

**December 2017  
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## December 1, 2017 – To Speak Clearly

I have invested my career in honing the skills of oral language. I am well aware that there is a big difference between reading good writing out loud and crafting meaningful speaking words. Effective oral communication has features that are distinct from effective writing. A good speaker pays attention to repetition, rhythm, pitch and breathing. Pauses must come in the right places. Volume must be varied. There is a lot going on in an effective oral presentation.

Having worked hard at honing this skill, I am not appreciative of people who refer to what I do as “speaking off the cuff,” or “impromptu.” I also am grieved when others speak in public and play loose with facts or make offensive comments or fail to employ proper grammar. Some of these features are acceptable in conversation but not appropriate to more formal speech. Addressing a group of people involves careful consideration of your audience and what best communicates the message that you want to convey.

I am also aware that writing about speaking, even writing this journal entry, is to risk a demonstration of just the opposite of what I seek to do when I preach or give a speech to a group. I have no more desire to bore readers with a long diatribe about speaking than I do to bore listeners with a long speech about writing.

I am, however, grieved by some of our public officials who seem to be careless with their choices of words in public settings. I can cite many examples, but earlier this week, President Trump used an occasion that was intended to honor the contributions of Navajo code talkers to make a comment about political opponent, Elizabeth Warren. He referred to her as “Pocahontas.” You could see those who were supposed to be honored wince at the blatant racism of the comment. The Navajo Nation President referred to the quip as “a racist slur.” Whether or not offense was intended, it certainly was felt.

Ardent Trump supporter and Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos put it this way when asked about the Pocahontas comment: “We can all do well to reflect on the things we say before we say them.” Although I don’t often agree with her, it was an appropriate comment in this case and I think she was right on.

Words are powerful. They can do great harm and they can be the source of great inspiration.

We have inherited such a rich legacy of eloquent language employed in the service of politics. Abraham Lincoln was the first president from the Republican party. First elected on November 6, 1860, his victory was a tribute to his superior debating skills and his eloquent and persuasive use of oral language. On multiple occasions in my life, I have visited the beautiful monument to him in Washington DC. Each time I do, I read once

again words that he said on March 4, 1865, just a bit more than a month before he was assassinated:

“With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

Another Republican, decorated and distinguished in battle before rising to our nation’s top post, said these words:

“Throughout America's adventure in free government, such basic purposes have been to keep the peace; to foster progress in human achievement, and to enhance liberty, dignity and integrity among peoples and among nations. To strive for less would be unworthy of a free and religious people. Any failure traceable to arrogance or our lack of comprehension or readiness to sacrifice would inflict upon us a grievous hurt, both at home and abroad.”

The words come from a speech given by Dwight Eisenhower on January 17, 1961 in what has been called his farewell address to the nation.

Of course such eloquence is not limited to any one political party. I have chosen a couple of Republicans simply because that is the party of our current President, so in a sense he stands in the lineage of these men.

How I long for similar eloquence in the conduct of our government in our time. Have we so degraded our expectations for those who serve that we no longer expect rational thought and carefully chosen words from them?

I do not intend this journal entry to be an attack upon the person of the President of the United States or even upon his chosen manner of speaking. I intend no malice towards his supporters. But I am aware that there are significant divides in our nation and I long for words “to bind up the nation’s wounds.” Indeed, “to strive for less would be unworthy of a free and religious people.”

We still aspire to be a free and religious people. But the lessons of our history provide us with numerous and striking examples of times when our people have not acted in the best interests of freedom. We have chosen the leadership of those who were unequal to the task. We have surrendered our freedom in the pursuit of financial gain. Thankfully, ours is not the defining generation in the history of free people on this planet.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered a powerful speech formed around a resonant line. He had adapted that line from a sermon by the Unitarian minister and abolitionist,

Theodore Parker. Dr. King's version of the line was, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." If I could adapt the phrase even further, I might say, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward freedom and justice." We may have taken a few steps backward in the path towards knowing and speaking the truth that will set us free, but I remain convinced that this generation will, like all previous generations pass from the halls of leadership and new faces will appear and new voices will be heard.

I pray that they might speak with clarity and fluency.

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## **December 2, 2017 – Building Community**

One of the enduring memories of my time serving in North Dakota is of the restaurant where we gathered for coffee. The actual building has since burned down and the locals now gather in a different place. Back in the time I was there, people would start arriving at the cafe around 9 am. A few would order breakfast or a pastry, but most just had a cup of coffee. I had a rather tight budget in those days, so a cup of coffee was my usual. It wasn't the best coffee in the world, brewed in a pour over drip machine into pots that probably weren't scrubbed as often as optimal. The water in the town was high in mineral content and the water in the cafe wasn't the best in the world. What I am saying is that I didn't go to the cafe for coffee, really. I went to the cafe for the gathering of the community. I could see a sizable percentage of my congregation when I stopped by the cafe and it was a convenient place to check in with folks about what was going on in their lives. Furthermore it was a place to be seen by the rest of the community as engaged with the life of the town.

We served a church in a neighboring town, too, and I knew where folks gathered for coffee in that town and was a frequent visitor to that place.

When the time came for us to move away to accept a new call, one of the parting gifts I received was a mug from that cafe.

At the time, I believed that what was going on in that cafe was building community. I was young and eager to serve others as a pastor. I knew that community is essential to humans and an important dynamic in a life of faith and I was interested in relationships. We had coffee hours after church in both communities and it wasn't all that uncommon for a rancher who had gotten hung up feeding cattle and didn't make it to worship to show up for coffee afterwards.

In those days, North Dakotans didn't ask you whether or not you want coffee. They simply served it to you, assuming that all adults drank regular coffee. They didn't serve

their coffee strong, so it wasn't like consuming that number of cups of coffee from a modern coffee shop in terms of caffeine.

Looking back, I now realize that despite the positive effects of those regular gatherings, we weren't really building community as much as I had thought. The longer I stayed in the community the more routine the gatherings for coffee were. After seven years, the faces in the booth where I sat were almost always the same faces that had been there the day before. I ceased circulating around the room and began to just sit with a select few friends. The cafe wasn't a place to meet new people, but rather a place for me to gather with my cronies. And there were a few folks whom I avoided. I chose not to sit with people whose political views were so different from my own that their outbursts irritated me. I chose not to sit with those who were critical of the church and the work that we did.

Building community involves bringing together people of different walks of life who don't necessarily know each other already, so they can talk and better understand their differences. That isn't what was going on in those gatherings. They were, for the most part, gatherings of people who knew each other well to talk about the things about which they agreed and who were practiced at avoiding offense or even difference most of the time.

That process has continued throughout my ministry. These days I tend to go to coffee shops where the coffee is stronger and costs more than the old City Cafe. And I order decaffeinated beverages with skim milk. I also make a point of changing coffee shops regularly. My weekly bible studies, based in coffee shops, change shops every month to avoid getting stuck in a rut and to make sure that we have a style that welcomes newcomers and changes in the crowd. There are regulars, to be sure, but we seem to be a bit better at welcoming others.

Meanwhile, back at the church, I notice that the same people sit at the same tables after worship each week. In fact, we have a couple of tables to which the regulars are so attached that we have learned not to move them or to designate them for some different use. The outcry from the regulars is too loud.

Our coffee hour after church may feel very warm and welcoming to those who attend nearly every week, but they have an entirely different feeling to visitors, whom I often see standing in the middle of the room, unsure of where to sit. And the process of how the coffee is served is so rigidly enforced, with each item in its own place on the table, that it is a very challenging place for a new volunteer to plug into the life of the church. Simply practicing hospitality at the coffee hour after church is a special challenge.

Still, beverages and refreshments are valuable tools for hospitality. Recently I have been experimenting with offering coffee and other hot beverages in a second location in the church. The room is smaller and more intimate. The beverages are available from

the time we unlock the doors in the morning until the building is empty, instead of there being a designated coffee hour in that place. People seem to cluster in twos and threes in that room instead of the larger groups we see in the fellowship hall. I don't know if this experiment will help foster community, but it is a small change that has allowed me to pursue conversation with a few different people than the usuals.

Community isn't based on the size and shape of the tables, though we've experimented with those, too. It isn't based on the type of beverages or how they've prepared, though we are capable of arguing over coffee systems. It isn't formed by the decorations in the room, though we routinely get into heated discussions about those. Community is the result of human relationships and relationships require work. There is no magic formula for building community. Building community requires commitment. After a long time in the ministry, I'm still learning.

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### **December 3, 2017 – Taking Time to Think**

When it comes to making decisions, I am fairly able to make my choice and move on. I don't spend a lot of time in regrets over the choices I have made. Rather I try to move on and live responsibly with the consequences of those choices. I'm well aware that there are many different styles of making decisions. My wife, who makes very good decisions, is much slower to come to a conclusion than I. Sometimes that can be a bit frustrating for me as I have had to learn the patience of waiting for decisions. I often want to decide, act and move on, while she is more comfortable with more contemplation before the decision is made.

I've known others who are even quicker than I to make decisions, who seem to hardly ponder, but rather simply react when facing a decision. I've also known others who are nearly paralyzed by decisions, fretting over choices and suffering from remorse after decisions have been made.

I learned a bit about those differences from spending a day with a teacher and mentor back when I was a full time student. We went, with others, to a farm to make photographs. I took extra rolls of film and snapped off frame after frame, uncertain of exactly what images I would capture, quick to see something and try it. My teacher, on the other hand, studied our surroundings. We had been on the farm for more than an hour before he tripped the shutter for the first time. He invested a long time getting the camera angle, light and shadows, and other elements of the photograph just right before making the commitment. At the end of the day, I had probably captured 75 or more images. He had maybe three or four. A couple of weeks later, we each had printed our images in large format, matted and mounted them and brought them to the classroom to display. I had gone through my proof sheets and immediately discarded about half of my images. Then I went back through them again and again, trying to find

two that were worth presenting to the class. The first came to me easily. The second was a difficult choice. There were several that were about the same quality, and none really stood out with a sense of “WOW.” My teacher, in contrast, made his choice and spent a few minutes in the darkroom, emerging with two stunning photographs. I don’t really remember the images I brought to that class so many years ago. I do remember both of his. His slower pace and careful studying before acting were definitely an advantage in making photographs.

I’ve been thinking about the choices we make over the past year, spurred by a meeting of a group within the church that is taking a look at the future. They have been tasked with making plans for some big events that will be coming up in the next few years and each of us seems to have a different approach. Some are comfortable with waiting to see what will happen and having a response ready when it occurs. Others want to develop a timeline and have specific tasks and action items all lined up. They long for a sense of predictability and control over the events that will be coming to the church. Both positions represent slight exaggerations of the way that things really work in the life of the church. Events are not random and being reactive can lead to over reactions and even change the outcome of events. On the other hand, the future is not predictable and a lot of energy can be invested in preparing for eventualities that never come to pass. Somehow, in this particular conversation, it seems fortunate that both voices are being expressed in the conversation.

Groups of people and systems of decision making can, however, get things terribly wrong. There are a lot of books that have attempted to analyze the rise of 20th Century Nazism and how Germany fell into genocide. We might be more comfortable had those terrible events been the result of a group of insanely evil persons who were monsters and extremely deviant in their thoughts and behaviors. We could easily identify the evil ones and do something about them. Instead, those who have studied those events have discovered that the persons involved were, in many cases, quite ordinary and commonplace, neither demonic nor monstrous. Hannah Arendt, after decades of study, concluded that Adolf Eichman, the Nazi SS officer who helped orchestrate the Holocaust wasn’t at his core an evil person though he committed hugely evil acts. She attributed his capacity and even eagerness to commit crimes to his “thoughtlessness.” It was his inability to stop and think that permitted Eichmann to participate in mass murder.

Philosophers have been contemplating the process of thought and action since the earliest days of human existence. Plato, in *The Republic*, tells the allegory of the cave, in which the philosopher escapes from the darkness of the company of others into the sunlight of contemplative thought. The philosopher is alone, but not lonely, and becomes attuned to inner thought and more tuned to the world in the process. The process of reflecting on actions and contemplating decisions is essential to ordered thought. Simply going along with the flow is inherently dangerous to the self and the other.

Too often, however, we become immersed in small details, many of which have no large impact on the living of our lives. We invest too much energy in day to day decisions without considering their role in the big picture. We don't give sufficient time to prayer and deep contemplation, but rush through our lives. We become fixated with our worries and fail to embrace the things that bring new life to us and others.

The discipline of quiet and contemplation is essential to a life well lived. It still requires energy for me to slow down and take the time necessary to think. Sometimes it is just the right thing to not make the decision and take time to weigh the consequences before springing to action.

These lessons take a lifetime to learn. And I am still learning.

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December 4, 2017 – Beautiful Light



There has been a dramatic and beautiful light show the last couple of nights, however. The “Full Cold Moon” which technically rose last night, but has been coming for several days, is the only “Supermoon” of 2017. Supermoons occur when a full moon coincides with the moon’s perigee, or the point in its orbit when it is closest to the earth. The moon appears to be 14% larger and 30% brighter than usual. It was slightly more dramatic on Saturday night, but equally beautiful on moonrise last night. As the night progressed, however, clouds have moved in and dimmed the light of the moon. Because of the elliptical orbit of the moon, it actually reaches perigee tonight, so, depending on the clouds, we should get a really good light show tonight as well.

And we don’t have to worry if we miss the supermoon, because we don’t have long to wait for the phenomenon to occur again. Supermoons will occur on January 1 to celebrate the coming of 2018 and again on January 31, 2018. We’re planning to travel on January 1, so we’ll remember to take a gander at the sky.

I have tried for years to make good pictures of the moon. I have a fairly long lens for my camera and I can get a very good view of the moon through that lens, but even with a tripod, I get a small amount of vibration from the moving shutter and the image isn’t quite as sharp when I look at the photograph as I remember it from looking directly at the moon. It is a lesson in humility about my lack of skills as a photographer. It also reminds me that there are some experiences in life that cannot be captured and replayed. Actually looking at the rising supermoon is an experience that is far greater than looking at a photograph of the phenomenon. I enjoy taking photographs and I enjoy looking at photographs to remind me of life’s experiences, but a photograph, even a very good photograph, is only part of the story.

The stories our people tell about the first Christmas include the reports of an extraordinary star that was observed by wise men from far away and guided them to the place where the child was. Their gifts had special impact on the parents and marked the recognition of the birth by the outside world. It is clear from our earliest stories that Christianity is not a faith to be kept to ourselves, but to be shared with the entire world. Although we don’t always understand the connections, we are bound together with people all around the world. Looking at the moon last night and the night before, I was reminded that this is something that can be seen all around the world and an experience that we share with all kinds of different people.

So don’t worry if I don’t have a lighting display on my house. I’m still moved by the beauty of light and grateful for the joy of the season.

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## December 5, 2017 – The Season of Thinning

Yesterday felt like the hills are supposed to feel in December. We didn't get more than a tiny skiff of snow, but some of the areas to the north of us got more. Reports of 5 to 7 inches were backed up by cars with lots of snow melting in the parking lots. There were several accidents on the Interstate caused by slippery roads and parts of the highway were closed at various times as the storm moved across the state.

Contrary to my plans, I didn't go paddling. The wind had a real bite to it and although I've paddled in colder temperatures, the combination of cold and wind seemed to counsel against going out on the water. The forecast calls for warmer temperatures by the weekend and I may yet get a chance for a December paddle.

I have always had a kind of appreciation for winter. Even yesterday, with its biting wind, didn't find me wrapped up in my warmest coat. I reserve my parka for days that are really chilly. It is a trait that has become a kind of a joke. If you start wearing your parka when it is 20 degrees above, will it still work when it is 20 degrees below? We don't see twenty below around here very often, so the question is mostly rhetorical.

At any rate it is a good time to check all of the safety gear to make sure that we are prepared. A sleeping bag in the back of the car can make a world of difference if something happens. Trips that take us out of town call for a few more winter supplies in the car as well.

The animals were all in storm mode yesterday. A group of seven or eight deer spend most of the morning bedded down just beyond our backyard shed. They were content to wait out the storm while munching on their cud. When the turkeys came through on their daily trip, there were a bunch of juncos at the feeder. The turkeys will usually check below the feeder to get whatever seed has fallen, but yesterday one flew up to the porch rail in an attempt to get at the feeder. It sat there for a while, looking as if it forgot why it went up there in the first place and finally gave up and rejoined the rest of the flock. The juncos looked like they have been prudent in their preparations for winter, their rounded bodies looking ready for the cold and their feathers barely ruffled by the strong winds.

Winter is a testing ground for some animals. Mortality rates go up when the temperatures plummet and only the fittest survive. The animals of the hills have developed some pretty impressive survival strategies. They can take weather that is a lot more harsh than we have seen so far this year.

I keep thinking that the dead pine needles have all been blown out of the trees, but yesterday's wind brought enough that I'll have to look for a warm day and clean out the rain gutters one more time. The needles on the lawn can wait until spring to be raked, but if we get some really warm weather, there is a job in the yard waiting to be done. I'm

ready for snow because it covers up some of those undone yard chores and makes it easier to ignore them until spring.

Although it has happened at least once since we have lived here, snow that lingers is fairly rare in the hills. Most of the time the snow falls and then we get enough warm days to melt it before the next storm. Even when we have more than a foot of snow on the ground, it doesn't mean that it will last all winter.

So far, however, this winter is open. And the forest is really, really dry. The needles crackle under foot when we go for a walk and the plants all seem to be a bit stressed. The animals take to the warm and even dry weather better and most are looking healthy. The coats of the deer are getting thick and smooth again after the scruffiness of late summer. And the birds that stick around for the winter are looking a bit fat, their sources of seeds being plentiful.

A Mary Oliver poem about the edge of winter seems appropriate for a day like yesterday:

**“On Winter’s Margin”**

by Mary Oliver

On winter’s margin, see the small birds now  
With half-forged memories come flocking home  
To gardens famous for their charity.  
The green globe’s broken; vines like tangled veins  
Hang at the entrance to the silent wood.

With half a loaf, I am the prince of crumbs;  
By time snow’s down, the birds amassed will sing  
Like children for their sire to walk abroad!  
But what I love, is the gray stubborn hawk  
Who floats alone beyond the frozen vines;  
And what I dream of are the patient deer  
Who stand on legs like reeds and drink the wind;—

They are what saves the world: who choose to grow  
Thin to a starting point beyond this squalor.

The last line of the poem is haunting. But there seems to be some deep truth in the words. Something deep inside of me resonates with the choice to grow thin. I’m not a thin person and although I am overweight, I am well aware that my weight is the result of choices that I make. But I am also not by nature a snowbird who heads for the warm south as soon as blustery winds begin to blow. I choose to stay in the cold country and to deal with the weather that we receive.

The poem, however, seems to point beyond physical appearances to a truth about what winter has to teach us about living more simply. There is much I can do to strip away things that stand between me and what is really important. I hold a deep desire to live more simply and to declutter my life from all of the stuff that gets in the way of what is most important. It isn't just material possessions, but also lazy thinking and unnecessary thoughts, shaky logic and bad ideas.

And each day I need to learn once again to make a choice to not be lost in the squalor of the world, its commerce, mass media, politics and general distraction. "Thin to a starting point beyond this squalor." I hope I can make of this winter a time of thinning.

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## **December 6, 2017 – That Boat Bug**

I met with a member of my congregation. Most of the story of the meeting is not mine to tell. That is usually true in my job. I often am privileged to witness parts of people's lives that are not public. So I won't be reporting much about that meeting. But for the small bit that I am able to share, it is important to state that this is someone I know pretty well. I've been his pastor for 22 years. I've been with him in some hard times and some good times. I know stories of his life that come from the years before we met. I know his children and have met most of his grandchildren. I know several of his hobbies and interests. Have sat next to him at events that are not related to the church. Once he asked a casual question about someone who shared my last name. It was someone he had seen in a professional capacity. It turned out that it was a grandchild of my brother. Professional boundaries prevented any further discussion, but I knew that he knew that my family is more complex than most people in the church know. Likewise, he knows that circumstances have put me in the same room with a woman to whom he was married and later divorced. It isn't the kind of information that a pastor would generally know and we don't speak of the details of such events, but there is a sense in which we live in a small enough region that we learn things about each other over time. I've seen him endure major surgeries and other medical events. The reason we were meeting was a new and very serious medical diagnosis.

So, yes, I would say that I know this person.

But when we last met I learned something that I had not known. In addition to a rambling conversation that covered a lot of different topics, he told me about a wooden sailboat that he acquired in the midst of a restoration and that he has brought home with the intention of completing the restoration. He knows that I build canoes and have a bit of experience with wooden boats. He also knows that I have never tackled a project as big as the one waiting to be moved into his garage. It is even possible that it won't quite

fit in his garage, at least not on the trailer and still allow enough room for the work that needs to be done. That however, is another story.

Here is the deal. We don't live near the ocean. There are no natural lakes in the hills. The bodies of water that are within an hour's drive of his home are not known as places to sail boats. There is no maritime tradition out here in the middle of the country where the plains meet the hills. We don't have Sea Scouts to teach our children and grandchildren to sail. There are a couple of marinas in town, most of which have to sell snowmobiles and ATVs in order to have year round business. There is no sailing center.

Yet here, away from the large bodies of water on the earth. Here, thousands of miles from the nearest sail loft, a couple of boat nuts can be found with projects in our garages that seem to defy common sense.

As he spoke, I know that he doesn't fully realize the size and scope of his project. I've been involved with enough boat restoration projects to know that you estimate the amount of time and money you'll need to complete the project and that is somewhere around a quarter of what will be really needed. You look at a surface and think, "Scrape and paint. How tough can that be?" and find out that you need to remove rotten pieces of wood and cut and fit new ones. He was describing how he thought he could make some plexiglass coverings for missing port lights. I didn't bother to tell him that genuine water-tight port lights like those cost more than his total investment in his project each at West Marine. They do include free shipping, however. He'll learn that information on his own at his own pace.

He is the kind of person who is capable to tackling a big job and, after discovering it is bigger than he thought, persisting and completing it. I suspect that he will one day have a sailboat of which he can be proud. He'll probably even find ways to go sailing in it.

I also know the the urge to build and work on boats is not a rational process. Maybe it is a product of aging. Add in a challenging medical diagnosis, and some of the old dreams rise to the surface and create an itch that can't be ignored. One can never predict accurately, but it is within the realm of possibility that he will live for another 20 or more years. That is enough time to build a sailboat from scratch, which might be a tad easier than rebuilding one in a sad state of repair and neglect. An objective observer might point out that he'd get a lot more sailing accomplished, and probably at a lower cost, if he paid for trips to a coastal town and rented a boat. But when the urge to go off in a boat that is the product of your own hands grabs you, such arguments don't influence you one bit.

The boat is a dream. It is also a project. It gives meaning that is difficult to express in a rational argument. Fortunately, we both seem to have families that are tolerant of our urge to mess about with boats, though now that we have discovered this little fact about

each other, one never knows how far it might go. It hasn't escaped me that he may need a partner to complete his project.

Then, again, I have a project in my garage that needs to be finished before I tackle a new one.

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## **December 7, 2017 – Reading the Reviews**

You can tell that I'm gettin older. The number of times I say, "I remember when . . ." is increasing. I even think of some of my experiences in the past as the good old days - times that have no passed that had at least some qualities that I enjoyed. I remember living in Chicago in the 1970's. We had a tiny apartment and we were both studying full time and working small part-time jobs just to survive. Our days were busy and we pulled the occasional all nighter to meet deadlines. But Sundays were our lazy days. We'd go to church at 11, but the morning before time to get ready for church was a lazy time. I'd usually get up, put on the coffee and go out to walk the block and a half to a newsstand and purchase a copy of the Sunday Chicago Tribune. We didn't receive a daily newspaper at that time and the Sunday Tribune would last us all week.

I'd begin with the comics. The Tribune, in those days, had a decent comic section - eight pages of color comics - double the amount of the newspaper back home.

I usually saved the book reviews for the afternoon. after we'd gone to church, had lunch and maybe even taken a nap. Graduate school is demanding and you learn to read - a lot. Textbooks were only the beginning. I usually had more than 5 books from the library relating to research projects that were going on. We were expected to do a thorough literature review before starting to write. In those days students were expected to know the field of literature that already existed and to make the case that their ideas were fresh and new and contributed to the body of literature.

So, I rarely read any of the books recommended by the writers of the book section in the newspaper. I just read the reviews. They were often entertaining and they often enticed me to want to read the book. "Someday," I would think, "I'll have time to read that book." In a strange way, I got to know authors through reading the reviews of their books. Every week there would be a few authors who were new to me. In my fantasies, I'd one day join them. Of course that can't happen until I write a book. Other than a slim volume on hospitality and a handful of Christian Education books, my name hasn't made it to the cover for the simple reason that the manuscript hasn't been finished. Life has held different priorities so far.

Sometimes, on a holiday weekend, or when I was feeling extravagant, a copy of the New York Times would make its way into our home. The New York Times Book Review

was, and in some ways still is, the gold standard of newspaper guides to reading. When a book makes the New York Times Best Sellers List, it is a huge financial success for the publisher. Just making it into the Times Book Review is a moment of fame for an author.

Ah yes, but that was then and this is now. Book reviews are easy to obtain. amazon.com even lines up book reviews based on my purchasing history, recommending books based on some kind of computer algorithm. Of course, I order books for others as well as for myself, so the recommendations are sometimes a bit strange. And Amazon book reviews seem to lack the careful analysis that one finds in the newspaper reviews. They are more like short book summaries with a promotion of the book thrown in than serious reviews.

But this is the season of the year when good book reviews are easy to find. Many organizations are posting their “top ten” or “most recommended” book lists for holiday giving. I enjoy looking at them. One of the best, in my opinion, is NPR’s Book Concierge. The reviews aren’t long and they are rarely detailed enough to make for good reading in and of themselves, but the various ways to search to database of books are amazing. You can search the list of books by applying different filters and you can apply multiple filters. There are links to more complete reviews, author interviews and more. It is pretty entertaining just to spend time following links started by the site. Sometimes I like to do strange searches just for the fun of it. That’s how I discovered that the list doesn’t have any rather long, fiction, cookbooks. I guess cookbook authors are more into nonfiction. The application also shows the covers of the book, which make it seem a bit like shopping in a bookstore.

Shopping in a bookstore also used to be a form of recreation for us. That was one of the treats of living in Hyde Park, Chicago in the 1970’s. There were bookstores everywhere. Coming from Montana, even the biggest town in Montana, we hadn’t been exposed to so many bookstores with such wonderful inventory. We even got to know the cat that lived in the bookstore around the corner from our apartment building. Most of the bookstores didn’t mind if you spent an hour browsing and even reading short sections of the books. We didn’t have much money in those days and certainly couldn’t have afforded all of the books we saw, but from time to time we did find some treasures that we brought home. Chicago taught me the value of used books. If you are a bit careful, you can buy a book, read it, and sell it back to the same book store and drop as little as 10% of the original value of the book. It isn’t quite like going to the library, but not bad for those on a strict budget.

Amazon allows users to sell books, but it is hard to find a book that will sell for more than the shipping costs on Amazon’s used book listings. I know. My house and office are filled to overflowing with books and I have to do something about it, but haven’t yet found the solution.

So this holiday season, you don't need to buy me a book. I've got plenty. And, if I have a lot of extra time, I'm perfectly capable of amusing myself by reading the reviews.

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## **December 8, 2017 – Revelations of Pain in our Midst**

My college and graduate school years coincided with a dramatic rise in divorce among clergy. Clergy divorce rates were very low until the late 1960's. Then, through the 1970's they skyrocketed. Having been so unheard of that there was intense social pressure for clergy families to remain intact, even amidst intense problems and pressures. A minister who divorced was likely to become an unemployed minister. People looked up to ministers and when they revealed flaws and problems, people were disillusioned. I shared the disillusionment as mentors and teachers announced their divorces. The pastor who confirmed me was divorced. A beloved teacher was divorced; then another. There was a period of time when I began to question my vocation simply because of all of the clergy divorces. As a newlywed myself, I didn't want to be part of that statistic. I wondered whether or not it was the calling to ministry that contributed to the high divorce rate. Then, fairly early in my career, I began to witness divorces of peers. Clergy couples, where both husband and wife are ministers, have an even higher divorce rate than couples where only one is a minister.

Enough years have passed, that I have gained a bit of confidence about my vocation and about my marriage. At 44 years of marriage and 39 years of sharing ordained ministry during which we have both served the same congregation for all of those years, we hold a record for our denomination for clergy couple longevity. Not all of our peers have become divorced, but those who have not have witnessed one or both of the couple change vocations.

After we were well established in our careers and marriage, we witnessed another wave of disillusionment with ministers. In the 1990's the church was rocked by allegations of sexual abuse by clergy. This was not just a crisis in the Roman Catholic Church, which received a great deal of negative press for the abuses of clergy. It was also true in Protestant denominations as well. Our United Church of Christ discovered a need for the creation of sexual abuse policies and investigation procedures. I ended up serving on and chairing a sexual misconduct response team and was involved in several investigations, including those that resulted in the loss of standing for the involved clergyperson.

In the midst of these times of discovery of the flaws and humanity of clergy, I always had the good fortune of strong connections to clergy who continued to serve faithfully, who had strong and consistent boundaries and who cared for their relationships at home with love and tenderness as they cared for their congregations with openness,

honesty and integrity. I discovered that even when there are bad things happening, there are good people who remain.

It is a lesson that I am glad to have learned as we, as a society enter another wave of testimonials about sexual harassment and abuse in work environments. It seems as if almost every day there is a new group of allegations against politicians, television and film personalities, business leaders and others. Scanning the headlines, it would be easy to come to the conclusion that there are sexual predators lurking around every corner and in every office in the land.

It is deeply disturbing - and rightfully so.

The courage being displayed by the victims is so impressive that Time magazine has named "The Silence Breakers" as its 2017 Person of the Year, recognizing the women and a few men who came forward with stories of sexual harassment and assault and have brought us to a time of national reckoning.

I know from my previous experiences of a few things that are helping me in this time. One is that the feeling of being hit by a wave is caused in part by a history of silence. Because we went for generations without speaking of dysfunction in clergy families, when it finally became acceptable to do so it felt, for a while, like every clergy family was dysfunctional. Although the rate of problems probably wasn't much higher than other couples, because there was a backlog of suffering in silence, it was as if a dam had broken and it took a while for us to realize that there were plenty of healthy clergy families and plenty of model marriages among clergy. The same was true when people finally were able to speak up about clergy sexual abuse. There were many victims who had suffered in silence for a long time whose stories needed to be told and heard.

Now, in the midst of this current wave of disclosures about abuses in entertainment and politics, it makes sense to me that we are feeling disoriented. It is disturbing to find that someone who has been revered as a leader is revealed to be a recalcitrant, incorrigible offender with little hope of reform. When that person is someone whom we thought we could trust the disorientation is even more severe.

But not every politician and not every entertainer is an abuser. And not every abuser is incorrigible. Having our flaws come to light is not the collapse of our society. In fact it holds the seeds of hope for a brighter future.

Although abuse still occurs, shining a spotlight on clergy sexual abuse has, in the long term been good for the church. That which was hidden has been revealed and the church has been forced to take it seriously and to make serious changes. I was not required to take any classes in healthy boundaries or sexual ethics during my formal education. Now I participated in high quality recurrent training on a regular basis as a

condition of my standing as a minister. This is good for the church and it is good for those of us who hold positions of power within the institution.

When we discover serious flaws in our social structure, we gain the power to mend them.

The church is especially practiced in the art of mending. We understand that while there are differences between individuals, we all have flaws. We all make mistakes. We all stand in need of forgiveness. Honest confession, meaningful repentance, and learning to accept forgiveness are real steps on the road to healing. Reform is not some job that we give to victims. It is the responsibility of all of us. But it is the courage of the victims that has given us all the opportunity to become a better society. And for that they deserve our gratitude.

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## **December 9, 2017 – Adoption Stories**

I did something different this morning. Usually, I begin my day by writing in my journal. This morning, I decided to watch a short BBC documentary called “Meet Me On the Bridge.” It is the story of Kati Pohler, who was abandoned in a market in China when she was three days old. Her birth parents left a note saying they would meet her on a famous bridge 10 or 20 years later. Kati was adopted into a loving family in Michigan and grew up there. She graduated from high school and went away to college before she learned the contents of the note.

Her adoptive parents, however, knew of the note and couldn't quite find the right way to tell her all of the details they knew about her birth parents. When Katie was 10 years old, they sent a message to her birth parents with a messenger to meet them on the bridge, informing them that she was healthy and living in a loving family. The messenger somehow missed connecting with the parents, but their story became national news in China. They appeared on a television show and told their story.

Katie's adoptive parents eventually told her what they knew about her birth parents and she decided to travel to China and meet them on the bridge when she was 20. She learned that she had a biological sister. She had only brothers in her adoptive family. Her birth mother and father were eager to apologize and ask for forgiveness. They showed her the place where she had been left in the market and told her the story of that day. Their conversations had to be conducted through a translator because Katie speaks only English.

It is one of those feel good stories where everything seems to work out so well. Katie now knows she has two loving families. Her adoptive family gained some new distant

relatives. Katie continues to live her life in the United States, but may visit China more now that she knows her family there.

Not all stories make such nice documentaries. When Jenna Cook went back to China at the age of 20 to search for her birth parents, she met dozens of families who desperately hoped she was their lost child.

China's one child policy meant that families faced heavy fines for having too many children. In the early 1990's China passed a law that allowed foreign nationals to adopt abandoned Chinese babies. An estimated 80,000, mostly girls have come to the United States and another 40,000 were adopted in Europe, primarily in Spain, the Netherlands and the UK.

Children who grow up in the family to which they were born never think twice about their origins. They might wonder about how or when they were born, but those answers come easily to their parents. They look at their own belly buttons and when they are old enough to understand, they know that they were connected to their mothers in the beginning and that is about all there is to it.

An adopted child, however, even in the most loving and caring family, learns to live with a question. There is always this alternate life that is what might have been. They have questions about their birth parents that often go unanswered. For most of the babies adopted from China to other countries, it is nearly impossible to trace their origins. There are no official records. Even details like the exact date of birth are often unknown. The government assigned birth dates to abandoned babies that were based on estimates and could be off by several days. Had the birth family been traced by government officials, they would have suffered dire consequences. Abandoning babies was illegal.

I think about these things because we have an adopted daughter. She was not born in a different country. She was born in the same state where we lived at the time. But we know very little about her birth parents. We know that her birth mother was very young. In North Dakota, at that time, a judge could seal all of the birth records. This was thought to protect the birth mother, who was a minor. It was also thought to protect the adoptive parents from risk of being engaged in a custody dispute at a later date. In our case, the judge ordered a new birth certificate to be issued. Our daughter's birth certificate lists us as her parents.

We never attempted to hide any information from our daughter. We answered as clearly as we could whenever questions were asked. We spoke of adoption as a loving and natural way for children to come into a family. But we had little information to give her about her biological origins. We can't even answer some basic questions that are asked on routine medical history forms. Our daughter has had a good life and has become a

wonderful, loving and caring adult. We are incredibly proud of her and feel blessed every day to have been chosen to be her parents.

I know, however, that she has to live with unanswered questions. Like so many adopted children, there is a sense of mystery about what might have been. Are there biological siblings? Is there more to the story? What would have happened if he or she had not been released for adoption? In a few cases, like the documentary I watched, answers can be found. I regularly read stories of reunions between adopted children and their birth families.

The truth, however, is that many of those birth families are not single units. Birth parents may not have ever married. They might have divorced. There are a lot of different possibilities when it comes to unplanned pregnancies. For many adopted children there are questions to which the answers cannot be found. For others, finding their biological parents does not provide any helpful or meaningful information. For some, it can be inviting pain into their lives.

I am fascinated by the stories that others share and I am honored to be part of the incredible story of our daughter. I know that part of that story is learning to live with mystery. In our case it underscores the simple fact that every child is a miracle and a gift of incalculable worth.

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## **December 10, 2017 – Advent 2, 2017**

Time rolls on. It is already the Second Sunday of Advent. Christmas is two weeks from tomorrow. The snow is melting and the forecast calls for highs in the mid sixties today. The full moon is nearly half gone and last night was a great time for stargazing. There are a lot more lights in our neighborhood than was the case a few years ago, but it still gets dark enough in our back yard to point out some of the more familiar constellations.

It feels to me like this is a good year for Mark's Gospel. Mark rushes on with a nearly breathless pace, going from even to event, miracle to miracle and quickly reaches its conclusion. It is a gospel written to be read in a single sitting, if you have the time, or, as is the case in the Lectionary, with a bit of John thrown in to stretch out its reading. Today's Gospel makes it from the first word of Mark through the story of John the Baptist in a half dozen sentences.

Meanwhile, the Hebrew Scripture, the first 11 verses of the 40th chapter of Isaiah, invites us to slow down, to take a deep breath, to look around, and to notice that things have changed and God's love is nearby.

The writings of the prophet Isaiah span a long period of Jewish history. The first section is filled with warning and foreboding. Israel is asked to consider that its lack of faithfulness is linked to the political realities that surround the nation. Enemies loom. Threats are made. And the people seem to be invested in pursuing lies of luxury, of exclusion and of comfort. All of those efforts come up short when the Babylonians arrive in Jerusalem, destroy the city and its temple and carry off many of the residents into exile.

Enter what scholars had dubbed “2nd Isaiah.” With the 40th chapter, the tone of the prophet changes: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.” The pain of what may be the most devastating defeat in the history of Israel is real. The disillusionment of those who had thought that being God’s chosen people was a kind of insulation from the harsh political realities of the world is nearly complete. Their entire way of life has crumbled at the hands of external enemies. The protection that they had assumed was automatic simply wasn’t there. They proved to be as vulnerable as any other people and their pain and disillusionment is overwhelming. Those who were first to hear Isaiah’s words must have seriously doubted his message. “Comfort? How can there be any comfort when the temple is destroyed, the young men are killed, the young women and children are carried off into exile and the few elders that are left have nothing from which to build a future?”

Things are so bad that the people have ceased to believe in God and those who do remember the stories of God are doubting whether or not God has any power to affect the harsh realities of everyday life. “Where is God in all of this?” they ask.

Even Isaiah questions his message: “A voice says, ‘Cry out!’ and I said, ‘What shall I cry?’ All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers. The flower fades.”

To speak of the power of God and of the closeness of God seems to be a real challenge for the prophet. The voice that had uttered dire warnings and challenged the people to give up their harsh and powerful judgments of God now is at a loss for words. And so he falls back into familiar imagery of the classic poetry of his people and describes God as a shepherd who gathers the people together and nurtures them.

The parallels with our time are striking. Our people are restless and disillusioned. Our President, less than a year in office has never had high approval ratings. Last week’s poll set a record low for presidential approval, with only 32 percent of those polled approving of his job performance. 63 percent of Americans disapprove of his leadership. Confidence in the legislative branch of government isn’t much higher. The tax plan, still in reconciliation between House and Senate versions garnered only 35 percent approval, with 53 percent of Americans disapproving of the plan. The majority of the people in our country believe that our leaders are taking us in the wrong direction. We

are a restless and unhappy people. One wonders how we might respond to the words of the prophet.

In the midst of all of this, life goes on. We went out to do a little Christmas shopping yesterday and found that we weren't the only ones with that idea. Each place that we went was filled with others on similar missions. It appeared that business was good for the retail merchants, and probably for the banks who issue credit cards as well. I couldn't help but feel a twinge of jealousy - not a good feeling. The church won't be full this morning. People's preparations for Christmas include less and less corporate worship each year. Proclaiming the good news is difficult when the intended audience is elsewhere.

I need to remind myself that Isaiah experienced a similar problem by the 40th chapter. The people were scattered. His words often fell on just a remnant of the people. The others were scattered throughout Babylon beyond the reach of his message. His words came into prominence in the stories of the people many generations later, long after the people had returned, the nation had been restored and then conquered again and again. Their power rings through the centuries with incredible resonance.

It is, after all, the season of waiting. It is a time to remember that God's time is not our time. Patience is the word of the season. God has not forgotten the promise of peace. And comfort is offered whether or not we are ready to receive it.

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## **December 11, 2017 – Gathering Memories**

I was a church camp kid. My mother served as the camp nurse for family camp the summer I was born and, of course, I went along. I don't remember that summer, but my family has a couple of pictures of me wrapped in blankets and sleeping in what was a wood box near the fireplace. Our family returned to camp the next summer, and each summer after that. When I graduated from college, I applied for and was given the job of managing that same camp, which we did during the first two summers that we were graduate students. I continued to make it up to camp for a couple more years, making a total of 25 summers in a row at the same church camp. By that point in my life, I was active in another conference with another church camp. At the same time, because of the location of the first churches that I served, we also brought youth down to the hills to our church camp here. Wherever we have lived, church camps have been important in our lives and I have worked to make church camp experiences for others.

I've got a lot of camp stories, so it didn't surprise me when, a week or so ago, I received an email from someone on the current camp committee that oversees that church camp I first attended, asking some questions about the history of the camp. I wrote right back, giving the information that I could recall. I also threw in a little bit of information about a

couple of details that weren't mentioned in the note, but might fill in some missing information. The last question that I was asked, however, gave me pause. It was, simply, "Who else could we ask who might know the history of the camp?"

My mind flashed through the names of elders who were present in my growing-up years, There were a lot of folks I had once known who were around decades before I came on the scene. The names I could come up with, however, were mostly of people who have passed on. There have been a lot of funerals over the years. A few people moved to distant locations. There are some with whom I've lost contact and I don't know their status. I looked at some pictures of construction of a then new dining hall at the camp when I was manager. Most of the folks in those pictures have now passed away.

I finally recalled one elder who is still around who should be able to remember 15 or 20 years before my time. He is sharp and we still receive his Christmas letter each year. The sender of the email was grateful to have his name and thanked me for forwarding it.

I'm not sure how it happened that I've become one of the elders. They want to interview me further before I forget. It wasn't that long ago that I was collecting stories from elders. I'm really not that old. Yesterday we attended a 60th wedding anniversary and a 90th birthday party. In both cases the honorees are mentally very sharp and can easily remember details from decades before I was born. These particular elders didn't know stories from the church camp whose history they are assembling, but they could definitely contribute to the histories of the places in their lives.

So I'm not the oldest of the elders. On the other hand, when they get around to publishing their anniversary booklet, I'll be one of the people who is in the section with the black and white photographs.

One of the sources I did not recommend to the camp historians was a book that was published back when I was working at the camp. The book was a history of the valley where the camp is located and has a section on each of the four church camps in the valley as well as sections on the working ranches and guest ranches that are in the high country. When the book came out, I was eager to read it, but when I did, I was shocked. The information and stories about our church camp were filled with inaccuracies. It mentioned traditions that were only a few years old as being long-standing. It listed as "old timers" folks who had only recently started to come to the camp.

I began to investigate where the book's author had gotten the information in the book. It turned out that the author had driven to the camp a year earlier. I had been present, but was off working and didn't meet the author. A student, who I had hired as an assistant at the camp, met the author near the camp gate and chatted with that person for a while. Then the author drove on up the valley to the next place. That particular student had been a camper for a week during two or three prior summers and had been hired for a couple of months that particular summer. He wasn't an authority. He didn't really

know much at all about the camp. From that singular source the book was written and printed. I presume there is a copy in the library and a researcher could find it and easily assume that it was accurate. There aren't any other books of which I am aware that purport to report the history of the area. Single source histories aren't really history at all. They are collections of stories. But when stories become old enough, they are treated as history.

I'm grateful for the historians who are seeking to get the story straight. This season of intentional remembering and storytelling is important to gathering the information about what has occurred. I'm even more grateful for the question with which they ended our conversation: "Who do you know that we could talk to who might remember the old times?" Its a good question for all of us to ask if we would gather accurate memories of the past.

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## **December 12, 2017 – December Paddle**



I started building boats because I wanted to paddle and I didn't have money to buy a canoe. I figured that I could build one for less money than purchasing one of equal quality and I was right. That first canoe was very inexpensive. It took me most of a winter to complete it, building outdoors on our patio. At one point, I erected temporary plastic sidewalls to create a bit of shelter for the building process.

Then I kept building boats. And my life fell into a kind of rhythm: build in the winter, paddle in the summer. I enjoyed both activities, but I always built for the purpose of paddling. Every one of my boats has been used over and over again.

A few years ago, after building a kayak, I began to stretch the paddling season. I acquired some clothing designed for cold water paddling and began to push the season. I started by watching the lake in the spring so I would know when the ice was beginning to go out of it. There might be some open water towards the end of February, but so far it has always been March before there was enough water to put a boat in and paddle. This year the first day that I had time and there was enough water was March 18. There was still a family large sheet of ice floating in the lake, but there was plenty of water for paddling around the edges. I made it back to the lake on March 20 for more paddling and by March 25 the lake was free from ice except for a bit of skim ice at the edges.

That was nearly 10 months ago, and I got to paddle yesterday. I had hoped to paddle a week before, but high winds and cold temperatures made it easier to stay home that day. Yesterday it was windy, but I decided to go for it and I'm glad I did.



I was surprised at how much ice had formed on the lake. We've been having high daytime temperatures, sometimes as high as the mid sixties, but it has been getting down to the low twenties overnight and the lake temperature has been dropping. I estimated about 25% of the lake had floating ice. The wind, however, was keeping the ice all at one end of the lake and so the rest of the lake was open for paddling. The ice, however, prevented paddling close to the shore at one end of the lake.

I had the lake to myself. I guess others had plans for Christmas shopping or other activities. I didn't see anyone fishing or engaging in other activities on the water. A dozen geese greeted me, or perhaps more accurately complained about my presence. I'm pretty sure that the geese that hang around in the winter are different from those we see in the summer. We usually have a few weeks with no geese at the lake in the spring and in the fall and I believe that the summer geese winter farther south and our winter geese spend their summers in the north country. At any rate the geese were a lot more flighty yesterday than is the case in the summer. I couldn't get within 100 feet of them before they took to the air and circled around to a more remote location. The eagle who had a fish up on the ice let me get closer than that before taking to wing. I also watched as an osprey did a little fishing in the open water.

Getting pictures of the birds was a talent beyond my skills and equipment yesterday. It was quite windy. I could only take pictures when I had a little shelter from the wind where the shoreline provided a bit of a windbreak. On the open lake the waves were 6 to 18 inches with whitecaps and I didn't dare put my paddle down to take a picture. Even though the boat I was paddling is very stable, it is designed to take waves head on and keeping it properly aimed is important. Furthermore, close to the shore you can end up hitting rocks very quickly if you don't keep in motion. My paddling gloves make it very difficult to operate the camera and it wasn't a day to take off my gloves and risk losing one in the water. Staying warm and dry means getting everything sealed up before paddling and keeping on each item of clothing.



Paddling was a lot of fun, with waves washing over the bow of my boat and the boat rising and falling with the waves. At the top of a wave, the spray would blow up into my face. I had very little exposed skin, so the splashes didn't make me cold, but I simply had to live with water on my glasses while I was paddling. I could wipe them with my gloved hand a bit and I have learned to look around and through the water on the lenses.

I am aware of how amazingly lucky I am to have such a wonderful reservoir so close to my home. The longest paddling season of my life didn't require me to take the boat anywhere. Although I did travel with boats as is my usual, my first and last paddles of the season were within 10 miles of home. I know that there are people who live in places where they can paddle year round, but they don't get to play with the ice in the lake. Yesterday, as is the case in the spring, large chunks of ice had broken off of the main ice sheet and when I paddled close to the edge of the ice sheet the boat would crunch on unseen chunks of ice in the water. I build strong boats and I wasn't afraid of hitting the ice. It probably scratched the varnish on the bottom and edges of the boat, but that boat will need new varnish this year anyway.

In fact, I've got a lot of boat work that needs to be done. The long paddling season means a shorter building season. I didn't work on the boat in my garage at all yesterday. I was having too much fun on the lake.

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## **December 13, 2017 – A Windy Night**

I grew up in windy country. The east slope of the Rockies produce some high winds and the terrain around my home town was just right to funnel those winds right down the Yellowstone Valley. I can remember multiple times when the winds blew semi trucks off of the highway and for a while the only way to move a mobile home through our county was to go to a specialty insurer like Lloyds of London and pay a really high premium or at your own risk. Once we had to have four new tractors parked under an awning at our shop repainted because wind born sand literally sandblasted the front of the tractors. In our town when the wind gauge on the local TV read 0 it meant that another anemometer had been blown apart by high winds. Straight line winds of over 60 miles an hour meant that a skilled pilot could fly a Super Cub backwards and an unskilled pilot has not business taking the airplane out of the hanger.

One of the lasting memories that I will never forget is the day when a grass fire got going west of town on a very windy day. The town fire siren kept going off again and again, calling for more volunteers. In the middle of the afternoon, they sent us home from school early with instructions to go straight home and not go to our friends' homes. As I walked the block from the school, I could see the flames at the top of the hill. Firefighters had succeeded in bulldozing a firebreak across the airport and lighting a

back fire that saved the airport buildings and airplanes, but not before the fire had overrun a line of firefighters who survived by running through the fast-moving flames.

High winds and fire are the stuff of which nightmares are made and we've all been watching with bated breath as the flames driven by the Santa Ana winds consume home after home in California.

It was blissfully calm in town yesterday afternoon as I went out to run a few errands for the church. But the winds really came up in the early evening. By the time I was heading to my car to go home a little after 8 pm, the winds were blowing pretty good.

Our home is fairly sheltered by the hills and the trees, but we can tell when the winds get to whipping. Gusts over 40 mph or so will rattle the storm windows on our house, which are just a bit weathered and slightly warped after all of these years. They still fit pretty good, but they'll move just a bit when it is really busy. Once the wind gusts get over 50 mph, there is a whistle in the front door that will occur. I'm pretty sure I know where the weather stripping needs to be replaced, but I haven't gotten around to it. Other than that, our house is amazingly tight and we don't feel the blasts of winds.

But last night, as I stood on my deck for an evening look at the night sky, I noticed a red glow on the clouds to the south. I kept studying the glow, because it seemed unlikely that I was seeing the glow from the Custer State Park fire from such a distance. The edge of that fire is about 30 miles away by road. I'm not sure that I know the straight line distance from our home, but I'm guessing it is 20 or more miles. But I have no other explanation for that troubling red glow on the bottom of the clouds. It certainly is possible that I was watching an effect of a particularly intense blow up of the flames.

The Fire Information web site reported that the fire's activity "has greatly increased due to high wind gusts," just after 7 pm. By 10:30 pm officials were reporting that the fire had grown out of the park boundary to the southeast down Lane Johnny Road toward Highway 79.

For readers who don't know the hills well, the fire is burning away from where we live, not towards it. But we have friends who have a ranch down on Lane Johnny Road right in that area. Fortunately, their buildings are very defensible, out in the open away from the trees with green space all around.

Still the reminders of the intensity of the flames made for a bit of restlessness on my part. I know a lot of firefighters who are likely to be on the fire. High winds can make the smoke do strange things and firefighters can quickly become disoriented. It can be hard to tell where the fire has spotted if you are downwind from the center of the fire because the smoke doesn't go up in the high winds, it goes across the ground.

They had to close Highway 79 and the town of Fairburn was on pre-evacuation notice. That has got to be unsettling for a family from Fairburn with whom I've been working throughout the fall who lost their daughter and their home in a house fire on a windy day at the end of the summer. I wonder if there was any sleep at all for that family last night.

The cold front that is blowing through our area is pretty powerful and there is a high wind warning for our area until noon today. With daylight, the smoke should clear out and give firefighters a chance to assess the size of the fire and make new plans for containment. My guess is that it will have jumped previous fire lines. Hopefully it won't be too windy for the helicopters to fly as soon as the sun comes up.

We don't think of December as fire season in the hills, but this is a year for unusual things. We fared very well during the hot, dry summer months, but the fuels were building up. Today is a day to pray for the safety of the firefighters and hope for a break in the winds.

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## **December 14, 2017 – Gifts of Time**

Yesterday, I was in my office early, before an 8 a.m. meeting. I went through my email and one message contained an attachment that was a Microsoft Word document. I clicked on the attachment to read the document, which launched Microsoft Auto-update, which revealed that there was an update for some of the programs on my computer. I clicked in the appropriate places to install the update, which forced me to close Word. Since the update was taking time, I returned to my email and headed off to my meeting. Later, at the second meeting of my morning, I realized that I had not read the document. Neither had I saved it to a place from which I could access it with my phone or tablet. I had to wait until I got back to the office to read the document. It was, at worst a very minor inconvenience.

This morning, when I woke up my sleeping computer there was a message on the screen about a system update that required the restart of my computer. I decided to install the update. System updates often involve security and affect computer performance. I've learned to keep up with the regular software updates that come, especially in this day of rampant hacking. It was just over 20 minutes before I could get to writing this journal entry.

I don't think that I am naturally a patient person. At least I wasn't very patient as a child. I would become frustrated and angry fairly quickly when told to wait. I have had to work hard to cultivate patience as an adult. Obviously, my job requires patience. Institutions with long histories don't always respond instantly to leadership. It takes time to make changes. A church should not be controlled by a pastor. My role isn't to keep things

moving, but rather to enable the people to respond to God's call. Patience is frequently the name of the game.

And, from a practical point of view, my role in the community frequently requires patience. I need to be able to wait at the hospital when medical procedures take precedence over my visits. I need to be able to wait for the busy schedules of the people I serve. Not all meetings start or end on time. Extending hospitality often means adjusting my schedule to the needs of others.

One of the mental exercises I use when patience is required is to look for gifts of time. I have a very busy schedule and I am often engaged in activities throughout the day. I am rushing from place to place and it seems that I rarely have time for relaxing and creative thought. If, instead of being annoyed with having to wait, I teach myself to react with gratitude for the gift of time, I can live a more joyful life. So when I find myself waiting, I try to start by saying a prayer of gratitude. "Thank you God for this gift of time." I take a few really deep breaths. I sit in a quiet posture. I think of the members of my family one by one, reminding myself of their gifts and challenges.

I have also adopted a rather strange behavior - at least strange to others. I don't want entertainment or distraction when I am waiting. This morning was a nearly perfect environment for me. I could sit upright in my chair in the dim light of my desk lamp and simply meditate. But too often I find myself waiting in public waiting areas and nearly every public waiting area in our community has a television dominating the space. With the 24/7 news cycle, more often than not the television is trying to command our attention and bend our minds to a particular point of view.

So I look around. If I am alone in a waiting area and can figure out how to do it, I turn off the television. If there are others, I ask if they would mind if I did so. Sometimes the others are relieved to have the television turned off. Almost all of the time, others will agree to having the volume turned down a bit. When I cannot turn off or turn down the television, I will adjust the furniture in the room so that some of it faces away from the screen.

Increasingly, I find that people carry personal screens with themselves and are used to using their phones or tablets when they are waiting. They appreciate it when the large screen hanging on the wall doesn't distract them from their emails or facebook or other smartphone applications.

There are plenty of waiting areas where it is not possible to adjust the television or to move the furniture. In those places, I make sure to comment on how intrusive the television is to the attendant or greeter in the room. It probably makes no difference, other than to make the person think I'm eccentric, but it seems to help me to deal with the situation when I feel that I have contributed to making the space a little bit quieter and more conducive to receiving the gift of time.

We don't have to accept the demands of our media-filled world. We don't have to whip out our smart phones every time we are asked to wait. We don't have to be entertained every moment of the day. I am well aware that I can't and shouldn't tell others how to invest their time, but I choose to have a bit more quiet and a bit more reflection in my day. When I am feeling impatient it is often because I need an adjustment in my attitude. I quickly fall into the sin of pride, thinking that my time is more important than the time of others. I forget that the world does not owe me anything - much less owe me entertainment to fill up every minute of my day.

So if you are in charge of a waiting room and you have left out the remote control for people to change the channel on the television, don't be surprised when I choose to use it to turn off the device. It is possible that I gain a bit of joy from annoying those who think that televisions should be on whenever there is anyone in the room.

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## **December 15, 2017 – The Middle of Advent**

At the core of our faith is the mystery of a new beginning emerging from what appears to be death. There could be different imagery for the season of Advent coming from the southern hemisphere, but the roots of Christian Advent traditions lie in the north country. It is, for those of us who live in the north, a season of waiting that takes place as the days shorten, the nights lengthen, the trees stand leafless and the ground is frozen. Symbolically, we wait for the return of the light to our earth.

A beloved Advent hymn, translated from the original Spanish proclaims, "All earth is waiting to see the Promised One." Indeed all earth is waiting. You can see it by paying attention to the world around us.

Here there are all kinds of signs that the earth is waiting. The grass is brown. The birds are eating to pack on more and more layers of fat. Our summer birds have left and will wait until spring to return. The turtle is buried in the mud awaiting the return of warmth to the water. The ice is spreading across the lake. The insects are hiding and waiting. Hope is there, but it is delayed.

It is an even stranger season this particular year. Though we are finally seeing some cold nights, we still are having fairly regular mid days highs that are uncomfortably warm. The duff in the forest has no snow and the ground is crackly dry. Fire is gobbling away at our beloved forested hillsides and open prairie. Our biggest fires aren't supposed to be a December phenomenon. But the fire has now covered more than 84 square miles. Crews are making progress but the end is still uncertain. It is probably only a little over half contained.

The hills are waiting for snow. They are crying out for moisture of any kind. They are longing to be covered with the white blanket and to sit beneath the drifts for a while.

Ah, but the mystery is that things don't happen the way we imagine. Sometimes we can't even see the signs of new life because we become focused on what appears to be dead and lifeless. We see the black burn scar and fail to recognize the new shoots emerging.

If you listen to the earth, however, you will learn that the dark is not an end, but a door. The bear is hibernating, but she is also bringing forth new cubs in her slumber. The squirrel packed away nuts for the cold, but also planted new trees for future generations. The fire is consuming over abundant fuels and making space for new growth and a more diverse forest.

This is the way that new beginning comes.

The earth proclaims Advent. Are we ready for the coming of the Messiah?

As certainly as we shiver against the cold winds that swirl around us, trying to hang on to every bit of metabolic heat that we can muster, we cling to hope against the blasts of despair. So much in the news, so much in the stories of our people, so much in the lives of those we serve works to pull us toward the darkness of despair that we shudder at the coldness and cruelty of our human systems. We curse at the politicians. We despair at their failures of courage. We forget that it is precisely into this world with all of its troubles and trials that God comes to meet us face to face.

We need Advent every year to remind us that Emmanuel - God with us - is not some ancient concept, but a present reality. We need Advent every year to practice looking for light in the season of darkness. We need Advent every year to teach us to welcome the mystery.

Do we have the courage to wait?

This is my panic time. The lists of undone tasks threaten to overwhelm me. Two bulletins for this week's worship. Three for next week's. And additional one for the 1st Sunday of Christmas. And there are sets to construct and lights to arrange and music to practice and readers to recruit and members to visit and communion to be prepared and sermons to be written and meetings to attend.

I stay nearly as busy in my private life, cluttering it with presents to purchase and wrap and meals to prepare and bags to pack and cards to address and chores to complete and errands to run and people to greet. Would the party go on with out me? I don't want to find out. I fear missing out as much as the next person.

This is the theme of Advent. It is also the core of our faith. New beginnings emerge from what we believe to be death. We won't fully comprehend the truth of this reality in the season of Advent alone. Even when Christmas and Epiphany and Lent and Easter have come and gone, we will not truly understand the depth of God's mystery.

Mystery is not to be fully understood, but rather to be enjoyed and explored and engaged. In the game of life it is acceptable to not have all of the answers.

In the traditions of our people Advent was meant to be a long season. Even after our people shortened it from six weeks to four, the season of fasting was too long for those who fully accepted its disciplines. In the midst of the season comes Gaudete Sunday, which boldly cries for us to rejoice and then rejoice again. In the midst of the fasting of preparing comes the feast of irrepressible joy. Breathe deeply and eat a sweet to remind yourself that there is still much sweetness in this life. Take a drop of honey on the tip of your tongue to remind you of the sweetness of other people and of the story we share and of the hope in which we live.

I am beginning to learn to slow down and enjoy Advent, though it is a challenge and a discipline. There is no need to rush. With the bear and the turtle and the insects we do well to wait.

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## **December 16, 2017 – Nativity Scenes**

According to tradition, Saint Francis of Assisi was concerned about the secular emphasis on materialism and gift giving, especially during the celebration of Christmas. He wanted to teach the people he served about the deeper meanings of Christmas. In 1223, he created a nativity scene, featuring the infant Jesus, his mother Mary and her husband Joseph. The tradition of creating nativity scenes, also known as manger scenes, crib, or creche, is well established in the church. Our congregation has a large collection of nativity scenes with enough to display at least one in nearly every room. There is a large scene in the entryway of our church, another on the communion table, more in the fellowship hall and a number of special scenes designed for children to move and play with the figures as they are told or participate in telling the story. It has become a staple of teaching the story of Jesus' birth among Christian educators.

Distinctive nativity scenes have been created around the world, often with shepherds, wise men, and lots of different animals. Sheep are common accessories, accompanying the shepherds. A donkey and sometimes an ox are included. Camels are included as the mode of travel for the wise men. Several cultures add animals and people that are not mentioned in the Bible such as boys with drums, local animals, and other characters.

Saint Francis's scene, however, was quite simple and featured live actors standing still in a sort of tableau or pantomime, without a script or spoken words. Other communities picked up on Francis' example and living nativity scenes were staged across the Roman Catholic world over the next centuries.

Living nativity scenes are still very popular and are staged in many congregations around the world. Our church has a tradition of a modified living nativity scene for one of its Christmas Eve services. Many years ago, the tradition began to stage a live nativity scene with characters entering as the Christmas story was told. A script was developed and used and modified over the years, based primarily on the birth narrative from the Gospel of Luke and the visit of the wise men from the Gospel of Matthew. At some point, exactly when is not clear, church leaders worked with a rancher to have a couple of baby sheep for the scene. It has been nearly 30 years since there were lambs available for the scene, but people still remember those lambs and wistfully tell the story, wishing that the lambs could be brought back. Twenty years ago I made an effort to find a ranch that could have lambs available in December. I was unsuccessful. I admit that growing up in a family that raised donkeys and tried to supply a donkey colt for Palm Sunday pageants, I was a bit less than enthusiastic about animals in the church, but I did make a careful search and spoke with several ranchers. One offered to breed a ewe to produce the lambs on time, but his ranch is nearly 80 miles from our church and the logistics of borrowing lambs, keeping them overnight and returning them the next day were, at best, challenging.

My colleague, Rev. Michael Caine, pastor of Old First Reformed United Church of Christ in Philadelphia inherited a very strong tradition of a living nativity. His congregation, founded by German immigrants in 1727, has been a part of Philadelphia for 270 years, so the scene isn't exactly ancient history in the church, but they've been staging an outdoor living nativity scene since 1972. Becoming pastor and teacher of that particular congregation meant embracing the living nativity scene and helping the congregation to stage their annual outdoor festival.



Michael didn't study animal husbandry in college or seminary. He has no particular agricultural background. But traditions are traditions and so he participated as his congregation erected the wood beam stable and filled the fenced in area with fresh hay. He watched as the sheep arrived and Stormy, a 7-year-old Hereford was added to the scene early on Thursday morning. Stormy, however, wasn't a practiced actor. She may also have been offended that they were asking her to portray the part of an ox. She's a pure bred Hereford, after all. Anyway, by 2:30 in the afternoon, she had had enough and simply broke through the temporary fence and went on a walk about. Church leaders, including Rev. Caine, were unable to stop the wandering cow, who eventually made her way onto Interstate 95, where she was eventually boxed in by Highway Patrol cruisers. A patrolman, who is also a rancher succeeded in putting a bridle on her and eventually coaxing her into a horse trailer. She was returned to the scene, where she waited for about 4 hours before making her next escape attempt. This time she headed to a nearby parking garage causing significant traffic delays in the rush hour traffic. Her owner succeeded in getting a lead on her and getting her back into the enclosure for a bit of rest, hay and water before she was relieved of her acting duties and replaced by Ginger, a smaller cow who has shown no signs of desiring to escape.

The church web site is pleased to report that Stormy is safely at home and has not been injured by her adventures. She is still getting attention on Twitter and in other social media.

It certainly resulted in a lot of press for Old Reformed United Church of Christ. Time will tell if it results in an increase in attendance. So far the stories have focused on the cow and not the birth of the Christ child. On the other hand, they have distracted some from the usual Christmas culture of buy, buy, buy. If Saint Francis' intention was to divert attention away from commercialism and gift giving, perhaps Stormy played a small part in the education of the public.

Of course, there is no way that an impoverished couple, who witnessed the birth of their first born son in the public room of a common home would have had enough money to have a cow. It is possible that there was an old donkey, probably tied up outdoors, but our imaginations have created many different visions of the nativity scene.

For quite a few Philadelphians thinking of the nativity will forever more bring to mind the vision of a 1,600 pound red and white Hereford cow.

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## **December 17, 2017 – Gaudete Sunday 2017**

The celebration of Christmas was added to the calendar of the ancient church in part because of its success. During the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine the Christian church became recognized under Roman law. This resulted in a period of rapid growth for the church. The prior tradition of six weeks of lent as a time of fasting and preparation for joining the church on Easter Sunday was being flooded with converts. Church officials couldn't handle the numbers of people who wanted to join the church. So a second season for membership was added. Pope Julius I officially declared the birth of Jesus would be celebrated on the 25th of December and a new season of preparation for membership in the church was created and named Advent.

Six weeks of prayer and fasting is a long time, and was a bit less than popular as the years went by. While Lent remained at six weeks, the season of Advent was eventually shortened to four weeks.

Another ancient tradition of the season remains. The third week of Advent, which used to be closer to the middle of the season, remains as Gaudete Sunday. It is a feast day in the midst of a season of fasting. The name comes from the Readings that command believers to rejoice. Philippians 4:4 says, "Rejoice in the Lord always." The tradition is rooted in the ancient rites of preparation for membership in the church. The six weeks were arranged to tell the entire story of the Christian faith from the Creation through the Exodus and prophets all the way to the death and resurrection of Jesus. This was deemed to be essential instruction for anyone who wanted to become a member of the church. When the instructors got to the miracles and wonders performed by Jesus, there was a lifting of the mood of those being instructed. They had arrived at the reasons they wanted to become members of the church. A celebration was allowed to emphasize the great wonders and to provide sustenance for the remaining weeks of fasting in preparation for joining.

Not much of that mood remains in our contemporary church. Advent celebrations tend to focus on the coming of Jesus and are filled with more joy than fasting. Our homes and churches fill up with all kinds of sweets and Christmas goodies long before the day of Christmas and we indulge without reservation. In the popular culture outside of the church, there is no distinction between Advent and Christmas. The season between Thanksgiving and Christmas is a continual stream of Christmas carols, Christmas decorations and Christmas gift buying, all of which stops abruptly after Christmas day. Inside the church, we sing a few Advent carols, usually set in a minor key, sometimes to the dismay of the congregation eager to sing Christmas Carols. We also celebrate Christmas for 12 days ending with the fest of Epiphany on January 6. However, the ancient tradition of prayer and fasting and instruction has largely been forgotten in the flow of the church. We receive members at the convenience of the new members, not according to the schedule of the church.

In our congregation about the only recognition of Gaudete Sunday is that the candle for the third Sunday of Advent is rose colored instead of purple. And the knowledge of why this is is not common among our people. This year, when the Altar Guild set up the Advent wreath, the pink candle was placed in the fourth position. When I went in to see the work that the group had done setting up the sanctuary, I quietly switched the position of the candles. It was no big deal at all.

And we have another tradition in our church, recently begun, of celebrating Blue Christmas on the third Sunday of Advent. Blue Christmas is a special service that acknowledges that the holiday season is a particular challenge for those who are grieving. Holiday celebrations are reminders of loved ones who have died, and for some people, reminders of particular problems or tensions in family life. The season is not filled with joy for all people. Acknowledging that, we have a special service designed for those who grieve and those who support them. The hymns are a bit more somber and reflective. The prayers acknowledge the reality of the pain of grief. There is quiet time for personal reflection and an opportunity to light candles and name those for whom we grieve. It is a small service with only a handful of people, but deeply meaningful for those who participate.

It may be that the timing of our Blue Christmas service is mostly based on convenience. The tradition of placing Blue Christmas on the night of the winter solstice, which is the longest night of the year, doesn't work well in the timing of our church calendar. It simply made more sense to us to hold the service on a Sunday. The timing of Christmas has its origins in earlier solstice celebrations. The variation between the actual day of solstice, December 21, and Christmas day, December 25, is likely due to variations in calendars over the years.

Celebrating Blue Christmas on Gaudete Sunday, however, makes sense to us because we are deeply aware of how the tears of joy and the tears of sorrow often mingle in our lives. Our memories can bring us both joy and sadness. Our emotions are frequently mixed. Yesterday, I met with a support group. There were some very sad stories told. The tissues were dispensed freely as tears rolled down cheeks. But the room also erupted in laughter several times. It is the way we grieve. We are genially hurt by the pain of loss at the same time as we are genuinely lifted by our joyous memories. We carry multiple truths in our hearts and minds and multiple emotions in our singular lives.

So may this be a day of joy for you. I wish you the deep joy that acknowledges the presence of real sorrow and persists despite loss.

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## December 18, 2017 – Trying to Understand

I have enjoyed many privileges in my life, many of which are unearned. One of those privileges is that I have always had a job. When I was growing up there always was work in my father's business. I swept floors, assembled machinery, drove truck, delivered parts and machinery, and had a number of different jobs. I was allowed to work alongside seasoned employees who knew how to get jobs done. When I went away to college, I knew that I could have a summer job back home if I wanted one. The first time I decided not to come home for a summer job was the year I got married and for a while in the spring, I wondered about what summer job I would find. I filled out lots of applications. I attended a hiring fair for drivers of ice cream trucks, which seemed like a pretty good summer job until I realized how much risk the owners wanted their contract employees to assume. I ended up getting a very good job at a large bakery and earning a good summer wage.

Throughout my educational career I was successful at finding part-time employment. I worked as a librarian, a janitor, a furniture repair person and several other jobs before finding excellent internships and opportunities to serve congregations as I completed my preparation for ordination.

I had a call to a church when, at 25 years of age, I was ordained. I have never experienced unemployment from that moment. I have gone directly from job to job without ever missing a paycheck for my entire career.

It should come to no surprise to anyone, then, that I don't understand the culture of unemployment. I live in a community with virtually no practical unemployment. The official unemployment rate is 2.4%, but if you figure in the number of persons who have disabilities that prevent employment, the number of people who have mental illnesses, and the number of people who are severely incapacitated by addiction, virtually everyone who is seeking employment can obtain a job. Not all of those jobs are good jobs, however. Minimum wage work in our community is insufficient to make rent and groceries. We have a number of people who are homeless while being employed full time.

But things are different if we expand our neighborhood to include some of the counties not far from ours. Oglala Lakota County, where the Pine Ridge Reservation is located has an unemployment rate that vacillates from 85% to 95%. 97% of the population of the Reservation live below the federal poverty line. Unemployment is systemic and generational. Children grow up learning not to expect being able to find a job. Families live in perpetual crisis.

While I have compassion for my neighbors, I don't fully understand their circumstances. I understand attachment to family and place a little bit. I've always considered myself to be a Montanan although I haven't lived in Montana since I was 21 years old. I enjoy

returning to the place where I grew up. But my vocation has always demanded that I be able to move where I am called. So my response to the high unemployment on the Reservation is to wonder why people don't move off of the reservation. While there are no jobs in Pine Ridge, there are plenty of jobs in 'Rapid City, just 100 miles away. Housing is a problem in Rapid City and the commute is too far, but it seems like it might be worth leaving. However, my solution is not a solution to many people, who have obligations and connections to family, culture and place.

Even after many years of living and working with neighbors from that area, I am still surprised by the constant state of crisis in which people live. It seems like everything is a crisis. For example, a family that has been supported by our congregation with firewood seems to lack the capacity to anticipate their needs. We never hear that they are running short of wood until they have been without for a few days and are trying to heat their home by turning on the oven and leaving the oven door open, which never works. It seems like they don't even start to look for a better way to keep their home warm until it is completely cold and they are huddled beneath blankets. I rarely have any contact with them until an absolute crisis.

Another person with whom I have been associated for some time dropped by mid week last week in need of food. He was down to \$3 and won't get paid until January 1. I understand that his wages are very low. I get it that rent and groceries are expensive. What I don't quite understand is how he gets down to no groceries in the house at all and only \$3 in his wallet with nearly two weeks left until payday. It seems like the crisis was evident much earlier. By the time he talks to me, he is out of options for support. Fortunately, food is fairly easy to obtain in our community. I guess he knows that. Rent support is very hard to obtain. Help with utilities can sometimes be found, but is a challenge. Food and clothing are probably the easiest things to come by, so they become lower priorities for a limited paycheck. For some people asking for help is a survival skill and they learn what kinds of help they are most likely to obtain. For this particular person, keeping his cell phone is more important than having grocery money. His cell phone is a tool to get food.

I work with a lot of people who, like me, are very privileged and comfortable. One part of my job is to inspire those who have much to share and to enable those who are comfortable to express their compassion. But that can be difficult when I don't really understand the nature of poverty, especially poverty that is generationally entrenched. I have never lived that lifestyle. My suggestions often don't make any sense to those who are in need. When I imagine myself in their situation, I imagine making different decisions than they make.

In this season of generosity, I discover that I still have much to learn.

## December 19, 2017 – Welcome Home

In addition to the traditional Christmas Carols that we love to sing in church, this is also the season of a whole lot of pop songs about the season. “I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas,” “Jingle Bell Rock,” “I Saw Mama Kissing Santa Claus,” and a whole lot of other songs are on the radio, being played in shops and over public sound systems, and generally surrounding us wherever we go. For some reason, I’ve had Perry Como’s “There’s No Place Like Home for the Holidays,” in my head for the past couple of days.

I remember when traveling home for the holidays was an important part of my life. When I was in college the trip was pretty short - about 80 miles - and I generally made it home for Thanksgiving and for Christmas break. Then, when we moved to Chicago for graduate school we continued with the practice, the trip being a lot longer. Our first winter in Chicago, we drove our car home - 1340 miles each way. In the days of the 55 mph speed limit, we spent six days of our vacation driving. The next winter, we rode the train back and forth and brought with us friends - a family of four - to share the fun of winter in Montana. In addition to attending our home church and visiting with family, we took a winter trip into Yellowstone Park and a snowmobile trip up into the mountains.

Even after we were established in our career and living in North Dakota, Christmas often meant a trip to Montana to visit family. We would get through all of the Christmas Eve services and then travel, sometimes on Christmas day, to get home to celebrate with our families.

Time passes and things are different. Our parents are no longer living. The houses where we used to go have been sold to other owners. Even our own children have grown up and established their homes and moved beyond the point of coming to our house for the holidays. We still occasionally gather some of our family in our home at Christmas, but we are more likely to travel to be with our children in their homes. We’re a bit more mobile than a family with three children.

Home no longer is a specific place for me. I grew up in Montana and I love that part of the country. I have two sisters and a brother who live in that state. But we have lived in this house for longer than I have lived in any other house in my lifetime. The Hills are really home to me in so many ways and we have memories of a lot of very meaningful holidays spent in this place. The traditions of our congregation for Christmas Eve worship are deeply imbedded in my sense of how the holidays should be celebrated. So, in a very real sense, this is home.

Being pastors, we’ve fallen into a tradition of traveling after Christmas more often than being somewhere else on Christmas. This year our plan is to travel on Christmas day to be with our son and his family in Washington.

So we really took notice when the train failed to make the curve and derailed sending train cars down to Interstate 5 just north of Nisqually, WA, yesterday. Our son and his family lived in Olympia, WA for several years and the place where the wreck occurred is very familiar to us, just around the bend from a campground where we have stayed. When our son worked at the corporate offices of Providence Healthcare, he drove under that bridge going each way - often at about the same time as yesterday's accident. The hospital that treated the majority of those injured in the accident is just a block from their home and our son had an office in that hospital.

But that isn't home to our son and his family any more. Last year was their last Christmas in Olympia. They've moved north to another town, he has a new job, and this will be their first Christmas in a home that is new to them. We are looking forward to visiting that house for the first time.

What I am realizing, and perhaps it takes a few years to learn, is that home isn't really a specific place. Although place is important and we do get attached to locations, what makes home what it is are the relationships that are critical to us. We are at home wherever we gather with those we love. Our daughter and her husband have lived in three different countries on three different continents and are teaching us some of the wonder and joy of being able to move freely around the world. Home to them is Japan this year and last. They'll probably spend another three Christmas seasons in Japan and we'll visit them there, though not likely at Christmas. They are doing a wonderful place of making Japan their home for this phase of their lives.

Even the old song acknowledges that home is different places for different people.

But there are many people who feel a bit lost during the holidays. They are unsure of where they will hear the words, "Welcome home!" A record 65million people have been forced to leave their homes and are refugees according to the United Nations. This Christmas, as was the case last year, there are more people than ever before who are not able to go home for the holidays. In fact they may never be able to go home again. While a few of these refugees receive welcome in various countries around the world, many are stuck in temporary housing in camps and other less than ideal conditions.

There are others who are feeling lost for a wide variety of reasons. Some have experienced the death of loved ones in the past year. Some have been disoriented by the loss of jobs. Some suffer from illness and have their sense of security threatened.

Many are lost and struggling to find their way home. How we treat those who are feeling lost may be the most important part of the holidays. May we find the grace to open our hearts and say, "Welcome home!"

## December 20, 2017 – Emmanuel

One of the most familiar and popular Advent carols is “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” Our version of the hymn is a translation of the traditional Latin hymn, *Veni, Veni, Emmanuel* that entered the English lexicon in the book, *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, published in 1861. Throughout English-speaking Christianity, the most common pronunciation is with a long E as suggested by the spelling *Emmanuel*, but that word is a romanized version of a more ancient Hebrew word, *עִמָּנוּאֵל*, pronounced with a softer opening vowel sound, *Immanuel*. It means “God with us,” and is applied to the Jewish Messiah and to Jesus Christ.

The Gospel of Matthew, after telling the genealogy of Jesus from Abraham through David to Joseph, cites a Greek version of the prophet Isaiah to claim that Jesus is the son of God. The citation is a reference to the seventh and eighth chapters of Isaiah, in which three children with symbolic names bring restoration to Israel after the kingdom of Israel is overthrown by the Assyrians. The reference is a bit obscure for a first-time reader of the Bible, but it was undoubtedly clear to faithful Jews hearing Matthew’s gospel in the first Century. It is a definite claim that Jesus was the son of God from the very beginning. Jesus was born as God’s son and was in the form of God from the very beginning.

That faith - that Jesus is God in human form - is at the core of our Christmas celebration.

It is no stretch for me to believe in “God with us.” I need no miracle different from the miracle of human birth. I held our son within minutes after his birth. There was no question about the presence of God. There was no doubt about the miracle of birth. My first time to hold our daughter came later, just two days shy of a month after her birth. It was, without a doubt, as impressive an experience. I had to force my arms to quit shaking in order to hold her.

And there have been many other babies. As a minister I frequently am blessed to hold babies who are presented for baptism. I am frequently allowed to hold the children of church members and friends. I held all three of our grandchildren as soon as I was able, one within hours of her birth.

It doesn’t take more evidence to convince me that God comes to us in human form. I accept this truth without reservation.

We have more trouble remembering that God is present in every human life when we encounter older human beings. The author, LZ Granderson wrote, “Children may be born angels, but with all the temptations out there in the world, it takes work to try to keep them that way.” I wouldn’t say it quite the way that he does. I don’t think that the divine presence in a human being somehow disappears. I realize that human behavior

is often less than divine, but God's presence isn't what changes as they become wounded and are led to harmful decisions.

Seeing the divine in the people we meet everyday is, however, a definite challenge.

Saint Patrick challenged his followers to go even farther:

“Christ with me,  
Christ before me,  
Christ behind me,  
Christ in me,  
Christ beneath me,  
Christ above me,  
Christ on my right,  
Christ on my left,  
Christ when I lie down,  
Christ when I sit down,  
Christ when I arise,  
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,  
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,  
Christ in every eye that sees me,  
Christ in every ear that hears me.”

Christianity proclaims that God is not distant and far away, but personal and closely engaged in human relationships. This reality challenges us and our faith for the simple reason that human relationships are messy and don't always reflect the way we want to think about God.

Not long ago, I was trying to help someone who was in fairly desperate circumstances. I wasn't able to solve the problem, only to make a small gift towards the immediate solution. The person I was trying to help was convinced that I could do more and became angry and a bit verbally abusive. I wasn't threatened or afraid, but disappointed that there was no sign of gratitude expressed. I was in danger of failing to see the other as a blessing and wishing that I had not done anything. It took a little time and a bit of reflection for me to remember that each encounter with another is an encounter with God's presence in the world.

My work brings me not only into contact with people at some of the best moments of their lives, but also at some of the worst. I see our human flaws demonstrated again and again. I don't confuse human pettiness and greed and violence with actions of God. I know that there are terrible things present in the real world.

The miracle of Christmas, however, is that God doesn't remain distance from the messiness of human experience. When evil is present, God is not absent. When

tragedy overwhelms, God hasn't abandoned us. When we don't notice God's presence, it doesn't mean that God is absent.

Immanuel isn't just the truth of birth and babies and the miracles of love. It is also the truth of grief and loss and unimaginable pain. But it can be harder to recognize in the midst of times of crisis.

So we practice Advent every year - over and over again. Because we need to learn how to look for God's presence. It is a skill we will need when we face pain and sorrow and loss. In those moments we will need to have our sense of Christ's presence practiced and refined so that we will recognize God in the midst of pressure and human messiness. Our Advent hymn is not just a pretty carol that is sung in this season of the year. It is an expression of our deepest longing: "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel!"

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## **December 21, 2017 – Telling the Christmas Story**

Yesterday I was discussing the birth of Jesus with friends. The truth is that we don't have very much information at all. The Gospel of Luke tells us surprisingly little about his parents. We read that Mary was a virgin and that she was betrothed to Joseph. The Gospel of Matthew traces Jesus' genealogy through Joseph back to Abraham and Sarah. The Gospel of Luke traces it through Mary all the way to Adam and Eve with some notable women in the lineage. We don't even know much about where Jesus was born. Both Mark and John are silent on the subject. Matthew and Luke name Bethlehem as the place. Luke records that the infant was laid in a manger because there was no room in the inn, but doesn't specify exactly what the inn was other than using the same word as is used later in the gospel to describe the upper room where Jesus and his disciples shared the last supper.

An ancient Christian document that is not in our bible, the Protevangelium of James, is known as an apocryphal book. It is attributed to James the brother of Jesus, but probably actually written sometime in the latter half of the second century. It tells stories of the infant Jesus, which are not told in the New Testament. It claims that Jesus was not born in Bethlehem, but rather somewhere in the desert between Bethlehem and Jerusalem. In that story, Joseph leaves Mary and returns with a midwife who assists with the birth.

Most Christians are surprised to learn that there is also a story of the birth of Jesus in the Quran, the holy book of Muslims. Islam's scripture holds Jesus and Mary in high regard and urges believers to show adoration for both. That report tells of the Annunciation, when Gabriel tells Mary she will give birth to Jesus, in a manner that is very similar to the Gospel of Luke. When it comes time for the baby to be born, the Quran says Mary withdrew to a distant place and describes a scene that is not

described in Christian texts with Mary at the base of a date palm, where she is sustained by the dates and a stream of healing water. Another ancient document, "The Infancy Gospel of Matthew," also depicts Mary eating from a palm tree and drinking from a miraculous spring. In that book, however, the event doesn't occur at the birth of Jesus, but years later.

Even the best scholars who read multiple ancient languages and have access to the most complete libraries of early documents, have little more information to add about the birth of Jesus. The popularity of Christmas as a religious holiday didn't arise until at least the third century and Nativity scenes weren't staged until the 1200's.

For most of us, the celebration of Christmas isn't based on extensive knowledge. We don't have a story, complete with all of the details. We have formed images in our minds that may vary in some aspects from what actually occurred. But we delight in telling the story. Years ago I memorized the first twenty verses of Luke 2. I recite them multiple times every Christmas. The simple story of Mary giving birth to her first-born son and wrapping him in swaddling cloths and laying him in a manger is beautiful in its ability to carry the story without a lot of details. We sing with our children, "But little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes," without any reason to believe that detail other than whether or not or when the baby cried simply is not a part of the stories we know. One suspects that the infant, like all infants, used his lungs and voice to signal his need of attention from time to time. But we don't need to discuss that particular detail in order to tell the story.

We read in Luke's gospel that the baby was wrapped in swaddling cloths. Swaddling is a very ancient practice of tightly wrapping an infant. It has long been believed that wrapping an infant tightly helps it transition from life within the womb to the outside world. The cloths were simple bands of soft cloth, not really clothes with a particular shape. The cloths are mentioned by Luke not only in his description of the birth, but also in the angel's announcement to the shepherds. Finding a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger is a sign to the shepherds that they have found the messiah. And the story of the shepherds concludes by declaring that what they heard and saw was "as it had been told them."

If you simply read the narrative from the Gospel of Luke, the story is over in less than 5 minutes. It is simple and short and to the point. We expand the telling of the story in our pageants to include many things from our imaginations. Some of those details come more from our imaginations than from the actual words of the text. Our parents have grown to include Roman soldiers to announce the decree from Caesar Augustus and an innkeeper who refused the holy family lodging. We add a drummer boy to the shepherds' visit, though there is no mention of any of these characters. We imagine animals that may or may not have been present. We collapse the birth of Jesus and the visit of the Magi into a single scene as if shepherds and wisemen were together at the same time around the manger where the child lay. The manger, by the way, is not mentioned in the story of the visit of the wisemen, only in the single sentence in Luke's

narrative. It is worth noting that in Matthew's version, the wise men "go into the house" to see the baby as opposed to an outbuilding such as a stable or cave.

Our imaginations are essential to our celebration of Christmas. It is good to study and become familiar with the actual texts, but our celebrations invite us to go beyond words on paper. And if our story doesn't quite fit together neatly, we can always return to the simple beauty of the Gospel narrative and soon our imaginations will soar again.

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## **December 22, 2017 – About those Bell Ringers**

I've been trying to figure out the Salvation Army bell ringers this year. Well, I've been thinking about them. I haven't done any research or called to inquire or anything that would produce accurate information. What I have noticed is that they began early this year. There were bell ringers out in front of the grocery store before Thanksgiving. And it seems like they are working shorter hours. If I stop by the store on my way home after work, the ringer is gone and only a lonely pole stands waiting for the next day. I've been busy, but it almost seems as if they haven't been very visible even during the day in the last week. You'd think that the week before Christmas would be a big time for the charity, but I made a quick stop at a grocery store in the middle of the day yesterday and there was no one ringing the bell out front.

I've never quite understood the phenomenon of the bell ringers in the first place.

The Salvation Army is a responsible charity. They don't spend their money on excessive administration or wasteful buildings. They help people with the money they receive. There have been a few missteps. One year, when the charity received an especially large bequest from a wealthy family they proposed some improvements to housing for their officers and a local camp in the hills and they received some criticism. I don't think it affected holiday giving, but I don't know for sure.

Usually the Salvation Army receives solid support from others in our community. You can see members of local service clubs taking a Saturday to ring the bell. In addition to building up donations by their visibility, I'm pretty sure the groups are themselves generous. Years ago, I volunteered to ring the bell as a member of a local service club. We were covering several locations and got a bit of competition to see who would raise the most money. We assisted our own efforts by making donations to increase the amount raised. It was all good-nature fun for a good cause.

I have long wondered about how efficient it is to employ that particular method of raising money. The pots are designed to accept coins. The idea is that everyone can spare a bit of loose change and when everyone contributes it adds up to real good in the

community. Many small donors instead of a few large donors. I guess it works for the Salvation Army.

I think that sometimes the Army actually provides a bit of income for people in need by paying them to ring the bell. I don't really know the practice, but I see ringers being delivered to their posts in Salvation Army vans. Ringers are often people that I don't know, which means very little in our community with lots of people coming and going all the time. If they are helping someone with a job, that is a good thing, but one would think that such a practice would raise less money than staffing the kettles with volunteers.

What I mostly don't understand is the practice of using public places, such as entryways to retail stores as the point of appeal. I support a lot of charities that do a lot of good work. Some have fund-raising dinners and even breakfasts where they make their appeal to folks to participate. Some assemble mailing lists and appeal with carefully crafted letters. Our church passes the plate as a part of worship and emphasizes how giving of one's financial resources is a way of praising God - an act of worship. Most of the groups that I support establish a sense of their own membership and contingent of supporters and appeal to them to provide the financial resources for them to accomplish their mission. The Salvation Army appeals to the general public to support their work.

The church I serve has been engaged in mission and outreach in this community for 140 years. We have never, to my knowledge, made an appeal to folks outside of our church to support our mission and ministry. We fund it ourselves from the generosity of our members. That seems quite different from standing in front of a retail business and asking the general public to fund our ventures.

The Salvation Army seems to make a distinction between its church and its charities that is not present in our congregation. The Army is an evangelical outreach organization with its own theology and doctrine. It does not practice sacraments, but is unapologetic about its intention of advancing Christianity.

In our community, the number of people who actually don the uniforms and assume membership in the church is relatively small. Their impact in terms of providing services to those in need is very large. You have to admire the good work that they do.

Still, the practice of the kettle seems so much like begging that sometimes it takes on the appearance of pan handling on the street corner. And, it is possible that the actual amount of money that I donate to the kettles each year is less than I give to pan handlers on the street. I don't keep records of all of the small donations I make. What I do know is that the largest percentage of my giving is planned and not impulsive. I make a plan of giving to the church and fill out a pledge card and honor my commitment. The pan handlers and the Salvation Army get the change I'm carrying in my pockets. It may add up a little, but it isn't a significant contribution on my part.

Perhaps I should learn a bit more about those red kettles and the bells that chime in front of the stores. I wonder if their strategy was different this year - starting and ending early. I wonder if they are moving away from volunteers to more paid attendants. But I don't really know.

In the meantime, I don't think it is a fund-raising technique that our congregation is inclined to imitate.

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### **December 23, 2017 – In Bethlehem**

O little town of Bethlehem,  
how still we see thee lie;  
above thy deep and dreamless sleep  
the silent stars go by.  
Yet in they dark streets shineth  
the everlasting light;  
the hopes and fears of all the years  
are met in thee tonight.

Where would we start our tour of the little town?

A tourist entering the town today would go through the checkpoint. Pedestrians line up and pass through between the concrete wall and an eight-foot tall fence as they await their turn in the screening area. cars inch towards the opening in the wall next to the tall round tower with the guard post at the top. Armed guards stand next to their armored vehicles, ever alert to any sign of trouble.

The troubles have been sporadic in Bethlehem, West Bank, with protestors clashing with Israeli forces near the checkpoint. It was an uneven battle, with no shots fired, just tear gas canisters streaming towards rock-throwing protestors. The rocks don't cause much damage to the armored vehicles.

Just a few days before Christmas, there is plenty of room in the Inn, if by the Inn you mean the luxury Jacir Palace Hotel. There is a Christmas tree inside the doorway, but inside the management is mulling whether to reopen or remain closed for the holidays, normally one of the busiest periods for the hotel. The intermittent clashes between Palestinians and Israeli forces seem to frequent the space right outside of the hotel.

Bethlehem is like the rest of the Palestinian territories this Christmas, suspended in a kind of limbo. Residents are neither basking in seasonal cheer nor raging in the throes of a new intifada. The mood might be described as one of hopeless resignation.

Even when there is a respite from protests, the residue of tear gas hangs outside of the Inn. If you spend time out there, within sight of the 26 foot tall wall separating the West Bank from Jerusalem, your eyes will itch and you will start sneezing. You could probably find a used stun grenade lying in the street.

There are no guests in the hotel and most of the staff have been sent home. It is uncertain whether or not the one scheduled group will arrive. The hotel is set up to receive guests through a side entrance if there are riots going on at the time the bus arrives.

Frankly, the protestors seem to lack enthusiasm. They have become burned out by action after action that yields no results. Many Palestinians now view the confrontations with Israeli soldiers as pointless. They know they lack the power to do anything meaningful about President Trump's declaration of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. That won't be reversed by any actions they might take. Those who are lucky enough to have jobs don't want to lose their livelihoods. Those struggling to make ends meet have more immediate concerns than throwing stones at well protected Israeli soldiers.

How silently, how silently,  
the wondrous gift is given;  
so God imparts to human hearts  
the blessings of his heaven.  
No ear may hear his coming,  
but in this world of sin,  
where meek should will receive him, still  
the dear Christ enters in.

In Manger Square, near the Church of the Nativity, a vendor is trying to sell Santa hats and selfie sticks, but there are no customers. One pilgrim group from Africa passed through, but they weren't interested in buying. The vendor, from Ramallah, put in a six-hour shift without a sale and that means he is out the bus fare he paid to get there. He still has to buy milk and diapers on his way home. "All on loan," he says as he leaves the square.

One can't help but think that if the Christ child were to be born these days in Bethlehem, the location probably wouldn't be the public square outside the church with its brightly lighted Christmas tree. More likely it would be in the shadow of the separation wall right next to the Inn. That's where the Aida refugee camp is located. It has been there since 1950 when refugees were forced out of Jerusalem and Hebron. It was started with just over a thousand refugees, and now is home to about 5,500 people. It has two schools and no health clinic. Access to water is often disrupted. The sewage system rarely works properly.

On December 12, three children were playing in an area by the wall when Israeli border police officers tried to drag them into a jeep. The scene was captured on video as the parents struggled to keep the children from being taken by the police. The police finally gave up. Locals believe they tried to capture the children because they could not find the stone-throwing youth they were looking for.

Children continue to be born into this densely populated area. For those who will never be able to stay in the luxury hotel, there will somehow be room made in the refugee camp. There they are born without medical care, often without access to drinking water, in a place with an inadequate sewage system. If they are lucky, their fathers might be able to obtain diapers on credit, in hopes that there will be some way to earn enough to pay back what is owed.

Christmas is a season when we surround our stories with lots of romantic notions and images. We picture the baby with the attention of two loving parents, gathered shepherds and angels in attendance as the wisemen visit from afar. The streets of Bethlehem are silent and peaceful and calm prevails. It is a far cry from the black watchtowers and the concrete barrier and the stench of tear gas hanging over the squalor of the refugee camp, where people have lived for three and four generations and are losing hope of ever seeing a return to a life of self sufficiency.

Yet hope is born in Bethlehem today as surely as was the case so long ago in the days of Roman occupation. The Christmas miracle is far greater than we can imagine.

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## **December 24, 2017 – Remembering Christmas Eve**

I woke up 50 years ago today aware of the fact that it was my brother's 12th birthday. Of course that means that today is his 62nd birthday, which is another story all together. Christmas Eve 1967 was a time of building excitement for me. The first order of the day was to get the papers delivered. I had, for the most part, turned my paper route over to my brothers, but on occasion I did help out and the brother whose birthday we were celebrating was the one who most loved the opportunity to sleep in. He was very capable at collecting payments, a chore that I hated, but he wasn't the best or most organized deliverer of newspapers. Even though the route was at the time the largest one in our town, I could head out with my bicycle and cover the route before the other paper boys got their papers delivered. I started by getting to the papers first. I was waiting when the bundles were tossed from the delivery truck. Then, I organized my papers into a double paper bag before heading out. Balance was critical for the first part of the route when there were 150 newspapers in the bag. Delivering to homes was fairly easy. There were entire blocks where every house was a customer. the route was well designed and I cycled to the customer farthest away from home first and worked my way back to our house before the others were up for breakfast.

For the next half a year, my brother and I had ages that were 2 years apart. Then, when my birthday came, I'd be three years ahead of him until his birthday came around again. From January 17 to June 15, five of us kids lined up in two-year spacing: 2, 4, 6, 8, 10. Only this year we would be 8, 10, 12, 14, 16. We had two older sisters, but they never lined up in the two-year spacings. This year was a big one in my book because the driver's license age in Montana was 15 and I would be getting my driver's license on my birthday that year. I could just imagine myself with a driver's license. No more hauling papers on a bicycle. I could drive my littlest brothers around and they'd deliver the papers.

Even though it was the day before Christmas, I already had my summer job lined up. I would be working for my cousin. Summer fallow would pay \$8 per day and harvest would pay \$12. If I was lucky, we'd get 10 days of harvest after five weeks of summer fallow. I stood to make over \$350, which for me in those days beat the take on a paper route. I could pick up a little bit more by mowing lawns. It still owned tow lawn mowers, but when I had to pay my brothers to do the mowing, I didn't make hardly anything for owning the mowers. The income came in when I ran the mowers.

In our house, the celebration of Christmas was reserved until after supper on Christmas Eve. Our family had our big meal at noon and the birthday celebration with cake and presents would come after dinner. For supper we'd have shrimp. I don't know where that tradition got started, but it was something we did. Then we'd read the Christmas story from Grandpa's Bible and sing a few Christmas Carols while the little boys placed the figures in the creche and after that we could open one Christmas present each. I was a freshman in high school that year, which meant that I qualified to stay up for the 10 pm Christmas Eve service. In fact, I was singing in the choir that year. Our church was a bit too small to raise a choir every Sunday, but we could raise one for Christmas, when the college students were home on break. I was in confirmation and participated in nearly everything that went on at the church. I'd helped decorate for Christmas Eve, placing greens around the candles in the windows.

It was midway through the school year as well. I was doing OK with my class work: English, Latin, Band, Algebra, Gym, U.S. History, and Choir. I had gone out for wrestling and although I wasn't doing all that well, I was getting to wrestle at most meets and even winning a few matches. I planned to go out for track. I wasn't much of an athlete, but I had figured that I'd go for pole vaulting. Almost none of the area schools had anyone who could do it at all and I figured that if I could clear the bar two or three times I'd earn enough points to make it to the state track tournament. It turned out that I did, where I didn't clear the bar at the first level. At least I'd lettered in a sport.

I was practicing my trumpet every day at that time. I was second chair trumpet in the high school band and I had figured that fast rhythms were the weak point in the performances of the first chair player. I knew that if we could draw a challenge piece

with a lot of triplets, I would win the seat, and I was biding my time until the right music was handed out.

I had been given a small solo in the choir's Christmas concert. "The boar's head in hand bear I, Bedeck'd with bays and rosemary. And I pray you, my masters merry be, Quot estis in convivio." I felt pretty sophisticated singing madrigal and even a few words in another language.

There was a lot more going on in the world and in my life 50 years ago and a lot of other stories that I could tell. Despite a few protests, the War in Vietnam was continuing to escalate. My middle sister's husband was doing the first of two one year deployments that he'd see. I'm not sure that I could imagine that the war and the draft would become big factors in my life before too long.

And I could not have imagined that today, 50 years later, I would wake up remembering that day. I had no idea what 50 years would be like at the time. On the other hand, I still have a sense of what 14 1/2 feels like though it has been half a century.

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## **December 25, 2017 – On the First Day of Christmas**

I thought I had planned out my day so that I would not need to do any shopping, but I had forgotten to pick up a loaf of bread for the late night communion last night, so I stopped by the grocery store to pick up bread yesterday. I only had one item to get and I was in a rush, so I didn't linger, but as I headed through the door, I could see four store employees working to take down the Christmas displays. They had already removed the tree that stood by the entryway and were using a pallet mover to rearrange the area that had been filled with gift ideas and other Christmas items. I guess in the world of marketing, Christmas is over before the actual day arrives.

In my world, I enjoy the season of Christmas. It is 12 days long, beginning on December 25 and ending on January 6. Sure, I like to stretch it a little bit. As soon as our morning worship was over yesterday and we had celebrated the fourth Sunday of Advent, we got to work and began celebrating Christmas. The two evening services were focused on Christmas. And between the two evening services we hooked up for a video chat with our daughter who lives in Japan, where it was about 1 in the afternoon on Christmas Day. They were watching the snow fall and tending their smoker, where Christmas dinner was about to emerge. I enjoy beginning my celebrations just a little bit early. Unlike the retail stores, however, I'm in no rush for the season to be over.

I'm pretty sure that if I were to go to the store today, which I won't need to do, that I would be able to find Valentine's Day displays.

I don't understand the rush to end the season and get on to the next thing.

And yes, while I was there I did check out the station where the bell ringers stand. It was completely cleared out with no signs that they had been there before Christmas had arrived.

Here is the fun part. I rather enjoy being out of sync with the world of marketing. I have no need for Valentine's candy at this time of the year. I don't need to plan my purchases around the calendar of the marketers. I'm perfectly content to let Christmas keep going on. I plan to celebrate heartily. Let the stores do what they want. I'm going to keep Christmas going for the whole season.

Today, we'll be preparing to travel and this afternoon we'll board a plane. We'll go to bed at the home of our son and his family. Our grandchildren will be asleep by the time we arrive, so tomorrow morning, on the second day of Christmas, we'll awake to our grandchildren. And nothing makes a Christmas celebration like children do. Their enthusiasm and joy and capacity for excitement is the perfect mood for celebration. And we get to spend the entire week with our grandchildren. We bought plane tickets for each other as our Christmas gifts. I got exactly what I wanted for Christmas! And I haven't even opened presents yet - well we did open a few gifts with our daughter and son-in-law as we chatted last evening.

I keep hearing about what some are calling "a war on Christmas." I haven't experienced what they are decrying. No one is preventing me from celebrating the season. I haven't found any language police who tell me what I can or can't say or any religion police who tell me what I can or cannot believe. I'll get a few strange looks from folks when I greet them with a hearty "Merry Christmas" after New Year's has come and gone, but I don't expect to encounter any warlike behavior out there. And I haven't found that wishing my Jewish friends "Happy Hanukkah" detracts from my celebration in the least, though Hanukkah came early this year and got over on December 20. And I wouldn't turn down an invitation to a Kwanza party, were one to come, even though that holiday falls entirely within the season of Christmas. Celebrating with others doesn't take anything away from the joy of the season for me.

So I don't intend to fight any wars - or even any battles this Christmas. I intend to enjoy every day of the celebration. After all, one of the names we have for Jesus comes from Isaiah 9:6. We call him "Prince of peace." In a world filled with war and violence, we look to God for the gift of peace that is deeper than our human tendencies towards conflict. The word used in the original language of Isaiah, Hebrew, is Shalom. It connotes an end of violence, but it is more than just the cessation of warfare. It also carries in its meaning well-being, deep-seated joy, and wholeness. It speaks of the restoration of a deep and abiding relationship with God. I'll leave the culture wars to someone else. After all, no one seems to be attacking my faith or my celebration.

I will admit, however, that there are plenty of folks out there who seem to be in a gigantic rush to move on to whatever they think is coming next. The grocery store won't be the only place where the decorations are coming down while I'm still intent on celebrating the fullness of the entire season.

Happy First Day of Christmas! May your joy be complete as you gather with friends and family to celebrate the gift of incarnation - spirit infused into matter. We don't have any intention of making gifts of birds and other things that are included in the children's song, so there are no partridges in pear trees of which I am aware, but I'll be spending the day with those I love. May you find great joy today - and all of the other days of Christmas was well.

**Note:** *I will be away from home and in a different time zone for a week. I'll keep writing my journal, but don't know what time of day I will get around to posting. Those grandchildren will take priority for sure! Since we will be traveling on New Year's Day, it may take a while for me to complete the typical change in journal posts and archives. Don't worry. All is well with us. And I'll get back into a schedule before long. Journal 2018 will show up, maybe not just on January 1, 2018. Enjoy the season!*

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## **December 26, 2017 – Christmas Thank You**

Thank you airline flight crews for working on Christmas day so we could come to see our grandchildren.

Thank you baggage handlers. Thank you cleaning crews. Thank you ticket agents. Thank you snow plow operators. Thank you de-icing station operators. Thank you TSA screeners. Thank you air marshals. Thank you air traffic controllers. Thank you airplane fuelers and ground crew. Thank you baggage handlers. Thank you janitors and coffee shop attendants and maintenance workers. Thank you highway patrol officers and doctors and nurses and fire fighters and road crews.

The list goes on and on. Thank you to everyone who left their families and went to work on Christmas Day so that our transportation system worked so that we could get on an airliner, fly to one city, change to another plane and land at a city near to where our grandchildren live.

A few of you we were fortunate enough to thank yesterday as we traveled. Most of you worked without a conversation with us at all, but your work is noticed and appreciated.

Usually we stay at home on holidays. We try to plan our days so that we don't need to run to the store or to the gas station or other places where people have to give up their holidays off in order to provide services. We understand that law enforcement needs to

continue. We understand that we need fire fighters and hospital workers and a host of other essential services to keep our society running and we are grateful to those who give up time with their families for the health and safety of our community. But we try to keep that at a minimum. We don't need people to have to work in retail stores in order for us to shop on our holidays. We don't need janitors to have to clean up after us when they might be home celebrating with their families. So we try not to have too much impact on the system.

But in the case of our grandchildren, we are willing to make an exception.

And there are so many others for whom we are grateful.

Thank you dear friends for a ride to the airport. Thank you church staff and volunteers for covering for us during our vacation. Thank you colleagues for handling emergencies for us.

When we think of it, the entire system is truly amazing. We were able to sleep in on Christmas Day, have a fairly laid back day catching up on a few chores and preparations, eat a delicious, if somewhat unconventional holiday dinner of stuffed squash and toll house pie and then travel from Rapid City, SD to Mount Vernon, WA to crawl into bed in the home of our son and his family.

The speed of our travel would amaze our grandparents. The comfort and ease of travel would amaze our parents. My dad would have loved the display in the airline seats that shows airspeed, ground speed, distance traveled, time remaining to destination and other data on the airplane's travel as we spend across the country. He would have been impressed at the nearly new Boeing 737-800 that was packed as full as possible with holiday travelers. My mom would have enjoyed TSA pre check. I'm pretty impressed with all of that myself.

Beyond the technology, I'm impressed with the people. The folks who served us were cheerful and generous and kind to us. After having to sit for a few minutes waiting for our gate to be available, even though we were able to get off our plane on time, there were a few travelers who were tired and some who were cranky. There were a couple of rude folks and some who were trying to stuff bags that were too large into limited airline overhead compartments. And the crews handled all those people even those who were cranky and tired and rude with grace and kindness. It can't be easy to have to witness so many people who can't or won't follow simple instructions over and over again day after day.

I tried to be polite and kind to all the people we met. I tried to say thank you to as many of them as possible. I didn't have to put any effort into my smile. I'm always grinning from ear to ear when I'm on my way to see our grandchildren.

On Christmas Eve I was talking to one of the members of our congregation who is a very dedicated volunteer and whom has become a good friend over the years. She has been a big supporter of the church and of our ministries in the congregation. This Christmas Eve she went out of her way to tell me that she was glad we were getting a week of vacation to visit our children and grandchildren. She herself is someone who works a lot of hours each week. She accomplishes a lot and has high standards for those who work with her. She is willing to work overtime and give up days off to keep her own business running. But she went out of her way to express her support for our vacation. She might not have done that a couple of years ago.

I noticed the change in her from the moment that I learned that she will become a grandmother this year. That little baby isn't even born, and already it is working magic on its grandparents. That's one of the truly wonderful things about being a grandparent. You don't need any special training. Those little people work their way into your heart before you even meet them and they put a smile on your face and a glow in your life that makes it easier to love everyone else. From now on, I won't have to explain to her how important it is to spend time with our grandchildren. She already knows. She gets it.

I think I could tell which travelers were traveling to see their grandchildren or traveling home from having seen them. I like to think we made life just a little bit easier for all of the people who had to work to make our travel go so smoothly. At least we were smiling.

Thank you - all of you!

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## **December 27, 2017 – On the Third Day of Christmas**

Three French hens, two turtle doves, and a partridge in a pair tree: that's what the song reports for the gifts of the third day Christmas. We don't have any hens among the gifts for the day. I'm not sure that I know where one might find Faverolles. According to Wikipedia, the Faverolles is a French breed of chicken. The breed was developed in the 1860s in north-central France, in the vicinity of the villages of Houdan and Faverolles. The breed was given the name of the latter village and the singular is thus also Faverolles, not Faverolle. Faverolles were originally bred in France as a utility fowl, used for both eggs and meat but are now primarily raised for exhibition.

I'm not really into show chickens anyway and I don't know what is different about a turtle dove as opposed to an ordinary pigeon. We did, however, have some wonderful pears yesterday. Family members who live in Hood River, Oregon have made it a Christmas tradition to send beautiful pears from an orchard in their area at Christmas and the sweet fruit is a tasty addition to our holiday fare. This year, knowing that we were

traveling to be with our son and his family, they sent the pears to his home and they have been a big hit with children and adults alike.

One thing that we learned from the song, or from common sense, when our children were small, is that the frenzy of gift giving is more pleasant when it is spread out. We moved away from the practice of opening all of the gifts in one sitting fairly soon after becoming parents and the practice allowed our children to enjoy gifts one or two at a time. That way they were able to play with a new toy before going on to the next gift. The practice seems to work well with our grandchildren as well. The family opened one gift per person yesterday, but we still have a few in the closet in our room for them to open as Christmas proceeds.

Another treat for us of the day yesterday was a day when we were able to just be with family. I took one phone call and dealt with a minor bit of work, but other than that we just played with our grandchildren. We didn't go any farther than the yard of their home. So I didn't have to worry about what is going on in the stores, or if they have forgotten about Christmas all ready. I didn't have to drive in traffic or deal with other's perceptions. I was free to simply celebrate Christmas with the children.

Of course our son had to go to work and our daughter-in-law graciously did the grocery shopping with out us. I'm sure that was easier for her than if she had three children in tow, which is they way it often goes in this home. We simply enjoyed a wonderful day off and a time to connect with our creative, fun, loving grandchildren. If there is a better therapy for the soul, I don't know what it is.

i know that the world is going on. I'll have to take a peek at the news before too long and the job of dealing with my email is big enough that I don't want to let it pile up. But a true day off is a real treat and I enjoyed ignoring the alert tones from my phone and leaving my computer in its bag except for making a journal entry. I even demonstrated good behavior for my grandchildren by taking a nap after lunch. Our grandson thinks that a quiet hour is a bit of a burden, and he doesn't have such on school days, but he was content to build with his legos while his sisters napped. I, on the other hand, fell asleep and woke refreshed.

I know that we live in a different world than was once the case. Our families spread out and live in distant places and we don't have the same kind of multi-generational families that once were more common. These days, when grandparents are raising grandchildren it is often without much participation of the parents. That, of course, requires a great effort and love on the part of the grandparents and I admire those who respond to such a calling. But there is a deep luxury that comes to helping with the daily chores of living when parents, children and grandparents share everyday life.

Things like washing dishes or watching the children are not burdens or even chores when one has the time. I don't know how much extra work it is for our son and daughter in law to have us visit. I know we decrease their privacy, but for us it is simply a delight.

So Christmas celebrations continue for us. I don't think we have any big plans for today. We'll probably take a walk around the neighborhood. I know the dog would appreciate it and I am curious to see the park and other places our family enjoys. It isn't much agenda, and I am well aware that such lazy days aren't the only way to live and that we will need to return to our home and jobs and responsibilities, but that is something for next week. For now, we're just enjoying the celebration of Christmas.

After all, Christmas is the celebration of incarnation - spirit infused into matter - love taking on human form. And there is no better place to practice love than in the embrace of a grandchild.

Merry, merry Christmas! I hope that those who read these words are having as delightful a time as I am. I may not even bother to look up what kind of birds "calling birds" are. The children's scouting song, after all, doesn't require that we know the symbolic meaning of all of the gifts. We get the giggles just trying to sing the song together.

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## **December 28, 2017 – Laughter**

There is something that seems to set off an evening of giggles and laughter each time we get together. We found a lot to laugh about when our children were growing up. Their developing senses of humor touched us and as they learned to tell jokes and humorous stories, we learned to laugh with them. I have many fond memories of times when something would set us to laughing and we'd giggle until the tears rolled down our cheeks and then giggle some more. For days after the event, just recalling how good it felt to laugh together would set us to laughing again.

Since our children have become adults, we find ourselves laughing heartily almost every time we are together. One night, when both of our adult children were at our home, we held the cat up to the computer with the voice dictation program turned on. The cat made a meow and the computer displayed a curse word. The cat did it again and again and the computer made the same translation again and again. I commented that I never knew that the cat was cursing at me and we all giggled until we could barely sit up straight.

Last night there was a cat involved once again, but not one we knew personally. It started with a serious attempt to do research into dish washers. Our son's family have recently purchased a home and do not have a dishwasher. With three children, a dish

washer would be a great timesaving device and so we were looking at different models and discussing what might work best for their family. The Internet provides a good way to compare different models, check prices and features and the like.

In the past we've had great fun using Google to do unusual searches and, on a whim, I put "cat washer" instead of dishwasher in the search engine just for laughs. Little did I know that there is at least one company that makes coin-operated pet washing and drying machines. And there is a video on YouTube of a cat in such a machine. You can find it by entering Automated Cat Wash in YouTube. The cat does not enjoy the experience at all. It isn't the near torture of the animal that is funny, though the video seems to be that. What is so funny is the notion that someone would actually invent such a machine in the first place. Who would think that such a thing would be a good idea?

We've had several pet cats over the years and it never occurred to us that we needed to wash them in the first place. Cats are pretty good self groomers and other than gently wrapping a cat in a towel if it has been outside in the rain, I have no memory of ever feeling the need to help any of our cats with washing. Having administered ear drops and other medicines to cats, I'm pretty sure that if I would have tried to wash one of our cats I would have emerged from the experience with scratches. A cat has four paws and a mouth all capable of drawing blood and is pretty effective using all five points at the same time.

We were perfectly content with leaving the grooming to our cats.

Someone, however, was sufficiently inspired to make a chamber with adequate air circulation that also contains an animal and has water and soap jets as well as a drainage system and a dryer. I don't know what noise the machine makes, but the total experience is definitely not one that cats enjoy.

We decided that probably the machine was invented to wash dogs and the idea to put a cat in one might not have been part of the original intent. Dogs are pretty good at getting in the mud and tangling with skunks and finding other adventures that result in the need for humans to help them get cleaned up. At the house where I grew up that was an outdoor adventure with the hose and sometimes involved a lot of chasing of the dog, but I know people who do a fairly good job washing their dogs in the bathtub. Some dogs are fairly patient with the process.

Still, inventing and spending a lot of money on a machine to do the job seems like a real stretch. Then making such machine coin-operated and available for pet owners to use like any other vending machine is an idea that I don't think would have ever come to me. Now that I've seen the video, I can't help but think of a line of vending machines, some selling food and beverages, a few arcade games and then, in their midst an automatic cat washer. It makes me giggle just to think of it.

Last night I could barely watch the video the first time. The tears were streaming down my cheeks. We probably played it there or four times. I'll likely watch it again sometime.

What is amazing is the power of laughter to refresh the soul. We were made to be happy and smile and to break out in a good old guffaw from time to time. It does us good to laugh. We release tension and relax and laughter draws us closer to the ones we love. And, in our family it seems like each time we get into an old-fashioned giggling session we recall other times when we've had the joy of laughing together. It seems like an incredible gift to be able to laugh with others.

What is more, we don't need much to get us going. We find that just being together, playing with the children, making and enjoying meals, running errands and doing little home improvement chores is enough to entertain ourselves. We might occasionally go to a movie, but we don't seem to need much in the way of entertainment. Just being together is enough to make us happy.

I suppose that it is entirely possible that somewhere in the world is a serious engineer, who has carefully designed an elaborate and complex machine that would solve a problem, who can't imagine why people like us would be seized with convulsions of laughter when we saw the invention. Then again, we're having trouble understanding the engineer. It's really laughable.

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## **December 29, 2017 – Life in Almost Canada**

If you visit Mount Vernon, the estate of George Washington, in Virginia, it will cost you \$20 per adult to tour. There is a 10% discount for booking your tickets online in advance. On the other hand, if you visit Mount Vernon, Washington, there is no charge to wander around the town and see the sights. In Virginia, you'll see a mansion, gardens, tombs, a pioneer farm, distillery, gristmill, and a museum. Here in Washington, there are several very nice homes, gardens, a cemetery, fields of tulips, a couple of brew pubs and a very nice library. I know. My son is the director of the library.

Sometimes, I call this corner of the United States - and we are very close to the northwest corner of the continental states - "Almost Canada." If you get in the car and drive 50 miles north, you'll reach the border crossing to Canada. Perhaps more amazingly, if you were to travel 50 miles straight west, you'd also be in Canada. The city of Mount Vernon is actually north of Victoria, located on Vancouver Island, British Columbia.

We've come far enough north that the days are even shorter than they are in South Dakota in the winter. That means that when summer comes, the days are longer as

well. Traveling by air, we really noticed the difference the first couple of days we were here. Of course, the longer we stay the more we adjust to the differences. Like other places where the sun sets early, people adjust by doing all kinds of things in the dark. Sunset is around 4:20 this time the year and it doesn't rise until around 8 am. If you were to adjust your sleep to the daylight, the days would be pretty short, so people do a lot of things in the dark. It is typical for us to be up 3 or 4 hours after sunset and to rise before sunrise as well. I've noticed that my natural cycle of rising and sleeping has shifted more than the hour of the time zone. Even after adjusting my clock, I'm rising later and going to bed later than I would at home. And here I don't have a work schedule to guide my day. It is just that daylight isn't a good clue as to when to go to sleep.

Other parts of Almost Canada are also interesting to me as a visitor. The weather here is much milder than at home, due to the warm air blowing in from the ocean. Temperatures here have been 12 to 15 degrees warmer than at home during this visit, despite the decreased sunlight. The difference in temperature is less noticeable in the summer, but it tends to be a bit cooler here than at home. Despite Canada's reputation for extreme cold, here in Almost Canada the weather is very mild.

Skagit County is marked by amazing geography. The mountains rising to the east are dramatic and rise over 10,000 feet, so are snow covered year round. The ocean to the west is filled with islands and is a fascinating place to watch whales and orcas. The Skagit River is a major watershed that has dramatic flood cycles and rises and falls throughout the year depending on rain and snow fall in the mountains.

A short visit makes it clear why people have been attracted to this area for millennia. It is a good place to live, with abundant resources including fish, wild game, forests and more.

It does, however, rain a lot in this place. The green hills and the verdant forests are supported by a lot of rain. The Pacific Northwest is categorized as a temperate rain forest. When we hike in the woods we see all kinds of ferns and mosses that aren't a part of the ecology of our home. Out here you become familiar with banana slugs. The ones up here look more like overripe bananas, and are smaller than the fruit, but impressive nonetheless.

The past year has been momentous for our son and his family. In 2017, our son moved to a new job, they first moved into a rental home and from there into this home that they are purchasing. They had a new baby. Our grandson attended three different schools in 2017. He completed Kindergarten and entered the First Grade.

Through all of the changes and adjustments of a growing family, they have come to a wonderful place to call home. The yard is big enough to play all kinds of games and the adjacent farm field has plenty of room to fly kites. There is a lake nearby with a place for

swimming and paddling small boats - something that is known to attract their grandpa. Visits to the mountains and the seashore are just minutes away. When there isn't snow enough to sled here in town, a short drive will take you to great places to play in the snow. It certainly seems like a place where a family could settle and sings are pretty clear that the family won't have as many dramatic changes in 2018 as they did in 2017.

Despite the lack of snow outside - though it did snow on Christmas day here - it is a wonderful place to celebrate Christmas. I guess any place where we were with our grandchildren would be a wonderful place to celebrate Christmas. Holding a baby every day is a good reminder of God's presence in human form and the ways in which spirit infuses matter in everyday life. These spiritual beings who surround us are also spirit-filled and spirited. There is a lot of energy in this household when all three children are awake. I'm sleeping really well at night and I suspect that the parents are doing the same, though with the baby they get up a little bit more than grandpa has to.

It is just everyday life for their family and they've learned to live with it well. It is a special treat for the grandparents and we're enjoying every minute of it.

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## **December 30, 2017 – The Sixth Day of Christmas**

According to Ducks. org, we have several types of geese that frequent South Dakota: Snow goose, Ross's goose, Greater white-fronted goose, Brant, Cackling goose, and the Canada goose. Canadian geese, of course, are the one that we see most often and are easiest to recognize.

There are days at the lake when the geese are a nuisance. They hang out around the beach and boat ramp area at Sheridan Lake in big numbers and deposit their droppings everywhere. In the spring and summer it is nearly impossible to make it from the parking lot to the water without stepping in the stuff. The birds will, of course, scatter as I walk toward them, and then return as soon as I have passed. On the water, they make room for my boat. They don't like it when I come too close and raise a noisy ruckus as they take to flight from the water. The South Dakota Department of Fish, Game and Parks have installed devices called 'Away with Geese.' The unit automatically operates at night and produces a solar-powered amber beam of light directed at goose eye-level in a 360° radius. It recharges itself each day and has an effective area of 3.5 acres. According to the product's web site, the device is based around a simple concept: At night, geese sleep in or near water areas where they feel secure from predators. Placing a unit into these secure areas makes the geese anxious and they will no longer consider the area "safe" and will simply move to another suitable habitat within a few days. If the geese feel insecure in an area at night, they won't be back during the day, either. Geese, by necessity, have to be efficient. They tend to stay close to their secure areas during daylight hours in order to minimize the distance they travel each day.

“Away With Geese is effective in deterring the geese, so that they find a different nighttime home.”

The Geese that frequent the lake, however, haven't visited the “Away with Geese” website or read any of the literature about the product. As far as I can tell, they completely ignore the devices and the orange lights that flash from them. They seem to be perfectly capable of sleeping, feeding, and doing whatever else geese do with the devices installed at several points around the common area of the lake.

Canadian geese can lay up to one egg a day and their clutches normally contain 5 to 9 eggs, most of which hatch. Predation of the birds is most common when they are young. Eggs are among the favorite foods of several small mammals and the young geese often fall prey before they reach maturity. Still, a single goose can produce up to 25 eggs a year, and can live for as long as 20 years, so a pair of geese can produce a lot of birds. In captivity, egg production can be increased dramatically by taking the first few eggs and raising them in an incubator and then periodically allowing the goose to raise a clutch.

Six geese a laying would be enough to keep one in geese for the rest of one's life, I might think. It is quite a gift, but the gift has to be taken where it occurs. Other than removing eggs to be raised in an incubator, it is nearly impossible to successfully move a clutch of eggs once the goose has started setting. The Christmas song doesn't mention setting, just laying. Perhaps the song's creators were particular fond of goose eggs.

Goose egg is another name for the knot that is raised on your head when you receive a blow. I have received several of these over the years. One that I particularly remember was a result of my own carelessness. I had been working on a ceiling, using a step ladder. I climbed down the ladder leaving a hammer on the top of the ladder. Then, I was down on my hands and knees cleaning up something from the floor. I bumped the ladder and the hammer fell, hitting me on the head and raising a sizable goose egg. It would have made a very funny video, had it been captured. It was just like a cartoon. Actually hitting myself that hard with a hammer was highly unlikely, but I did it. I even saw stars, just like they depict in the cartoons. Well, not exactly, but close enough that I got the idea. I haven't ever recreated the event. Once in a lifetime is certainly enough.

That kind of goose egg certainly wouldn't be a very nice Christmas present. I'm just saying . . .

So, even though today is the sixth day of Christmas, I guess I'll take a pass on the geese a laying. We haven't been much for live poultry as family gifts anyway. I suspect that I'll get at least:

- six hugs from grandkids

- six turns at silly games
- six songs for singing
- six grins from the baby
- six toys for playing
- six silly jokes repeated

And likely a whole lot more. You can keep the geese a laying. We don't really need them here.

Our children and grandchildren, do, however, live in a great place for waterfowl. There is a lake just a short distance from their home and yesterday, as the rain fell in amounts for which we'd certainly be grateful in South Dakota, there were six or seven ducks having a grand old time in the pond that formed in the field beside the neighbor's house. We're only about 50 feet above sea level here and there is a lot of water everywhere. The ducks and geese seem to be happy about it. It isn't uncommon to see v's of geese heading in every direction in this part of the world. Spending the winter here is no problem for the big, noisy birds.

The days of our visit have gone by quickly. And it will soon be time for us to head for home, where it is a lot colder and folks are trying to make good decisions about which events to cancel and how much to stay inside. Out here, we have good rain jackets and are waterproof for the most part, so haven't been restrained in our adventures. And we've got a couple more wonderful days ahead before having to pack up and head home.

Happy sixth day of Christmas to all!

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## **December 31, 2017 – A Few New Years Resolutions**

So here we are. We have arrived at the last day of 2017. It hasn't been the worst year and it hasn't been the best. Like the other years of my life, I don't wish it hadn't happened. Topping the year for me has to be the birth of our granddaughter Eliza. We had the good fortune of being with her family when she was born and she has continued a healthy life in a loving family and she brings so much joy to the world. Not that she doesn't also bring challenges. As I write, I can hear her in the other room and know that she has interrupted her parents' sleep again - a skill that she has highly developed since her arrival on the scene. Like other young parents, they are learning to go through life just a little bit sleep deprived. It hasn't kept them from being joyous people, deeply grateful for the gift of their children.

On the more challenging side, I will remember 2017 as a year in which people came to me with some of the really big questions of life. Questions of meaning and purpose

came up often. I don't remember another year when so many people came to me confronting a sense of loss of the will to continue, unless it was during the farm crisis of the 1980's when we were serving people who faced the loss of multi-generational family farms and adjusted to big changes that included moving off of the land and leaving rural communities that they loved. There are a lot of hurting people in our community and being a pastor has brought me into contact with that hurt in significant ways.

2017 has, however, also been a good year of making some significant new contacts. We have developed friendships beyond our normal circle, connecting with people of other faiths and members of our community who we had not previously known.

It has become a tradition to begin the new year with resolutions and although today isn't January 1 here, I have a few resolutions worth noting. Since we have a daughter in Japan, where it is nearly bedtime on New Year's Eve, and since we will be traveling on New Year's Day and I won't be investing too much energy in my journal tomorrow, it seems like a good time to note a few resolutions for the new year.

I resolve that in the year to come I will push myself to speak out with more courage when I encounter irrational fears that turn into unkind words. I am not one to cause trouble and I'm slow to confront others, but I resolve not to sit in silence when I hear people express fears in ways that are harmful. Examples of those fears include the fear of those who are different. When I hear people speaking in ignorance, cruelty and shamelessness about Muslims, for example, I resolve to stand with those being attacked by ignorance. I am not a Muslim, and will never be, but I am grateful to live in a world with many different religious perspectives and, as a Christian, I am called to stand with those who are pushed aside from the mainstream of society. I resolve to speak out when I hear people attacking recent immigrants as well. Hospitality is at the heart of our faith and we, who live a life of luxury when others are driven from their homes through no fault of their own have a responsibility to extend hospitality to them. I will not be silent when others make ignorant comments expressing their fear of otherness when no danger exists. I will not succumb to popular media that puts others down and expresses fear that has no basis in fact.

That brings me to another resolution. I resolve to be a champion of the truth. Objective truth does exist. Even though there are those who seem to believe that if you repeat a lie often enough it makes it the truth, they are wrong. In the big picture truth will prevail. Even more so, it is the truth that leads to freedom. Jesus promised his followers that they would know the truth and that the truth would set them free. Knowing that the truth matters, I will not accept lies from public figures, nor will I accept it from those who propose "alternate facts." I will study before I speak and seek the truth in my words and my actions.

In the year to come, I also resolve to be more vocal in my support of education, especially K-12 public education. We have suffered nonstop attacks on K-12 teachers

and public schools. Those who are leading the attacks are blaming schools and teachers for problems that are not caused by the schools, such as nearly one fourth of all students arriving to school so hungry that their brains won't work well. Blaming teachers for the failure of students to learn and attacking schools that try to serve all children by diverting funds to exclusive schools that work only with the most privileged children harms the most vulnerable. It is time to shout, "Enough!" We all share the burden of providing education to all of our students. We pay dearly in the end when we evade the real issues that prevent teachers from teaching and students from learning. This must be a priority for all of our citizens and I will not be silent as demonic forces seek to destroy a fair system of public education for all.

There are more resolutions that I need to make, like resolving to set aside the fantasy that a few of the world's people can live secure private lives while ignoring our complicity in conditions that put others at risk and resolving to speak out for prevention of suicide in a society that often tries to ignore the mortal threat to too many of our people.

For this New Year's Eve, however, I acknowledge that I cannot solve all of the world's problems, but that won't keep me from trying to live a better and more responsible life.

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