traffic on that route and I've found it more relaxing to avoid it when there is a good alternative.

The other trip through Wyoming that we take regularly is just clipping the northeast corner of the state on Highway 212 between Belle Fourch, SD and Alzada, MT. There is about 20 miles of that highway that goes through Wyoming. It has an extended 45 mph speed zone through Colony, which is less of a colony and more of a couple of bentonite plants. I've never received a speeding ticket there. I'm pretty good about following speed limits in the first place. But I know quite a few people who have made their contributions to the State of Wyoming by not expecting to see any law enforcement in that corner of the state.

Mato Tipi, more commonly known as Devil's Tower is a beautiful place to take guests, not far from Rapid City, and we've been known to take a couple of different routes to see that sight. From there, if we are heading to Montana, the road from Hewlett to Alzada is now paved and easy to travel.

Interstate 90 makes its 80 mph run from a few miles outside of Spearfish, SD across the northern tier of the state to Buffalo, where it meets up with Interstate 25 and heads north through Sheridan towards Hardin and Billings, MT. It is a route we used to travel quite a bit, but these days we've learned to prefer highway 212 through Montana. It keeps us in our usual style of avoiding Interstates.

We have friends who can't imagine traveling the way we do. We rarely go over 65 mph when we have our camper so we don't need the speed that the Interstates offer. And we prefer the back roads. A friend, who has always lived in urban areas once asked what we would do if we had a breakdown on one of the remote roads that we travel. Breakdowns are, for us, relatively rare with the reliable vehicles that we are able to drive. However the answer is simple. We'd get help from those who were passing by. He was a bit horrified with my answer, being distrustful of strangers and preferring to drive only in places where he can use his cell phone to call for professionals with tow trucks. I drive in places where it is a whole lot quicker to change your own tire than to wait for AAA.

He can't imagine camping next to a highway that has virtually no nighttime traffic. He probably hasn't seen a moose in the wild, either, a treat that we got last evening as we were approaching our campground. It is a matter of preference. I love people. I love

working with people. But I also enjoy getting away. He'll probably never see the Milky Way the way it was last night in a place with virtually no light pollution. Even with the smoke from fires in Montana the sky was magnificent. To see that, you have to be away from street lamps and city lights.

It is quiet enough here to allow yourself to think.

Having never been to the Middle East and never traveled in the lands where the Bible Stories took place, I don't exactly know what that land is like, but I imagine that there are parts that are quite a bit like Wyoming, though in the days Jesus walked the land they didn't have huge pumps pulling oil from deep in the ground and enormous equipment working massive open-pit coal mines or the tall stacks of the coal-fired generators.

They did have empty spaces without many people and dark, star-filled skies at night. They felt the heat of midday and the cool of night.

God, of course, is everywhere and one doesn't need to go to wild places to pray. However, there is something special about the opportunities we get to go to places where we can be alone with God for a few minutes.

We are blessed.

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## **August 29, 2017 – Becoming Less Connected**

“But he withdrew to the wilderness and prayed.” (Luke 5:16)

The gospels make several reports of Jesus going off by himself for the experience of solitude and prayer. In most cases, these appear to be brief episodes, but early in his ministry there is the story of his going into the wilderness for 40 days. It is upon this that the length of the season of Lent in the church is based. 40 days has become a standard amount of time for prayer and preparation for major spiritual challenges.

In practical life, however, we don't withdraw from the pressures of society for long. Our culture and our community are based on a type of constant connection. Quiet reflection and meditation are not highly valued. Politicians who speak first and think afterward win elections. Leaders who are reflective are often seen as hesitant or weak. Recently I had a conversation with some friends about a book that is currently popular titled “10-Minute Mindfulness.” I have not read the book and am not qualified to comment on its usefulness, but I am stuck that like so many other things in our society, a deep and long-standing spiritual practice has been reduced to a series of 10-minute exercises. The great teachers of Buddhist tradition invest their lives in meditation. One wonders

how much of that spiritual reality can be delivered in short, small amounts of time that require almost no commitment or sacrifice on the part of participants.

It is still possible to withdraw to the wilderness to pray. We experienced that briefly overnight Sunday when we chose a camping spot where there is no cell phone coverage. It was peaceful and relaxing and there was time for a walk alongside a creek. There was time to think and reflect and renew our spirits. There was time to pray.

It isn't, however, as if we spent a lot of time there. We were parked about 12 hours and within about 45 minutes of starting to drive my cell phone began to make its familiar sounds indicating that messages were arriving. By the time we drove down out of the mountains to the prairie below my phone had collected text messages, voice mail and email. When we stopped in Red Lodge and set up our camper a little before noon, I went through my messages and responded to several. Then, though out the day I responded to a variety of messages.

There was a call for assistance from someone who had rushed to Rapid City to take a family member to the emergency room at the hospital and needed to find money to buy gas for the return trip. There was follow-up with a grieving family. Our daughter awoke this morning, which was yesterday afternoon in our time zone, to a "shelter in place" order caused by the launch of a missile from North Korea that headed in their direction. The missile fell harmlessly into the sea and all are safe, but there was the need to make contact and reassure ourselves.

As I was reflecting on the invasiveness of my cell phone with family over dinner I recounted how when I moved to Rapid City I did not have a cell phone. I felt that I didn't need one. I enjoyed quiet time when driving and never felt afraid to make a trip because I wouldn't be able to call for help. My first cell phone came as the result that I do much of my work outside of the office. I'd be out and about at meetings or calling on parishioners and it was often very difficult for me to estimate how much time it would take. I ended up getting a cell phone to make it easier for the secretary at the church to keep track of me and when I would be available to respond to the calls that were coming in to the office. At first I only turned on the phone when I was working. Gradually, however, the phone became more capable. I learned to send and receive text messages. We upgraded the phone system at the church so that calls could be transferred to my cell phone. I started giving out my cell phone number to those who might need to call in a crisis. Soon the phone was left turned on 24-hours a day. It replaced the land line that we kept on the headboard of our bed. Then I got a phone that would send and receive email messages. I added email accounts in an attempt to sort the nearly constant inflow of communications. I became addicted to being constantly connected.

I reflected that I had started my blog post yesterday with an apology for it being posted late in the day, though it was up before noon. When I started writing this blog, I wrote a

daily essay, but didn't give much thought as to what time of day I got it up to the Internet. There have been a couple of times since I began to post my journal to the Internet that I have gone several days without posting because I was sorting out issues with software or changing hosting services. Lately, however, I feel an obligation to get my posts up before the business day begins. That obligation wasn't imposed by some outside force. It was my own decision.

This summer, however, I passed the ten-year mark since I have traveled without a notebook computer. In 2007, I went to Costa Rica and although I kept a daily journal, I didn't post to the internet until after I returned from the trip. I have had a computer with me every day for writing my blog ever since. I've become addicted.

Which raises the question in my mind about whether or not I am capable of following Jesus to the lonely places to pray. I don't intend to stop writing the blog anytime soon. Writing is an important spiritual discipline for me. But I do intend to take the discipline of solitude more seriously. I intend to become just a little bit less connected.

I won't become Buddhist and I'll never master mindfulness. But I do intend to give more than ten minutes to the pursuit of solitude.

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## **August 30, 2017 – In the Flood**

As the world watches in horror as the flood waters rise in Houston, there are city officials there who can remember what happened a dozen years ago. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the devastation wrought by the storm and subsequent flooding in New Orleans, city officials in Houston tried to err on the side of caution when, just three weeks later, Hurricane Rita threatened their city. They ordered an evacuation of the nation's fourth largest city. The result was chaos. The highways turned into gridlock. People died of exposure in cars that ran out of fuel. A bus evacuating a nursing home caught on fire. Of the more than 100 people claimed by Hurricane Rita, more than 60 were the direct result of the order to evacuate Houston.

They weren't prepared to handle a mass evacuation of 2.3 million people back then when it was ordered. They weren't prepared to evacuate the city this week when the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey dropped record amounts of rain and unprecedented flooding struck the city.

A car is not a good place to be during a flood. A car that is trapped in traffic is no place to be during a flood. City officials decided not to evacuate. Like the decision to evacuate back in 2005, there will be plenty of people who second-guess the decision not to evacuate this time.

There is more to the story, of course. Just last year a report from Pro-Publica found that Houston officials had allowed an excessive amount of prairie to be used for building housing in the face of dramatic urban growth. The result, according to the report, was that any future flooding would be made more intense by using land that formerly would just soak up water as the site for houses, parking lots and other development.

Add to this combination of history and development and tragedy the fact that some climate scientists are pointing to the severity of Hurricane Harvey as a sign of global climate change. Warmer air holds more moisture. Dramatic flooding is, in part, the result of the capacity of the atmosphere to hold more rain. That is due, in part, to the effects of human fossil fuel consumption and the resulting increase in global temperature.

And so, despite the words that will be used on millions, perhaps billions of dollars worth of insurance claims, I'm not sure it is fair to call this storm "an act of God."

Certainly God is revealed through the power of nature. Still, blaming God does seem to be a stretch of the facts.

Having said that, however, I certainly believe that God is present in the unfolding tragedy of Houston flooding.

God is with those who are stranded and suffering. God is always present when people suffer, crying with the afflicted, sharing their pain.

God is with those who are grieving. All loss results in grief. God is always a part of the healing that comes from grief.

God is present with the amazing heroes who are taking on personal risk to assist in efforts to rescue and save others. God inspires human compassion and enables us to reach beyond ourselves in service of others.

Like New Orleans, when Hurricane Katrina led to devastating flooding a dozen years ago, the flooding in Houston isn't making any distinction between the rich and the poor. The gates of gated communities aren't keeping the waters from rising. Those with lots of financial advantages have faced devastating losses. In the months to come, however, after the waters begin to recede, there will be a big difference between Houston's rich and the city's poorest residents. Losing everything when everything is insured is different from losing everything when there is no insurance and no backup plan. There will be plenty of people who have nowhere to go and who won't be living in motels while they wait for the insurance checks to provide for the process of clearing away the debris and building new homes.

It may rain on the rich and the poor alike. But not everyone fares the same down the road when the waters have receded.

God will be with the poor of Houston long after the country has forgotten the power of this flood. God is still with those whose lives were devastated by Katrina, even though much of the lower 9th ward is yet to be rebuilt and its residents are scattered across the nation. In Houston as in Katrina, the rule is the same: in the land of bayous elevation goes at a premium and those with the least money occupied the lowest ground.

Of course the waters in Houston are deep enough to affect plenty of folks who had homes on somewhat higher ground. They will endure a lot of hassle as they figure out how to replace destroyed cars and homes and figure out how and when they will be able to return to work at jobs that are affected by the flooding. There will be plenty of insurance forms to fill out and savings accounts to tap. But those are the luxuries of those who have insurance and savings accounts.

Don't get me wrong. Those insurance policies and savings accounts are the result of hard work and prudent thinking. They are not luxuries for those who have experienced the devastation of the floodwaters. They are necessities for survival.

And to the extent that it is true that those things are the tools for survival, there are people in Houston whose very survival is threatened by the lack of those resources.

The ancient stories of our people include the story of the great flood when nearly all of the world was destroyed. Through God's grace a handful of people survived. We've been telling that story ever since as a sign of God's promise and God's power to save. Now we'll tell it again with fresh meaning.

Somehow the people will survive, though many will perish and the grief will be great.

We pray that the survivors will be able to share their wisdom with the rest of us as we move forward as a people rising out of the floodwaters and moving towards the future. For God is also in the future, calling us to learn better how to care for one another.

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## **August 31, 2017 – Toys**

Mr. Potato Head used to be a collection of items that had spikes on them so they could be inserted into an actual potato. The "head" was a fruit or vegetable and the accessories included eyes, ears, a nose, and a body, that was usually too small for the head. There were also hats and a pipe. We also has a Mrs. Potato Head around our house. I have a vague memory of playing with the toy using a cucumber and an onion in addition to a potato, but it never was one of my favorite toys. My youngest brothers had a Mr. Potato Head that included a plastic fake potato and the accessories had rounded plastic parts that fit into holes in the plastic potato instead of sharp spikes that could

penetrate the skin of a vegetable. It is now billed as a classic toy, but it doesn't meet my criteria for a true classic. I remember playing with the toy, but I do not remember our children or grandchildren playing with it. It is possible that they have, but I have no memory of it.

On the other hand the simple waffle ball with a yellow plastic bat is a toy that has been played with by at least three generations of our family. I don't think the design has changed a bit in all of those years. I'd put the hula hoop in the same category. There have been a few modifications. Seeds added inside the hoop make a sound as the hoop goes round and round and there have been additional colors and designs, but the basic toy is the same. I don't think they had the smaller hoops when we were kids, but the concept is pretty simple and has provided entertainment for generations of kids. It even made the Christmas wish list in the Chipmunk song, "Christmas Don't be Late."

My sister had Barbie dolls and so did our daughter. So far I haven't seen any in the home of our grandchildren, but they are pretty young. I never understood the appeal of that particular toy. It won't stand up, can't really be posed and the main game seems to focus on dressing the toy. I wasn't into fashion as a kid and am not into it as an adult. Changing clothes is a chore that one has to do, but there is no reason to see it as a game or play from my point of view.

The first "Little People" that I can remember came with a barn and a few animals. There was at least a cow and a horse and a chicken in the set. I think there might have been a lamb and a dog as well. The little people men had cowboy hats. Our kids really got into little people at a certain phase when they were growing up and there was a school bus that got a lot of mileage around our house. Our grandchildren have also played with little people a lot. It is interesting that a round piece of plastic that doesn't have arms or legs somehow becomes a "person" for the game, but the rounded body that fits into a hole in a vehicle or other toy seems to work.

The Etch A Sketch toy that our granddaughter plays with is a bit different from the original with a vertical and a horizontal knob, but the toy seems to be one that has endured for multiple generations. It's a pretty simple device, with a bit of aluminum powder in a plastic box which uses static to cling to the "screen." The pose of holding the device upside down over your head so you can watch by looking up as you "erase" the picture is an image that sticks in my mind.

Hot Wheels cars came around after my time. I think we may have had one or two Matchbox cars when I was a kid, and my youngest brothers had a few of the hot wheels. By the time our son came around, however, our home had plenty of the tiny cars and a box of plastic track and connectors. We make all kinds of configurations of track for the cars to zoom down from tables and chairs and other pieces of furniture. Our grandson still has a lot of fun with his box full of the cars. I think his dad has also

enjoyed the fact that his son likes the cars and has made a point of making sure that there are specific cars in the collection.

Legos didn't come into our house in my time, but I remember my brother's extensive collection of the building bricks. They were a big deal for our children and grandchildren and I suspect they will continue to be valued toys for many more generations. They are toys that last. Our grandson enjoys playing with the legos that were his father's toys. And his grandfather and grandmother enjoy playing with him.

Our kids, of course, will have a different set of multi-generational toys that came along in their time and still are used by children today. Care bears, cabbage patch dolls and little ponies are toys that I remember our daughter enjoying. She has been instrumental in making sure her nephew and nieces have those toys. I suspect that beanie babies aren't too far behind.

And there are toys that we enjoyed that our grandchildren probably will never know. Erector sets have been replaced with all kinds of different building systems, most of which don't involve all of the tiny screws and square nuts that were so easy to lose. Tinker toys still exist, but the plastic sticks somehow don't have the feel of the original wooden toys. The marvel of the view master with its 3-dimensional images doesn't hold much appeal for children growing up in a digital age with access to all kinds of screens with images and applications.

There are lots and lots of toys that add joy and meaning to childhood. Some are well-designed enough to persist for many generations. Truth be told, however, I don't miss Mr Potato Head.

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