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Dignity – November 1, 2016



The culture of our area has been shaped by art. Rapid City is probably best known for its proximity to Mount Rushmore, where the faces of four presidents are carved into the mountain. Not far away is the Crazy Horse carving, a giant, three-dimensional carving of an entire mountain. Our city is filled with public art, with sculptures on many downtown street corners, and numerous other public works of art. The church has a long history of being a patron of the arts. Many classical works of music, painting, sculpture, theatre and other arts have religious themes. Art is known to inspire and to lead people to thinking of topics and issues that are beyond themselves.

On our recent vacation, we stopped going and coming to spend time with a new public sculpture that is located on the bluffs of the Missouri River near Chamberlain. Titled “Dignity” the metal sculpture by South Dakota Artist Laureate Dale Lamphere, stands 50 feet tall and depicts a Lakota woman with a Star Quilt billowing behind her.

As is true with all art, it takes time to take it all in.

Before going farther, it is important to note that South Dakota’s newest landmark had its origins in the deep generosity of Norm and Enable McKie. They commissioned the sculpture as a gift to the people of South Dakota. Working with landscape architect Patrick Wyss the dream is to develop a park for South Dakotans and our visitors to use for years to come. The artists’s statement describes some of the goals of the piece:

“Dignity represents the courage, perseverance and wisdom of the Lakota and Dakota culture in South Dakota. My hope is that the sculpture might serve as a symbol of respect and promise for the future.”

In a way, it has been interesting to have waited over a month from the dedication celebration to make our first visit. We have heard lots of comment and conversation from friends and acquaintances about the sculpture before seeing it with our own eyes.

The comments didn’t fully prepare us for the experience of looking at the remarkable piece of art. People have spoken of size and scale. They have mentioned the star quilt with its colors. They have reported on how it changes with the light of different times of day. They have commented on the LED lights that add to its nighttime appearance. But not many have spoken to me about the beauty of the sculpture. The face and features of the woman are impressive and, simply, beautiful. I hadn’t expected to be so taken with that aspect.

There will, of course, be critics. Some ask why she is facing the direction that she faces - just a little bit south of East. I suspect that on the average blustery day, standing atop those bluffs, I might face exactly the same direction, turning my back to the wind. The sculpture, however depicts a star quilt billowing away from the woman, as if the wind were blowing almost exactly the opposite direction of the prevailing. No worries, this is South Dakota. There will be days when the wind will shift to the southeast and line up

with the sculpture. Some say that she is facing the sunrise, which is appropriate for a sculpture dedicated to the future of the state and its people. I've heard that she has turned her back on the town of Chamberlain. The bottom line is that a three-dimensional sculpture of a woman has to face some direction. As it is, it makes a wonderful impression from the parking lot and park area in which it is situated. Because there is also an older structure that is reminiscent of a Lakota tipi in the area which is of a smaller scale, it makes sense for the new sculpture to be a ways from that tipi so when they are viewed together one doesn't dominate the other.

As to the cultural appropriateness of the sculpture, I am not qualified to comment and will wait to hear from others about their opinions. What I do know is that Lakota and Dakota culture is not a fixed entity forever frozen in time. It changes and evolves. The tradition of star quilts, which we see in all kinds of celebrations from honoring ceremonies to funerals, is something that came after reservation times. Quilting wasn't an indigenous art, but rather one that has its roots in Europe. In contemporary Lakota culture, however, the quilts carry deep meaning and have been fully incorporated into the lives of the people. The woman depicted in the sculpture is wearing traditional dress - something seen only at pow wows and special ceremonies these days, but somehow it seems to fit very well to combine the traditional dress with the quilt. A historian would have trouble placing the sculpture in a particular moment of time, but perhaps its value to present and future generations is its ability to span time and not be connected to a particular date and place. It does have a transcendent quality. After all it is ten times as big as a living human person. From most angles of viewing one is looking up at the face of the woman.

For now, I feel a sense of gratitude to the generosity of the McKie family and a sense of appreciation for the vision of Dale Lamphere. Dignity is an incredible and memorable piece of outdoor art that will be a part of the story of our state for generations to come. I hope that we, who live and work in this place can aspire to some of the courage, perseverance and wisdom that it depicts. Perhaps the sculpture is just the inspiration we need.

Art enables us to express ideas and concepts that are beyond words and art such as this sculpture, designed to last for long periods of time, can have different meanings to different viewers. I know that I will be asking others what they think of the sculpture for years to come and listening with joy to their responses.

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## Thinking and Serving – November 2, 2016

Students of theology often get caught up in throwing around jargon. As we study, we learn new concepts and the words that go with those concepts. Part of the process of learning this new language is using it. Sometimes when words are used out of context, however, they fail to communicate meaning. The very tools we use to communicate can fail us if we use them in ways that are not understood. It takes a bit of time and skill to learn how to use specialized language to enhance understanding rather than as a tool to separate one from others. I remember being in my mid-twenties, filled with new knowledge and confident in my use of language and thinking that part of what I had learned was so specialized that it separated me from those who lacked a similar education. A wise advisor suggested that I offset my academic preparation with a few years of serving as a pastor of a local congregation in order to round out my preparation for ministry. The advice was solid. Seven years serving two small congregations in Southwest North Dakota did a lot to teach me about the role of humility and the power of using the language of the people I serve.

I didn't stop reading or thinking theologically. On the contrary, I studied as hard or harder than I had when I was in school. However, as I honed sermons each week, I also learned to think in the terms and concepts of those I was called to serve so that the ideas of my academic education would be communicated to those people clearly.

Early in my formal education, I learned about the process called exegesis. The literal translation of this concept is "to lead out." Its application means to allow oneself to be led by the Biblical text. Exegesis is a process of careful, objective analysis of scripture, a deep seeking of the meaning that is contained in the text. We were taught to analyze the language carefully, considering the effects of translation, history and culture on our understanding of the words. We considered all of the sources that were available to us, including the commentaries of other scholars and students in a process of trying to determine the meaning that is inherent in the texts that we studied.

We also learned another word that describes an opposite approach to holy texts: eisegesis means to lead into. In theology it is used to describe a subjective, non-analytical reading of the text. Eisegesis is a process of having a conviction or meaning in one's mind and literally reading that meaning into the text, resulting in an interpretation of the text that is consistent with the beliefs that one held before encountering the text. A common form of eisegesis is having a concept that one wants to communicate then looking for bible quotes to back up that particular opinion. Coming out of seminary, I was surprised at how often people asked me for eisegesis. They would come to me and ask me "where in the Bible does it say . . . ?" looking for biblical texts to back up their convictions. It is exactly the opposite of the way I was taught to approach scripture.

One doesn't, however, have to resort to using the words exegesis and eisegesis in order to speak of how scripture is approached. When I take time to explain to people that I am disciplined about studying the whole of scripture and that I follow a lectionary that gives me the texts for preaching rather than coming up with a sermon and looking for texts to illustrate my point of view, people are generally appreciative of my approach. It makes sense to them that if one wants to discover the truth in scripture, one must start with scripture itself and carefully study it.

I was fortunate to have attended seminary in a time when theological education was deeply based on collaborative learning. We were expected to be full-time residential students, that is, we lived in the seminary with other students as we studied. We read the same texts at the same time as our classmates and we discussed those texts not only in class but also around the meal table and in our homes. We understood that the perspectives of our classmates were critical to our understanding of the difficult and challenging books we were reading. As we wrestled with theological concepts, we formed community that worshipped together. Lifelong relationships started in our years of study.

That is quite different from current theological education, which is primarily taught in commuter schools, to which students travel for short times of common study, living in separate places. Increasingly theological education is conducted online with students acting independently and communicating primarily with teachers while remaining isolated from other students. The academic rigor may be as intense as was the case in our formal education, but the development of community is different and, in some cases, completely lacking.

The result is pastors who are probably better grounded in the communities they serve than we were immediately following our years of academic study. There is probably less jargon and fewer temptations to use specialized language. On the other hand, academic skills may be less well developed and critical thinking less honed than was the case in the style of education we experienced. It may be that just as we graduated from the academy needing a few years of practical experience to become fully developed as pastors, graduates of theological educations these days need additional academic work and exposure in order to become fully effective. The current fashion of forming clergy accountability groups seems to be the model for holding pastors academically responsible as the practice ministry. We were given those groups in seminary as an essential part of our academic practice. These days the group is formed after the pastor is serving in a congregation.

However it works, careful study is a group process in which the ideas of one individual need to encounter the ideas of another to be tested and refined. Study and learning become a lifestyle and not just a part of one's preparation. The wisdom of the community continues to inform the practice of ministry.

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## **Autumn Trials and Joys – November 3, 2016**

I have resisted the comparison of the states of life to the season. I know it is common to think of childhood as springtime, young adulthood as summertime, and the aging years as autumn. The analogies have a certain logic and I understand why the comparisons are made. On the other hand, I am personally a big fan of winter. I love the crunch of snow under my boots, the feel of a pair of skis on my feet and the challenge of survival in the harsh days. I'd much rather shovel snow than mow the lawn. I know how to bundle up against the cold. When it is too hot, you simply have to deal with it, there are limits to removing layers for comfort.

But there is more to it than just an enjoyment of the cooler weather. There is a surprise and wonder that is inherent in autumn which I greet with childlike joy.

To start with, the weather has surprised me most of this season. Here we are in November and I'm still driving around town with the windows down in my car. The mornings and evenings are chilly, but daytime highs have been remarkably warm. The urge to go outside is as strong as ever. Although most of the deciduous trees have now lost their leaves, there is still plenty of color to the world. We brought in the tomatoes from our garden a couple of weeks ago, but they continue to ripen in the basement and there are fresh tomatoes to eat every day.

And I have never witnessed a World Series like this year. The world has never seen a sporting event that matches last night's game. When I got into the car to drive home from the church last night, the Cubs were up by three runs. They needed just four outs to clinch the series. By the time I got home, Cleveland had secured a RBI double and a home run to even the score. The scoreless ninth inning meant extra innings and then it rained. It was as if the universe was conspiring to keep us from knowing how the game would end. Finally they removed the tarps and the Cubs managed to get two runs in the bottom of the 10th. They needed both of them as Cleveland came back with one run, but the pitching held out and after a 4 1/2 hour game the series was history.

One team had to win and the other lose and if your team is going to win it seems all the better to have the losing team clearly be one of the greatest teams in the history of baseball. Had the roles been reversed, it would have been hard to feel bad for long. It simply was a great series. Both teams are filled with young players and the prospects for next year are clearly evident.

I am so grateful for baseball's diversion from the American political scene. And I'm not the only one.

Politics may leave me feeling tired and old, but baseball has the opposite effect on me this year.

And I'm not really a sports fan. I enjoy watching games, but my home isn't filled with sports memorabilia. I don't have a baseball collection. We don't have a large screen television. I don't stay home to watch the game. I don't have any sports jerseys in my closet. I haven't spent my vacations visiting stadiums around the country. I've only watched a handful of live major league games over the span of my life. I know lots of people who are way more into the game than I. But I am grateful for baseball this year.

After all it is no ordinary year. And the surprises are worth the wait.

So I want to go on record, before next week's voting, with my conviction that this election will not bring the end of the world. I'm not thinking doom and gloom when I anticipate the post-election season. Regardless of which candidate wins, American democracy is a robust institution with many safeguards. The conflicts and controversies won't go away, but we have the capacity to return civil conversation to our national sphere. It seems possible that in the midst of all of the mudslinging, name calling, and other unbecoming behavior of the campaign season there are people of good will on both sides. Despite the tensions and accusations I think we may even have learned to listen a bit more carefully to those with whom we disagree.

Just as neither candidate is the end of the world, I also want to assert that neither is the savior of the world. I have a definite religious position on that particular item. The greatness of our country comes, in part, from the ability of minorities to be heard. Losing an election doesn't mean your point of view is discarded. The national conversation following this election must take into consideration the needs and wants of the people who have rallied around both candidates.

If we are lucky, the candidates will learn a lesson from baseball. I'm a big Cubs fan, but I don't dislike Cleveland fans. I admire their team. They produced a truly great team this year and they came so close to winning the World Series that they have to be proud of their efforts. After all, just last year the series' most valuable player, Ben Zobrist, was playing for the Kansas City Royals. Things change in Baseball. They change in politics, too.

One World Series game doesn't erase 108 years of losing with some pretty lousy teams. But it does put things into perspective. I woke up this morning on the day after and I'll be going to work and living my life as best as I am able. Life goes on and I'm glad that it does.

Perhaps I am living in the autumn of my life. If so, I know that winter is coming and I've always loved winter.

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## Looking at my Hands – November 4, 2016

Last week our daughter was looking at my hands and she asked me if my finger was injured. It isn't and it wasn't then. My fingers have a few bumps around the joints that I didn't have when I was younger. It is the normal process of aging for working hands. They develop a collection of small scars and a few changes in shape. In my particular case, I have been remarkably free of pain. My hands get tired from time to time, and when I have been doing certain jobs they will get a bit stiff and ache just enough that I notice it, but compared to many others, I am very lucky.

Now, a week or so later, remembering that brief conversation with her, I got to thinking about my aging body. I've never had a broken bone, or if I have, it wasn't displaced and didn't need treatment. I'm pretty sure that if I had broken a bone, I would know it, so I assume that I've been free from that particular injury. I do have an ankle that seems to sprain easier than was the case when I was younger and if I am not careful and allow it to get twisted, it will swell up and give me pain for a few days until it heals. I have what I assume is a bit of arthritis in one of my shoulders and it will ache if I haven't been very careful about its use. That's about it. Not bad for a guy who is approaching retirement age.

On the other hand, I've never had a body that is particularly remarkable for athleticism or strength. I tried playing sports in school, but never excelled. My peers were better at running, jumping, throwing balls and other sports skills. I was made the "manager" of my junior high basketball team and given a score book instead of a uniform so that the team could meet the league requirements for giving every boy who went out for the team play in games without sacrificing their ability to win. It never bothered me. I could imagine what it might feel like to be a star athlete and I was impressed with the skills of other players.

What I have been good at is work. I could load a truck with 50# feed bags as quickly as an adult when I was still in high school. I can work a shovel or rake. I can handle an axe and split wood with a maul. I can row a boat or paddle a canoe and make good distance in a reasonable time. I'm not the biggest or the strongest. I'm just me.

One thing about aging that I enjoy is that I have learned to enjoy being just who I am. When I was younger, I might imagine myself to be someone who would become famous. I like writing so I imagined being like Hemingway or Tolstoy or Steinbeck. I like singing, so I imagined what it might be like to be on stage with a room full of cheering fans. I enjoy leading liturgy, so I could imagine being called to preach in a cathedral or deliver a lecture series in a major university. My imagination often got me to thinking about what it might be like to be famous and well known.

I don't spend much time with that kind of imagination these days. At the well-seasoned age of sixty-three I know that I'm unlikely to become a famous author or a sought-after

speaker or someone who is recognized in a crowd. And, at this age, I've learned to be quite comfortable with who I am.

The one life I have been given is remarkable and wonderful in so many ways. It isn't just that I've been spared pain that others have had to endure, though that is in itself a precious gift. I have a life that has been touched by and touches the lives of others. I have relationships that matter and that connect me to a web of other people who are engaged in meaningful activities. Together we form a community and my role in the community involves tasks that fit well with my skills. I have meaningful work and am surrounded by people who care.

When I walk, I am aware of what an incredible ability that alone is. And when I step down just right (or perhaps just wrong) I can feel a twinge of pain in my ankle that reminds me that I am fully alive. When I wake in the morning and have done a bit of work, I can feel just enough hunger in my belly to remind me that I have a well-stocked pantry and enough food to sustain me. When I dress for the day, I look into my closet and see enough choice to remind me of the gifts of freedom. When I check my e-mail and phone messages there are enough there to remind me that others still desire my attention.

Instead of seeking to be famous, it seems to me to be sufficient to discover myself in a small circle of light in a sometimes very dark world, a modest bit of meaning in the midst of chaos. I may not change the world, but I can interact with it in ways that matter.

And when I look at my hands, I discover that I like them. The scar from an old accident with a cross cut saw in the woods years ago, the creaks in the joints from hours of grasping hand tools, the bumps and calluses and even the small scabs from the most recent encounters with harsh or sharp surfaces - these all have stories that accompany them. My hands have been with me for the entire journey of my life. And they serve me well. They can still do over 70 words per minute on the keyboard. They still can remove the lid from the peanut butter jar unassisted. They still can hold a baby and splash the waters of baptism.

Life has been good to me and I have every reason to believe that goodness will continue.

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## Shaped by Song – November 5, 2016

My mother had a modest collection of 33 rpm albums of Broadway soundtracks. I grew up listening to Rodgers and Hammerstein: Oklahoma!, South Pacific, and The King and I. There were other musical soundtracks as well. As I entered my teens, I obtained a few more soundtracks, some of which I played over and over in my own room on a tiny cassette player before the days of portable stereo devices.

The lyrics became embedded in my memory and I have the ability to amuse, and sometimes annoy, my family by recalling lyrics at different times. Many events or activities inspire short bursts of song from me.

It is a tradition that I have, in part, passed down to our children. I remember days, when our daughter was a teenager, driving to the lake to paddle with her in the right hand seat of our car and both of us singing songs from “The Muppets Treasure Island” together:

“Hey, ho, ho  
You’ll cruise to foreign shores (Ha ha ha! Sing it, lads!)  
And you’ll keep your mind and body sound  
By working out of doors  
True friendship and adventure are what we can’t live without  
And when you’re a professional pirate  
That’s what the job’s about!”

As the ancients knew, songs are an excellent teaching and learning tool. When you learn a song, you learn its contents and meanings and they become part of your identity. Think of reciting the alphabet. There are a few folks, my age and older who memorized the alphabet as a monotone recitation, but most folks any younger learned it as a song made popular by the public TV show Sesame Street. They sing the alphabet when they recite it. And when they try to say the letters without the song, the rhythm of the music remains. It is the way they learned the order of the letters and it is the way they recall that order.

Sometimes, when a song comes to my head, it helps me figure out what is going on in my emotions. I understand that is a relatively backwards way of self-understanding, but it seems to work for me.

Lately, I have caught myself several times with the words and tune of “I, Don Quixote” in my head. You probably know at least part of the song:

“I am I, Don Quixote  
The Lord of la Mancha,  
My destiny calls and I go,  
And the wild winds of fortune

Will carry me onward,  
Oh whithersoever they blow!”

In the musical, before the song, Cervantes sets the stage: Alonso Quijana is a no-longer-young country squire who is retired and spends much of his time with books. His late-night and all night long study sessions impress him with the evil of the ways people treat others. He comes up with the plan of becoming a knight-errant going forth into the world to right all wrongs.

The musical hit Broadway in the mid 1960’s. I can still remember the yellow album cover with simple black line drawings of the major characters. I was growing up in small town Montana with more than a few ideas and thoughts that distinguished me from my peers. I was often in the minority when discussing political candidates and elections. I was more interested in speech and debate than in athletics. I loved band and chorus more than any academic subjects. I dreamed of getting out of that town and going out into the world to find people who thought more the way that I did:

“To dream the impossible dream,  
To fight the unbeatable foe,  
To bear with unbearable sorrow  
To run where the brave dare not go;  
To right the unrightable wrong.  
To love, pure and chaste, from afar,  
To try, when your arms are too weary,  
To reach the unreachable star!”

The music inspired me before I had a clear sense of direction for my life - before I settled on my vocation - before I moved not only from that town, but also from the state of my birth.

But I haven’t thought of those songs for years. They hardly are the theme songs of my life. I’m not sure what the theme song of my life is, but it probably is a hymn that has been around the church for a long time. I haven’t lived my life as a rebel outsider. I have been enmeshed and nurtured by the institution of the church. I’ve been an insider and am, I suspect, seen by most people younger than I as a representative of mainstream institutions.

I’m no Don Quixote.

But I am an idealist. I do believe in the best in others. I do believe that we are capable of treating each other better than we have in the past. I generally am hopeful about the future and our role in leaving a better world for our children. And those beliefs and that hope is sometimes idealistic - even extremely idealistic.

I've lived long enough and witnessed enough suffering and pain to know that bad things happen to good people. I know that wishing for the best doesn't make it come true. I know that people with good intentions sometimes hurt those who are closest to them. I know that starting swordplay with windmills doesn't build a brighter future.

It takes more than a good theme song to accomplish good in this world.

I also know that the future of the world does not hinge on me, my life, my actions or my decisions. As important as my choices are to me, I am not the center of the world's action and there are many things far more important and influential than my life. Maybe, like the character in the musical, what I seek most is peace - the inner peace of knowing that I've done my best:

“This is any quest to follow that star,  
No matter how hopeless, no matter how far,  
To fight for the right  
Without question or pause,  
To be willing to march into hell  
For a heavenly cause!”

“And I know, if I'll only be true  
To this glorious quest,  
That my heart will lie peaceful and calm  
When I'm led to my rest.”

“And the world will be better for this,  
That one man, scorned and covered with scars,  
Still strove, with his last ounce of courage,  
To reach the unreachable stars!”

Some of the songs that I learned way back when still inspire me.

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## **Community in Diversity – November 6, 2016**

Last night was the annual Black Hills Works gala. It is one of many fund-raising dinners that non-profits hold in our community. A bunch of us from around the community make donations in exchange for a dinner and an evening's entertainment. There are a few speakers who talk about the benefits and contributions of the organization and a pitch is made for continuing support. It seems that these dinners, and now a few very similar lunches and breakfasts, are essential in keeping public awareness high for important organizations in our community.

The Works Gala, however is a bit different. First, and perhaps most importantly, the highlight of the evening are awards that are made to recognize outstanding individuals among those who receive services from Works. The high achievements, resilience, courage and energy of those honored is always inspirational. I find myself with tears in my eyes as I watch the videos telling the story of these members of our community. Everything else aside, it is a powerful experience to witness those presentations.

Additionally, last night's entertainment was provided by Flutter Productions a dance/theater group which combines "fully abled" (whatever that means) and disabled persons together onstage. If you haven't seen such a production, I highly recommend availing yourself of the opportunity when presented.

The effect was a fully-engaging evening that celebrated our community with all of its diversity.

At the dinner, while we were visiting with others before the meal was served, I had a brief conversation with a friend who is running for political office. He commented that he was out to enjoy an evening that was free of politics, not about him, and not about the campaign - a time to just enjoy being a member of our community. The conversation then turned, briefly to politics, of course.

People are anxious about the coming election. The tone of political rhetoric has been upsetting, especially in the race for President. There has been an unusually high amount of deception and lying and the fact checkers point out again and again that the candidates say things that are blatantly untrue. There have been dire threats made about what will happen if one or the other candidates is elected. The vitriol and anger has been more than merely off-putting. It has been frightening.

And it has been going on for so long.

November 8 is literally the latest that an election can fall on the calendar. Because the constitution specifies the first Tuesday after the first Monday of the month of November, this year turns out to be as late as it can get.

For a preacher, it is a challenge to know what balance to achieve when making public presentations. Do I or do I not mention politics when I address my congregation? Were I to be completely silent, it would be a failure to address one of the most important things going on in the lives of those I serve. My job is to enable people to make connections between their faith and their everyday lives. For anyone who watches television or reads a newspaper or spends time exploring the Internet, this election is part of our everyday lives. I did write a piece for our church newsletter about voting as a spiritual discipline and an opportunity to consider Jesus' invitation to think of our neighbors and to act for others.

On the other hand, my congregation doesn't want me to take sides when issues are contentious. To do so would be to risk alienating those who disagree with me. One of my roles in the church is to remind people that we can form genuine community in the face of disagreement. We are bound by faith, not by political ideology. Unlike some religious organizations that print voter guides and attempt to influence the way their members vote, ours is a congregation that trusts our members to make their own decisions and understands that we won't vote as a block.

Frankly, I am grateful for the diversity in my congregation. I enjoy listening to people whose perspective is different than my own. I don't mind spending time with those who are likely to vote different than I will. I do get a little tired of too much regurgitated rhetoric from particularly slanted television news programs and I am likely to turn off televisions in waiting rooms if the remote is left where I can get my hands on it, but that is a different topic entirely.

Our Congregational forebears had a tradition of an election day sermon. The sermon wasn't, as some have described it, a political rally where people came and were advised how to vote before casting their ballots. Rather the election day was considered to be a holiday with multiple public events and whenever people gathered, sermons were part of the event. The preacher would make a presentation after many of the ballots had already been cast and generally election day sermons were reminders of the rule of law and the benefits of living with the decision of the people.

Perhaps that is a role that I might be called to assume. With all of the dire threats that have been made about shutting down government, refusing to fulfill constitutional obligations, and other reactions to losing the election, our leaders need to be reminded that we continue to be a nation of laws and of institutions deeply rooted in our history and traditions. I can imagine the need for more than a few peacemakers to calm the fervor that some will attempt to stir.

But don't look to me for partisan campaigning from the pulpit. I have more important things to say. And one of those messages is about the wonder and joy of life in community with those who are differently abled and differently behaved than ourselves. Last night's dinner did indeed prove to be a wonderful respite from the contentious

election process. Together we celebrated the contributions to our community of people living with disabilities. Political dissension may have caused deep rifts in our community, but the strength of the community exceeds those divisions.

Black Hills Works is a community service institution that is deeply rooted in the love of parents for their children and their desire to provide the best for their offspring. That love is far stronger than the forces that threaten to divide us.

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## **Studying the Statistics – November 7, 2016**

I know that statistics provide a way of viewing the past and that they rarely have much value as a way of predicting the future, but there are patterns that can be detected. Recently, when trying to gain understanding suicide in our community, I turned to the statistics. I began to compare our state to its neighbors looking for similarities and differences. Whenever I do this, I keep in mind that statewide averages don't tell us what we need to know about South Dakota because the two ends of our state are radically different. In Eastern South Dakota, suicide rates run very close to national averages. Those numbers, while not good, are significantly lower than the Western part of our state. Here in Pennington County, our suicide rate has been as high as 2 1/2 times the national average.

Every suicide is a tragedy with wide-ranging consequences. Those who have lost loved ones to suicide themselves live with an increased chance of dying by suicide. Suicide grief is unique. The stigma attached to mental illness extends to suicide. People don't want to talk about it and those who suffer the pain of loss feel that they don't have support in the community. I don't want a discussion of statistics to cloud this simple fact: one death by suicide is too many. However, the numbers do tell a story.

If you look at statewide averages, every year in the past decade when our rate has equaled or exceeded the rate in Colorado, South Dakota has experienced a drop in the rate the following year. In 2006, our statewide rate was higher than Colorado's. 2007 was the lowest number of suicides in South Dakota since I've been following the numbers. We exceeded Colorado again in 2010, and had a dip in 2011, though not as dramatic as was the case in 2007. In 2013, the rate was virtually the same in the two states, and again, in 2014, South Dakota experienced a dip. We don't have the numbers in for 2016 yet, but it appears that we will be very similar as a state to Colorado. How I wish the numbers were predictive and we might experience a drop in 2017.

One more thing about statistics before I proceed. The rate of death by suicide continues to increase. If you think you've heard more about suicide in recent years one of the reasons is that the number of suicides is increasing. Nationally, we will probably top 13

suicides per 100,000 people this year. South Dakota's rate will likely be in the range of 18 per 100,000. Here in Pennington County, we could see numbers as high as 29 per 100,000.

Suicide is a phenomenon that we only partly understand. Its causes and the dynamics in individual cases are varied. And it is hard to study the act of suicide because much of the evidence is lost with the death. There is a lot that we simply don't know about what leads up to death by suicide. So we look for commonalities. We search for other factors that might explain what is going on. There are some things we can observe. Suicide rates are higher in areas where access to psychiatric treatment is limited. In rural areas there are fewer psychiatrists and the wait for an appointment can be long. Here in our county a person experiencing suicidal ideation might wait for up to three weeks to be seen by a psychiatrist.

The use of medications to treat psychological symptoms continues to rise at a rapid rate. Because people don't have access to psychiatrists, nearly 80% of mood-altering drugs are prescribed by doctors who are not psychiatrists. Doctors often give these powerful medications to persons who have no psychiatric diagnosis. Let me be clear. I am not suggesting that these medications are the cause of the increase in suicide. Research into the field is challenging because people who take the medications are more likely to suffer from depression and depression is one of the leading causes of suicide. We simply don't have the evidence to suggest that there is a cause/effect relationship. What I do believe, however, is that we have come to believe that medications can provide a cure to our problems and when they fail to do so, a spiral of hopelessness begins. I routinely encounter people who are taking more than three psychotropic medicines. The person doesn't respond to the first medicine, so another is added. The process continues. Multiple powerful mood-altering drugs at the same time is, for most people sub-optimal treatment.

Because there are multiple causes for depression, we shouldn't expect there to be a one-size-fits-all treatment for the condition. I have read that antidepressant medication alone works in only about half of the situations where it is prescribed.

When people don't receive treatment that works for their illnesses, the risk of death by suicide increases.

There is something else that has been going on over the past decade. While suicide remains more common among men than women, the rate of death by suicide among middle-aged women in our community has been increasing steadily since at least 2007. The women who are dying seem to be mostly white and tend to have jobs that are physically demanding. While labels such as blue collar and white collar don't fully describe the individuals in our community, those dying by suicide tend not to be working in offices, but rather in service jobs such as housekeeping and janitorial, as well as retail trades. They often are working at multiple jobs at the time of their deaths.

Women who die by suicide are likely to be taking medicine for psychological illnesses. Nearly 1 in 4 women aged 50 to 64 in our community are taking an antidepressant according to federal health statistics. That means that they and at least a physician are aware that illness exists and that there is an attempt to find a solution.

I don't have the answers. And I doubt that studying the statistics will provide the insights that are needed to prevent suicide in our community. But neither will ignoring the problem. So we continue to study and to respond and to build awareness in our community. It is that third part - building awareness - that I see as critical. This blog is one more attempt at that task.

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## **Election Day, 2016 – November 8, 2016**

Early voting is allowed in South Dakota and I have read that there are large numbers of people who have taken advantage of that opportunity. I, however, have chosen to wait until today to cast my ballot. I like the process of going to the fire station near my home, standing in line with people from my neighborhood, greeting the poll workers who are my neighbors, and casting my ballot in the temporary booths set up around the room. It is the same room where my mother voted towards the end of her life after she moved to our home and registered to vote in our state. It is the same place that I have cast my ballot in every election since I moved here 21 years ago. (Actually I did vote early once at the court house when I had to be away from town on election day.)

The process gives me a sense of connection with the other citizens of my country. Not that connection means unity. I don't often vote with the majority in my community. My political opinions often differ from those of my neighbors. Still, it is a good feeling to be a part of participatory democracy and to vote my conscience. I've studied the sample ballot. I've listened to the voices of the campaign and now I am ready.

It has been a particularly grueling and nasty campaign. The tone and mood that has infused the presidential race has been reflected in the rhetoric of more local races and the ardent enthusiasm of some of the supporters has made usual conversation difficult in some places.

Now that election day has arrived, it is important for our great country to get on with the work that lies ahead of us.

First, a story that I read about a moment much earlier in the campaign. Nick Bryant, New York correspondent for BBC news tells of traveling with Ohio Governor John Kasich when he was a contender for the Republican nomination for president. The campaign was stopped in Michigan. Kasich implored his aids and the reporters who

were traveling with them, to take their eyes off of their smart phones and other devices and look around them.

It is advice that I would like to pass on to my fellow citizens today. As we look around to discern the mood of our nation in the days after the election, I pray that we might not rely too heavily on social media and instead look into the eyes of our neighbors. If we listen to one another instead of whoever is most prolific on Facebook or Twitter we will gain an important perspective on the true nature of our community. It is a simple fact that the landscape of the United States and the people of our country are far more intriguing, wonderful and beautiful than is portrayed by the media. Those loud, yelling crowds are made up of individuals with thoughts, feelings, aspirations and ideas that are unique and wonderful. Those individuals are worthy of our time and attention. And, quite frankly, they are more intelligent and more thoughtful than the mindless messages they pass on in social media.

Recently I was talking to my son about a trip he will take next week from his home in Olympia, Washington to a meeting in Bethesda, Maryland. We spoke of the challenge of navigating so many time zones and needing to be fresh and energetic for the meetings. When you travel from west to east the day gets compacted. Evening arrives hours before you expect it. You crawl into bed before you are sleepy and the alarm goes off the next morning so early it surprises you. On the trip back home the day seems impossibly long. The flight takes nearly the same amount of time, but it seems like such a long time since you woke and began your day. I recalled a time when I served on a committee engaged in the search for the general minister and president of our denomination. The committee met in Baltimore, Maryland. I remembered the challenge of travel days. I suggested to my son that he request a window seat on the airline. Not only do you get to witness the change in daylight as you travel, you also get to look down on the nation as you pass over it. Even if you are traveling at night you can see the lights of cities passing below you and get a sense of the scope of this nation. On his eastward journey he will take off over the magnificent cascade mountains and be able to see the rockies beneath the airplane if the weather is clear. He should notice the great lakes and other large geographical features.

And he will notice the cities. It will be unescapable as he rides from the airport around the beltway of the Washington, DC area. There are a lot of people in that part of the world. Outside of four years of graduate school, when we lived in Chicago, I have spent my life in places that are more rural and more remote than the great cities of our land. But it is important for me to make a regular practice of paying attention and remembering that those cities aren't just blocks of red and blue that make up an electoral map. They are the places of homes of millions of individual people and each of those persons has to make their way in this life, discovering how to obtain the essentials of food and shelter and healthcare, forging their own meanings and finding their own relevance in the midst of a nation of many other people.

Together we have to learn to live with one another.

Outside of this blog, I plan to stay away from social media for the most part for the next few weeks. I'm not that active in those arenas anyway. Instead, I hope to talk with and listen to the people in my community. This much I know: This country is far more beautiful than the current election cycle and its people are far better than what we have witnessed in social media. I'll be looking for that beauty and goodness.

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## **Today – November 9, 2016**

Lesson

Response

Epistle

Gospel

Four readings of sacred scripture

In a traditional liturgy

I have no illusions about the words I write

They are not scripture

But I have felt kinship with Epistle writers

A letter to the beloved community

A personal essay shared with a small group

History

Law

Wisdom

Prophet

Four genres

within the lesson

More even than the

lyrics of the response

the prophets

are the poets

of the bible

They

speak most eloquently

of the grief of the people

They cut through denial

with the call to reality

In the midst of despair  
Isaiah describes  
the new thing  
God is doing

New heavens  
New earth  
former things forgotten  
Jerusalem rejoicing  
people a joy  
they shall not hurt  
they shall not destroy  
you will say that day  
thanks to God

It may be  
that this is the time  
for a new thing  
what it is  
is yet to be revealed

it may be  
a time for prophets  
though they are difficult to find  
in a world of false prophecy

Still  
God  
is doing a new thing

I am no poet  
I write essays

But today  
is no day  
for an essay

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## **A Theological Diatribe – November 10, 2016**

I love Advent and Christmas. They are deeply meaningful times for me. As a theologian, I revel in the theology of the incarnation. God-in-flesh! God directly entering into the joys and mess and triumph and tragedy of human existence. However, as a theological concept, it was hardly invented by those who witnessed the life of Jesus. It was well worn and old long before Christianity existed. In the times of slavery in Egypt, Egypt had a theology of incarnation. Pharaoh was God incarnate. The human manifestation of the divine. In the time of Jesus, Roman theology was also incarnational theology. Caesar was God's presence on earth.

The radical theological innovation of Christianity - that challenged Rome and resulted in the Crucifixion of Jesus was the assertion that the ideology of government leaders being ordained by God was in fact wrong. The radical monotheism of Jesus' teaching directly confronted the incarnational theology of Rome.

But I have no intention of "preaching" my Advent theology in today's blog post.

While the theology of incarnation is not new to Christianity, there is another theological concept that is radically new with the rise of our faith - so much so that it is rejected by some even today. Deeply immeshed in our Jewish roots is a theology of substitutional atonement. It may have begun with our grandfather Abraham. At the near sacrifice of his son Isaac, a ram is offered at the last minute that saves the life of the boy. The idea is that God demands a sacrifice. Whether or not God actually made that demand or it was the product of Abraham's guilt we may never know. To put it simplistically, substitutional atonement asserts that humans sin so grievously that God is angered and demands a sacrifice. Then a substitute is offered and the punishment meant for human sinfulness is absorbed by a substitute. This theology has been preached from many a pulpit. "Jesus died for our sins," the preachers declare, imagining a god so angry that he is willing to kill his own son for the punishment of the sins of humanity.

When you think of being washed in the blood of the lamb as substitutional, it is a concept that is alarming and frightening and projects an image of a god so angry that the anger becomes vile.

This theology is not the theology of the Christian Scriptures, however.

Allow me to be perfectly clear. God did not kill Jesus. The Jewish authorities did not kill Jesus. Jews who did not convert to Christianity did not kill Jesus. Jesus was killed by the Roman authorities, who saw his challenge to their particular brand of incarnational theology.

We preach not the theology of substitution, but rather the theology of participation. We preach Christ crucified and resurrected. The choice of the word crucified is not accidental. Check its meaning: intentionally executed by governmental authorities.

Atonement with God comes not from substitution, but rather from participation. When the apostle Paul asserts, "We preach Christ crucified," he asserts that Jesus' death is at the core of the understanding of the Christian life. Christianity does not offer some kind of "get out of suffering free" card. Rather it embodies the promise that we are not alone in the depths of suffering. God in Christ is right there with us in the times of trial and pain.

In a theology of participatory atonement no one gets to resurrection except by going through death. We declare in the liturgy for the funeral: "When we were baptized into Christ Jesus, we were baptized into Christ's death. By our baptism, then, we were buried with Christ and shared Christ's death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from death by the glorious power of God, so too we might live a new life. (Romans 6:3-4) For if we have been united with Christ in a death like Christ's we will certainly be united with Christ in a resurrection like Christ's."

Suffering is not a sign of God's disfavor. It is not a punishment for sin or bad behavior. It is often the product of human decisions. Too frequently we participate in causing another's suffering not through our intentions, but through our insensitivity and unawareness of how our actions affect those of others. The question that prompted Jesus to tell the parable of the good Samaritan rings in our ears today: "Who is my neighbor?" It is accompanied by Jesus' instruction to "Go and do likewise."

This is critical because the promise that the main focus of life after death is punishment or reward does not find its origins in the teaching of Jesus or in the letters of Paul. Expressing faith in Jesus does not help a faithful person escape pain and suffering and sorrow and sadness. Churches that promise such are in no position to deliver on their promises.

I suspect that I am preaching to the choir with this little essay on theology. I don't have many readers and those I do have tend to be folks who agree with my point of view. What I do hope is that I can impress on those who read this my passion about the subject. While I am in no position to judge the faithfulness of other Christian preachers, it does sadden me to hear and see them leading people away from a biblical faith instead of leading their hearers into a deeper relationship with - a deeper participation in - the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. I grieve that some have formed an image of an angry and punitive God in their minds. There is not the God of grace and glory whose power of forgiveness we proclaim.

As we walk through the end of this year in the Christian calendar and look forward to the season of Advent once again, may we have the courage to look honestly at the Biblical

narrative and preach Christ crucified and risen who participates in human life and invites us to participate in his death and resurrection, not some mumbo-jumbo fake promise that you can avoid pain by saying the right sentence at the right time.

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## **Grief in the Aftermath – November 11, 2016**

Pastoral counseling is part of my daily routine. It often occurs in the context of casual conversations before and after meetings, a person dropping into my office, or someone I meet in my daily routines. I am used to listening to problems, challenges, grief, and other events in the lives of the people who are in my care. I am often the first on the scene to provide crisis counseling for issues ranging from accidents and illnesses to suicide and the victims of crime. I studied psychological counseling in graduate school and interned at the Wholistic Health Care Center, so I have a counseling background, but I make it clear that I do not engage in psychological counseling or intensive marriage counseling or other forms of formal counseling. I keep a good list of people to whom I can refer when I discover that a person needs counseling that reaches beyond my limited skills. Meaningful boundaries are essential to the practice of ministry and I am careful to be attentive to those boundaries.

Having said that, I've been doing a lot of counseling over the past couple of days. Interestingly, that counseling has been about equally divided between members of the church I serve and members of the community with whom I work on volunteer boards and other community projects. The rush this week is definitely grief counseling. There are people who are grieving the election of Donald Trump to be the next president of the United States. As I listen, which is the greatest part of counseling, what I am hearing is less an expression of personal dislike of the president elect, though there is a bit of that, and more a sense of the loss of community. These are thoughtful and insightful people who believed that the vision for our country was one of inclusion, where the talents and contributions of all were honored and respected. They believed that this was a country where a parent could tell their daughter that it was possible to grow up and become president of our country. They believed that ours was a nation that welcomed immigrants and integrated them into our common life. They believed that it is wrong for men to abuse women and that victims deserve a voice. They believed that racism and sexism and homophobia and Islamaphobia are wrong. And it seems to them that their dreams are no longer possible now that we have a president who so directly embodies the things that they find to be morally objectionable.

They are dismayed that what they see as moral imperatives have been dismissed by others as political correctness. They had looked forward to celebrating the nation's first woman president and woke to what they see as the triumph of sexism.

What seems to be most common among those whose grief I have witnessed is despair over the attitude of their neighbors. One employee of Black Hills Works, an agency that provides services to people with disabilities in our community, said, "How can my fellow employees vote for a bully - for someone who publicly mocks those with disabilities?" The grief was that now after the election, this person no longer trusts those who voted for the president elect.

The grief I have heard is grief over the loss of a sense that our nation is a nation of moral decency. One person asked me, "How could we elect a president who doesn't believe in paying his bills, who doesn't pay his taxes and who won't own up when caught in a direct lie?"

I have also paid enough attention to social media to know that those who favored the election of President Trump are responding to the grief of their fellow citizens with a wall of denial - denying that he ever expressed racism, denying that his running mate is the author of homophobic laws, claiming that trash talk of women is acceptable in locker rooms.

Perhaps saddest was the person who spoke to me about his wife's health problems. She is facing a very serious and life threatening brain tumor. She will need surgery within the next couple of weeks and years of follow-up therapy. Their family was uninsured until the Affordable Health Care Act made it possible for them to obtain health insurance. Now he fears that the likely repeal of that act will leave them without insurance facing bills that will certainly exceed their ability to pay. He was close to tears not because of his fears about the future, but because of the inability of his peers in his workplace to understand his disappointment. "They just don't care! They just don't get it!" he declared.

I am enough of a student of the Bible and have read enough of the wisdom of Walter Brueggemann to know that our faith is deeply steeped in a tradition of prophetic reality as the answer to ideologies; prophetic grief as the response to denial; and prophetic hope as the alternative to despair. Ideologies lead to denial and denial leads to despair. Read the stories of the fall of Jerusalem or the destruction of the second temple. Read the words of the prophets.

I don't know the political opinions of those who read my blog, but I certainly hope that there are, among my readers people of different political opinions. To be specific I hope that there are those who voted for Trump and those who voted for Hillary and those who voted for someone else. I suspect that there are readers who didn't vote in this election. I don't want to surround myself only with those who agree with me. I am grateful to live in a community with a wide variety of political opinions.

So I assume that there are readers who are celebrating the victory of president-elect Trump. I hope that they will have some compassion and understanding for those who

are grieving. However, if they do not, we need to find the moral courage to treat them with love and respect. Jesus has taught us to not be afraid and, as the first letter to John teaches, "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love."

May we become perfected in love in the days and years that are to come.

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## **Books – November 12, 2016**

The Carnegie library in my home town was just one block down main street from our home. Our home was 500 Main Street. The Library was 314 Main. In the days when I was growing up there were two huge Colorado Blue Spruce trees in front of the building, With their closely spaced branches, they were a bit of a challenge to climb, but we could climb higher than the roof of the building. The library itself was a red brick building with a half-buried sandstone basement. In front steps led up to a pair of wooden doors with more steps going up inside of the door. There were stacks both upstairs and down. The librarian's desk was near the middle of the upstairs room with the reference stacks behind. There are many other details which I remember, mostly about the locations of books and the temperament of the librarian. I remember that there was a limit of 10 books that could be checked out on a single library card at any given time. Sometime when I was 7 or 8 years old, we persuaded the librarian to extend that number to 12 and then to 15 books that I was allowed to check out.

Failure to return books on time resulted in fines that were assessed in pennies per day, but it was more than money. In our home, failure to return a library book on time was a sign of a serious infraction. We were expected to return our books on time and in good shape. Besides the only way to get more books was to return the ones you had. I spend most of my summers with the maximum number of books checked out on my card.

My voracious reading took a slump somewhere during my high school years. I focused on earning my pilot's license and studied a single book in more depth than I ever had previously done. When I finished Wolfgang Langewiesce's "Stick and Rudder," I started over at the beginning and read more carefully than I had the first time through.

When I arrived at college I was quick to obtain a job at the college library. I was the person to open the library for business each morning. The library experienced very little business in its first hour and I was free to study and to go through the stacks in search of books that interested me. The reading for course work in college was significantly higher than it had been in high school and I was a fairly focused student, so I mostly read for the classes I was taking, but I read supplemental materials and extra books from the bibliographies for most of the classes I took.

In graduate school, I had full access to the seminary library, the library of the University of Chicago Divinity School and the Joseph Regenstein Library, home to 4.5 million volumes. And, by that time, I had begun collecting a modest library of my own. By weight, our books have been the biggest part of our household ever since.

I read almost no fiction from my second year of high school until midway through my graduate school career. That meant that I missed out on many of the novels and plays that other students read at that point in their lives. Upon graduation, I poured myself into fiction for a while, almost as if I was making up for lost time.

These days my reading interests are eclectic. I virtually always have a couple of theological books that I am reading. I belong to a book club that processes books slowly, often only a chapter a week, so while I like to keep up with that reading, the pace demands that I read other things. There is a lot of publication in my field, so there are always unread books around. Right now I have a stack of unread theological books in my office at work and another here in our home. I try to always have a volume of poetry available for reading in short bursts while I am waiting. I like to have some fiction in my life. And I enjoy stories of adventure, especially boat and canoe expeditions, stories of travels in the far north and historical books about our region.

It happens that for some reason, I finished multiple books close to each other last week. I had been reading W. H. Auden's "For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio," a very densely-written poem that I was reading out loud because of the challenging verbiage. I was also reading "Beauty is a Verb," an emotionally challenging collection of essays and poems by and about disabled persons. I came to the end of both volumes on the same day. The occasion prompted a shuffling of my stack of books to read. At the top of the current pile was a new volume on the death penalty that was sent to me by a colleague three or four months ago. I should read it, and I will, but I wasn't eager to launch into something that emotionally charged after the week I've been through. Simon Montefiore's "Jerusalem" has been out for nearly five years and I still haven't cracked the cover. But somehow a 600+ page history book with more than 50 pages of footnotes seemed like a more challenging read than my mood last night. I shuffled through the pile and my eye fell on "Barren Grounds: The Story of the Tragic Moffatt Canoe Trip by Skip Pessi. I got that volume after reading a review in a magazine to which I subscribe. But that book is a sort of a response to "Death on the Barrens" another account of the same trip by George Grinnell. I really should have both perspectives and I often prefer to read books in the order that they were published.

I ended up setting aside my books and reading a couple of magazines instead last night.

I'll take up a book today and I've got two going at the office, so I won't run out of things to read. But something tells me that were I to have stayed in my home town, I wouldn't need the 15-book limit on my library card any more. I probably could get along with four

or five. On the other hand, had I stayed in that town, the tiny library wouldn't have many volumes that I haven't read by now.

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## **Spitting Image – November 13, 2016**

I have very few direct memories of my maternal grandfather. I was only 2 years old when he died. Although I know lots and lots of stories about him, memories that come from my own direct experience are, at best, hazy. What I can remember is an incident when he was sitting in an overstuffed chair and he was laughing. I was told when I was growing up that he was delighted by the way I walked when I was a toddler. Apparently I would lean forward to the point of being off balance and then pump my feet to get the lower half of my body to catch up. I couldn't stop without falling forward for a while.

On the other hand, I have lots of memories of my paternal grandfather who lived until I was a college student. My earliest memories of him include "helping" with a carpentry project, when, in order to distract me from the work he was trying to accomplish, he pounded a series of nails into a 2x4 and taught me to pull them with a claw hammer. My "job" then was to straighten the nails and put them into a nail apron. Apparently it kept me distracted for quite a while.

When I was still quite young, I remember one of my uncles telling me that I was the "spitting image" of Pop - the name my mother and her sisters used for their father. I was a bit amazed at the comment - mostly because I didn't know what it meant. First of all, I couldn't quite imagine my mother's father spitting. There was a disciplined Methodist household, and there was no tobacco use, so my Pop wouldn't have been a man to spit like the ranchers and others I knew who would pinch a wad of tobacco into their mouths. I probably was a bit enamored with my own ability to spit at the time. Although he would never chew tobacco, it didn't seem too far fetched that my other grandfather might spit from time to time, but only when he was outdoors. I had been given that rule enough times that I was pretty sure it applied to everyone in our family.

Later, when I became more aware of appearances, I pondered the long-ago comment from another perspective. I don't think that I ever looked much like my maternal grandfather when it comes to appearances. I do bear quite a bit of physical resemblance to my father, and I think a bit to my paternal grandfather, but less so to my mother's father. I hope that the comment was a bit informed by attitude and personality. Perhaps I carry a bit of my grandfather's tenacity and seriousness and attitude toward life.

The term "spitting image" is a colloquialism that is hundreds of years old. Like beat the band, piece of cake, or knock on wood, its exact origins have probably been lost, but there are plenty of theories about the term's beginning.

I've read that the original term might have been "spit and image" altered by frequent use and a touch of linguistic laziness.

I've also heard that some linguists believe that the original term was "splitting image," as though a person had been split into two mirror images.

The third explanation for the term that I've encountered is that it derived from melding "spirit and image," as in "he's the very spirit and image of his father."

The first explanation, "spit and image," probably has the most support among etymologists. Laurence Horn, professor of linguistics at Yale University, points out that "spitten" is the dialectical past participle of spit." It is a word that is rarely used in contemporary speech, but it is a real word nonetheless despite the fact that the spell checker on my word processor doesn't know it. Horn is probably technically correct on the origins of the term.

However, Horn has another term that inspires me. He has coined the term "Etymythology." It is an offshoot of etymology: "The invention of lexical urban legends that explains various expressions in the language without any actual historical support for them."

Using Horn's term, I prefer the etymythological story of spitting image deriving from spirit and image. I like to think that I have a bit of the spirit of my maternal grandfather in me.

Whether or not I have his spirit, I do have his bible. The leather-bound "International" version book lives in its own cedar box along with a card from his candidacy for district judge, a position that he won. He also served terms in the Montana Senate. The bible itself is slightly larger than my palm and has black and white illustrations, some of artwork and others are actual photographs of landscapes, people and animals of the Middle East. The binding of the book is secure and it shows the evidence that although it was used, it was always handled with respect and care and that it was returned to its cedar box when it wasn't being read.

I have crystal clear memories of my own father reading from that Bible on Christmas Eve as our family recalled the Christmas Story gathered around the piano in our living room. The Bible used to live in the bookcase above the piano. I admired the varnished wooden box that made the volume stand out from all of the other books on the shelf.

I, of course, have lots of other bibles, and I don't use Pop's bible for daily reading or for study work. I've looked at it many times, but for the most part I use different Bibles for my day-to-day spiritual disciplines. I get it out when I want to think of my mother and grandparents. It is a family reminder.

Now that I'm a grandfather myself and have the perspective of time, I really hope that I can reflect some of Pop's spirit in such a way that it might be evident in the lives of my grandchildren. I can recognize qualities and traits of my forebears in the children of our son.

The image may or may not be spitting. But it is an image.

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## **Fascinating Conversations – November 14, 2016**

I had a brief conversation with a particle physicist yesterday. In addition to his university teaching duties, his area of research involves very large collaborative experiments, some of which are taking place at the Sanford Underground Research Facility in the former Homestake Mine in Deadwood. Our conversation, however, was not about his academic career or the objects of his research. We were speaking about the differences between substitutionary atonement and participatory atonement, a topic about which I blogged in the last week.

My friend is amazingly concerned about having "right" thinking about all kinds of topics and he wanted to check my opinion. He has had quite a bit of experience with a more fundamental theology and the assertion, "Christ died for our sins," is very meaningful for him. He isn't ready to reject substitutionary atonement, though he understands the concept of participatory atonement. I tried to assure him that the two theological concepts are not mutually exclusive. Although it was a bit bungled, I used an analogy from his field, saying, "It is like particle physics and quantum physics. Both search for the same truth, they just don't speak the same mathematical language. We are no closer to a unified theology than we are to a unified theory of physics."

I doubt that my answer was reassuring to him. Time did not permit the longer and deeper conversation that the subject demands.

I am amazed at my friend. He probably finds me equally hard to understand. It seems to me that the scientific mind must thrive on doubt. The process of formulating a theory and then testing it must require the ability to question even the most basic observations. Like scientific inquiry, theological thought thrives on doubt. The opposite of faith isn't doubt. The opposite of faith is certainty. If you are certain, there is no need for faith.

It is possible, though I don't know this for certain, that my friend is just a little bit fundamentalist in his approach to mathematics. I'm pretty sure that he examines the work of his students to make sure that their calculations are correct and that their mathematical work conforms to the established rules of mathematics. He sees mathematics as a beautiful language, and although he is aware that the mathematics of

different areas (such as particle and quantum physics) don't always agree, he believes that the differences will some day be explained by either an error in the mathematics or an as yet undiscovered mathematical principal. Perhaps that is part of the energy behind the search for dark energy and dark matter - they may hold the key to being better able to observe, measure and understand the as yet hidden nature of the universe.

The past couple of centuries have been a time of rapid scientific discovery. There have been so many advances in science and technology and the pace of discovery and innovation are accelerating so quickly, that we have begun to expect that all advances and answers can be discovered in a short amount of time. The changes in a single lifetime are mind boggling. Even though my friend's life is just a little bit more than half of my own, he is aware of the rapid advance of science and technology in his own time.

Such rapid advance has taught us to expect discovery and increased understanding to come quickly.

Theology, on the other hand, moves at a different pace. Some of our most cherished theological convictions are the product of multiple generations of thought and prayer and communal conversation. The true nature of God always lies just beyond our grasp. It is one of the things that makes arguing with an atheist such a non event for a theologian. The atheist describes the god in which he does not believe, but has not invested the time to get to know the God of the theologian. "I don't believe in the god you don't believe in either, but the God I do believe in takes a lifetime and more to understand." Most public atheists haven't spent enough time with the deep concepts of theology to be able to offer a systematic rejection of faith. As a result their arguments seem to theologians to be things that have already been said and explored. It isn't that atheism poses a threat to my faith, it is rather, such a simple interpretation of the world that it is boring. There are much more complex theological ideas that capture my attention.

That is one of the things that makes conversation with my friend so fascinating. He isn't an atheist. He is a highly-educated person whose education was so specialized that he has invested comparatively little time thinking directly about theology. However, God is so infused in this creation that his legitimate scientific explorations continue to inform his faith explorations. Were we to talk of physics, which we often do, he has to slow down his thinking and spend a great deal of time explaining jargon and basic principles that he long ago embraced in order for me to understand. When we talk theology, I can't assume that he has read all of the books that I have or encountered all of the historic discoveries that I take for granted. Our conversations, of necessity, bring out the teacher in one or both of us. Clearly he has as much to teach me as I have to teach him.

One of the gifts of education is its ability to enable one to see what we do not know. We become educated about our ignorance. We become aware that there are limits to our understanding. A physicist has to live with the reality that each new discovery will reveal more that is not yet understood. It is a life of inquiry and there will never be a time when all is fully understood. In fact, the opposite occurs: the more that is understood the larger the field of inquiry into that which is not understood.

It is very much like theology. The closer we come to an understanding of God, the more we discover that God is greater, more complex, and farther beyond our understanding.

We speak different languages, but my physicist friend and I are engaged in the same enterprise.

The universe participates in the mystery of God. Study either and you'll encounter that mystery.

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### **Pursuing the Vision – November 15, 2016**

Four decades ago I worked briefly with a client who had come to our health center filled with many different kinds of fears and problems. Her diagnosis and eventual treatment are not my story to tell, but the lesson for me in the encounter was that there are times when I am not able to solve the problems of all of the people with whom I come into contact. I had counseling skills and those skills had been helpful to other people, but in this case, the illness was too severe for my particular skills to be the sole remedy. The counsel that I did provide in a few weeks may have bought some time for more intensive care to be put in place, but my general feeling was of being inadequate to the situation. Working with my supervisor, our center quickly made a series of referrals and helped her to obtain more intensive care.

I remember one session where she was literally cringing in the corner of the room, describing creatures that were attacking her. I could not see the creatures. I could not perceive the source of her fear. All I could do was attempt to reassure her, let her know of my presence, ask what I could do to help, and offer what I had.

Much later, after a time of hospitalization, a change in medications, and other treatments, she stopped by our clinic and asked to see me. I welcomed her into my office, not knowing what to expect. She brought me a snowflake Christmas tree ornament made out of white crochet thread and stiffened with starch. She offered it as a gift of thanks for what she called the day I saved her life. On that day when I had felt overwhelmed and unable to know what to say and without the resources to calm her fears she had somehow been reassured by my presence. "You didn't leave me alone," she said. "You didn't throw me out because I am crazy."

I hang that ornament on our Christmas tree every year. It serves as a reminder to me that we are called to be present to one another even when we feel we are not up to the task. Sometimes we can be a blessing without knowing that we are.

Over the years since that time I have frequently encountered situations where I feel inadequate to the needs that surround me. My heart goes out to people who are suffering deep grief and I know that there is nothing I can do to ease their pain. It is often in the face of tragic loss that words fail me. I can offer a presence, but do not have words of comfort, because there are no words that will make the suffering less.

It is, however, far easier for me to be in a situation where I can see a person's pain even when I can do nothing to ease that pain than it is for me to come face to face with someone who is unaware of the pain they cause. Careless and sometimes cruel words are uttered and I can see the harm they are causing and I am silent when I should speak up. The color of my skin and the circumstances of my life often land me in situations of privilege. I hear a racist comment and I am silent. I hear words that I would never myself speak and I fail to tell the speaker how much those words hurt.

I was raised to believe in the dream that we are making this world better for those who come after us. My parents worked tirelessly for civil rights for all people. They worked to build a community where each person was valued and had the opportunity to participate in meaningful ways. And I have pursued that dream in my personal and professional life. There are some small symbols of that work in the places where I used to serve. I've raised funds for access elevators and accessible bathrooms and I've helped construct wheelchair ramps and install door openers. The physical barriers, however, aren't the biggest obstacles in the communities that I have served. We have struggled to welcome a more diverse congregation, learning to re-purpose budgets as we welcome members with lower financial means. We have incorporated words of welcome into our weekly liturgy: "No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here."

Our community, of course, is imperfect. Although we have some racial diversity, we're not the church of choice for very many of our Lakota neighbors. Our elected leadership is made up predominantly of people who are remarkably similar to one another in age, race and financial means.

So we keep working. We keep inviting those who are different from ourselves. We are careful with the words we use to make sure that we are not excluding others. We reach out in the ways we are able to offer help and support to those beyond the walls of our church.

One of the great mentors for me has been Vincent Harding. I've never met him face-to-face, but have read his words. He was a professor at Iliff School of Theology in Denver

and is author of “Hope and History,” “There is a River,” and other books. He offers his voice of calm and tells of his passionate pursuit of cross-cultural, cross-generational relationships. He is articulate about his desire for a beloved community that is not merely tolerant of integration, but rather spiritually connected at the deepest levels. His is a vision for the 21st century that stands in stark contrast to the rhetoric of hate and exclusion that is all too common in public discourse these days. His powerful paper, “Is America Possible?” reminds those who read it that ours is a nation whose dream is still unrealized and still worthy of our commitment.

The dream of our community as a beloved community is worthy of our time, commitment and passion. That dream does not die when it faces setback. It is not gone when our words fail us.

When I am at a loss for words, may I find the compassion to listen and the spiritual strength to be silent.

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## **Seeking Truth – November 16, 2016**

Biblical Hebrew doesn't have a distinction between upper case and lower case letters. In place of having capitals as we use in English writing, the text uses articles. There is truth and there is The Truth. It is a little bit more complex than that because the original Biblical texts don't have spacing to indicate the difference between individual words, let alone markings to designate sentences and paragraphs, so translating original texts can prove challenging. In more contemporary renderings of the texts, there are spaces between words and breath marks that allow readers to pause in appropriate places as they read.

Articles are not separate words, but rather prefixes attached to existing words, so in the example of the previous paragraph, truth is torah and The Truth is hatorah. That particular example is important because truth and truth telling is very important in the Biblical narrative. Because the texts circulated as oral tradition before they were written, it was essential that word-for-word accuracy be maintained. Small changes could mean big differences. There is just one word difference between “Thou shalt not commit adultery” and “Thou shalt commit adultery.” That difference is a big deal, however. To preserve the texts, ancients employed group memorization. The texts were handed down through a process of oral recitation in which there was an entire group of people participating and making corrections as the text was repeated.

It was only the advent of the printing press that allowed written language to approach the accuracy of spoken language. However, writing soon began to dominate research and technical communications. Before long the culture shifted to placing more trust in written documents than in spoken ones.

Returning to the example of truth and The Truth, the texts understood and expressed that human knowledge and perception is limited. The absolute truth is not possessed by humans, but rather known only to God. Humans can see partial truths and they can make judgments, but complete truth and the final judgment is left to God and God alone.

Any mother with more than one child or any police officer investigating a minor accident has had the experience of two people having a completely different memory of the same event. He-said-she-said arguments that offer only two eyewitness accounts often make it nearly impossible to obtain what might be called objective truth. Different witnesses will disagree about the color of the traffic signal with no way of knowing who is correct.

There is, however, a general agreement that such a thing as the truth exists. Our court system is based on a particular method of seeking the truth. It calls for multiple witnesses when available and a ritual of swearing to tell the truth. When people tell the truth to the best of their ability, a picture of a broader truth can emerge. And, when people intentionally lie in such a situation, the lies can be discovered and discounted. At least that is the theory.

I have, on occasion, commented that the standard of the oath that is sworn may be impossibly high for humans, however. The traditional promise, "to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth," is meaningful. To be honest, to be complete and to exclude falsehoods should be our aim in every interaction with others. However, there are lots of times when we are unsure of the truth and have only partial information. Only God knows the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth and to claim that I would have the ability to produce the same is a bit idolatrous. I have, however, on occasions when I have been called upon to produce sworn testimony, done by absolute best to be faithful the promise that I have made.

It seems to me, however, that we are entering a new world when it comes to truth telling. It may even be that we are already living in a post-truth society. There has already been much commentary given about the intentional falsehoods and direct lies that are circulated in social media. I am not very active on Facebook or Google, but when I do try to use those forums to connect with people, I am appalled at the number of stories and short posts that contain things that are directly contrary to objective truth. Direct and absolute lies circulate as if they were the truth.

In the recent political campaign an article stating that Pope Francis had endorsed Donald Trump was shared over 100,000 times. The pope did not endorse a candidate in the US election. And the sharing of direct lies is not contained by one political party or philosophy. Another article falsely stating that the Pope stated that Donald Trump is not a Christian also circulated to many thousands of viewers.

Once an article makes it to social media it seems to be passed on with no consideration to the truthfulness of the claims made. The result is that deceptive information is being passed around without restraint.

In most cases, the Internet itself provides the tools for simple fact checking. It isn't hard to find the truth. Pope Francis did say he would never interfere in an electoral campaign: "The people are sovereign. I would only say, study the proposals well, pray and choose with your conscience." The pope did not endorse either candidate. The truth is quite easy to discern. That didn't stop blatantly false stories from being delivered to hundreds of thousands of people.

Direct lies circulate every day. It is one of the reasons I am weary of social media.

A civil society can only be based on the truth. Direct misleading of people is not the hallmark of a free and open society. I've tried to be very careful with what I say in my blog and with what I share in every day life. But I am human. I have been misinformed. I have, on occasion, failed to undertake appropriate fact checking. I hope that my readers will hold me to a higher standard. I hope I will hear when I have passed on a factual error so that it can be corrected.

I pray that we will raise our standards above those of social media. We may not be able to possess the complete truth, but we can make every effort to tell the truth to the best of our ability.

In the meantime, don't count on me to pass on any story you sent to me on Facebook.

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## **Sales Pitches and Portraits – November 17, 2016**

There are a lot of sales pitches that are made directly to churches. We receive dozens of email messages every day that are aimed at selling us everything from candles to vestments to office supplies and more. We also received a fair amount of sales-pitch junk mail. Most of the vendors with whom we do business on the Internet also send us print catalogues of their wares. Then, of course, there are the telephone solicitors. Our administrative colleagues are very accomplished at screening those calls, but a few get through. I'm always amazed that someone is earning their living selling video bible studies or computer software over the telephone. Occasionally I will be a bit curt with a salesperson, asking them if they have ever considered the ethics of trying to get a church to purchase something that the church doesn't want. I've also tried to be funny, wondering out loud how a computer services company is so Internet ignorant that they are using the telephone to drum up business. I've even resorted to simply hanging up

the telephone on occasion. It causes no pain to the caller and lets that person get on to their next call quickly.

Yesterday, we had a salesperson come by the church on a cold call, hoping to make her pitch for photo directories. Our church has, in the past, purchased the services of directory companies, including the one whose salesperson came by. I don't know what makes it profitable for them to have an out-of-town salesperson just drop by without making an appointment, but it is annoying and being annoyed doesn't make me the most receptive to the sales pitch. I was working on things that seemed to me to be more important and the interruption wasn't welcome.

Church directory companies make their money by selling portraits to the families in the church. The church doesn't pay for the printed directories that are distributed and usually doesn't pay for the extra brochures and other items that are included as an incentive to get the company inside of the church. The company takes individual family portraits of church members and compiles them into an attractive book. Photo directories are nice things in churches. We find it useful to have pictures of our members. However, churches change at a quick pace and directories are already dated by the time they are printed. There are always people who are missing from the directory because they were out of town during the photo dates or because they are new to the church. There are always people who are in the directory who have left the church or who have passed away.

The process of lining up the people for their portraits is a huge job. In our church we have to schedule 150 or more families for their portraits. It takes multiple phone calls to schedule just one family. With the complexity of family schedules, the effort is massive.

Then there is the problem of the sales pitch. Despite claiming that there are no pressure sales, members of the church are presented with options for spending hundreds of dollars on prints, holiday cards, note cards, and a catalogue of other items for sale. The company always says there is no pressure, the people always complain about the pressure. And, having just been pressured by the company's sales representative, I'm not sure that they understand what pressure is.

The encounter got me to thinking about portraits in general. In our world of snapchat and selfies and ever-present cameras the meaning of a picture of oneself or one's family is different. As I write this morning, there are 14,529 photos and 192 videos on the computer that I am using. Not all of those photos are of people. I take a lot of pictures of lakes and sunrises and canoes and kayaks. But there are thousands of pictures of our grandchildren and thousands of other people as well.

And this is my home computer. There are a lot more pictures on the computer at the church. I average around 100 pictures per day when Vacation Bible School is in session. I've got scores of pictures of our large outdoor cross, of Woodchucks splitting

firewood and of our partners in Costa Rica and on the Cheyenne River and Pine Ridge Reservations.

There was a time when a single stately portrait, often painted by a recognized artist, was a prominent feature in a home. Family portraits were treasured and passed down for generations. That free 8 x 10 portrait from the church directory company doesn't share that kind of prominence in our family's possessions. We've participated in a half dozen or more church directories over the years and I don't think we've ever framed or displayed the print that we got to free.

It used to be handy to have a few wallet-sized pictures of oneself to accompany resumes and other professional documents, but all of that is done digitally these days and I have no need of actual printed pictures of myself.

We really don't know about the permanence of digital photos. Some services, like snapchat, are designed specifically for impermanence. The sender sets the number of seconds that are allowed for the recipient to look at the image before it disappears. Those pictures are somehow the opposite of the stately portraits that hung in expensive frames around the homes of the wealthy in previous generations. My photos have a different fate. With so many photos that have been collected and organized around different systems over the years, it is easy for a single image to become lost in the sheer volume of additional images.

I thought about telling the salesperson yesterday that I thought a free 8 x 10 portrait was a pretty small incentive to motivate a church member to sit through a 15-minute sales pitch. I don't sign up for "free" weekends at resorts in trade for high pressure time share sales, either. Instead, I just listened politely and got up to go back to work as soon as possible.

Who knows? We may do another photo directory sometime in the future. But if we do, it probably won't be the result of yesterday's sales call.

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## **Poets of Our Time – November 18, 2016**

When I was young, I was told that the Psalms were the hymn book of the Bible. In the church where I was raised, we didn't have a tradition of singing the psalms. They were read, usually responsively, from the section of our hymnal that had no tunes. I guess there was a certain musicality to the combination of voices in our congregation. I can still almost hear the booming bass of the judge who was always at least a half syllable slower than the majority of the congregation. I didn't really think of the psalms as songs, however. Later, when I was a bit older, I undertook reading all of the psalms to myself. I was a bit surprised at the amount of anger and anguish reflected in them. I guess I was

expecting all of the psalms to be upbeat and filled with praise. There are a lot of psalms of lamentation.

As an adult, I discovered the psalter and the techniques of chanting psalms with simple repetitive tunes and occasional responses from the congregation. There is a particular beauty in this way of singing the psalms, but I'm fairly certain that it has little connection to the way that the ancients recited the psalms before their original tunes were lost to time and multiple translations of language.

I guess we'll never really know the tunes that were used with the psalms in their original expressions. Perhaps not all were sung in the sense of a melody, but repeated with a consistent rhythm. There is a kind of sing-song way of reading Hebrew that is common that is not dependent upon pitch, but rather rhythm.

As a seminary student, I discovered that there is much more poetry in the scriptures than just the psalms. I studied Isaiah with Father Carroll Stuhlmueller at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. He was an expert on the history of Israel and the background from which the words of the prophet arose. He was, however, careful, to keep the text in front of us. We read it together in class. We looked at it in detail. He taught me one of the great lessons of my preaching career: "When the people leave the room which would you prefer for them to remember, your sermon or the Biblical text?"

Somewhere along the line in my education, I decided that I wasn't much of a fan of poetry. Through my college and graduate school years I read a few poets, mostly because teachers made the assignments or fellow students recommended them. My source of poetry in those years were the lyrics of songs - some better and more lasting than others.

Now that I have a few years behind me, I've discovered that reading poetry is a very important part of my life. There is something about the compactness and density of poetic expression that stirs deep emotions and calls forth reflection from me. I often read poetry out loud down in the basement of our home where no one is listening.

I have begun to wonder who the poets of our time are. Of course there are all kinds of places to look for the transformative poetry of our day. The Poet Laureate is appointed by the Librarian of Congress and serves a one-year term that is renewable. The position was first recognized as the nation rose from the Great Depression towards the end of the 1930's. Some, like Billy Collins, who served from 2001 to 2003 have become quite famous. Others are more obscure.

Canada has a Parliamentary Poet Laureate who serves a two-year term and is named in a joint appointment of the Speaker of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Commons. Other nations also have official positions for poets. The term poet laureate,

however, is often given informally as a description of someone whose poetry reflects the character or the mood of a particular country or region.

Perhaps most recognized of the poets are the songwriters. This year Bob Dylan was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. I've already blogged about the recognition. There is something symbolic in his decision not to travel to Sweden to receive the award in person, but I'm not sure that I understand much except that he is a person who does not want to be defined by public recognition and honors.

In the public eye for the past couple of weeks has been Leonard Cohen, who dies on November 7 at the age of 82. Since K.D. Lang sang Cohen's "Hallelujah" at the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, the simple lyrics of that song have been a part of the culture of both Canada and the United States. Cohen's death has prompted a lot of play of that song by a wide variety of artists. The words recall the story of the biblical King David, but they also speak of the power of human effort in the face of difficult odds, of trying and failing, of resilience and the ability to get back up after you get knocked down.

I did my best, it wasn't much  
I couldn't feel, so I tried to touch  
I've told the truth, I didn't come to fool you  
And even though it all went wrong  
I'll stand before the lord of song  
With nothing on my tongue but hallelujah

Mostly, however, it is the repetition of the single word, hallelujah that marks the song. It is an emotional expression, but time will tell whether or not it is the poetry that will mark our generation in the way that the poetry of Isaiah marked the time of the exile. Then, again, perhaps I am expecting too much of the poetry of our time. After all the great biblical poets didn't arise in ever generations. True poets, it seems, are few and far between.

Still, I continue to search and to ask, "who are the poets of our time?" "Who will find the right words to express this moment in history?"

Perhaps they are the ones who can say the ancient words in a new context and keep them ringing in our ears.

Hallelujah.

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## Random Thoughts on a Saturday – November 19, 2016

Saturday is a day when my schedule shifts. I always spend part of my Saturday focusing on worship for the following day, but I don't keep office hours on Saturdays and I often take a longer break from my email than on my other work days. This week the Woodchucks don't have a formal splitting party, so I won't be working with them. The result is a little more laid back approach to my day. So for this morning's blog, I'm going to combine several ideas that have been floating in my mind that are sort of, but not completely related to each other.

I grew up in a time when we had less awareness of safety and accident prevention than we now possess. We rode our bicycles around town without wearing helmets. Not infrequently we rode them without wearing shoes. We rode in cars without seat belts and, when I was just a bit older with a single lap belt that was shared by all back seat occupants. We went skiing with boots that didn't provide much ankle protection and virtually no other safety equipment. There were no helmets on the ski slopes back in the day.

That was then. This is now. I believe in helmets and the protection they offer. I wear a helmet every time I ride my bicycle and I am pleased that the same standard is applied to my grandchildren.

When I think back on it, the lack of safety gear in my childhood was primarily the product of a lack of information and equipment, not a change in attitude. My father was very specific in his teachings about safety. He applied agricultural chemicals from light airplanes for 25 years, at times with as many as three additional pilots in his company, without an injury accident. I have the helmet he wore - a World War II surplus helmet with almost no side of the head protection. It is covered with dents, any one of which might have been enough of a blow to the head to cause unconsciousness, which while flying a light aircraft is usually fatal.

He taught me to fly. He was precise in his instructions about safety and accident prevention. I share his attitudes. Proper safety equipment doesn't have to interfere with fun in work or recreation.

Once the kids have their helmets, I'm a big fan of Strider balance bikes. The pedal-free bikes are wonderful toys for children from about 18 months and up. Once a child is comfortable with standing and walking, you simply give them access to the bike. At first they stand and walk with the bike between their legs. Soon they learn to sit and walk followed by sitting and running. Along the way they learn to glide, and presto! They have mastered bicycle balance. When our grandson was four years old he made the transition from the strider bike to a pedal bike without training wheels in less than an hour and was confidently pedaling and riding without assistance on the first day he owned his new bike. His sister is now enjoying the strider.

I make no bones about having a brand preference when it comes to the bikes. The Strider company is a Rapid City company. The founder's children attended Cinnamon Hill Preschool at our church. The company produces top quality bikes at a reasonable price. Cheap imitation bikes are usually only \$10 less to purchase and for that savings you get a lot of frustration.

The seeds of our grandchildren's joy with their bikes were planted before they could even sit up. Their parents established a pattern of taking them outdoors every day. When they were infants they were taken for walks in their strollers. As they learned to walk, they were allowed to get out of the stroller and explore the world around themselves. The routine of going outside and looking at the world resulted in them developing skills for entertaining themselves without excessive dependence upon technology.

I've seen babies whose parents entertain them by handing them cell phones and soon are planted in front of television sets. I've witnessed children who can't put down their iPads or other devices for a moment's conversation and bring the devices to the table at dinner time. I'm sure that there are a lot of educational programs and that not all time spent in front of a screen is harmful to children, but the lack of moderation and balance is surprising to me. Parents who are addicted to their devices seem to be at home raising children who are similarly addicted. The devices seem to encourage indoor activity.

Speaking of outdoor play, I am amazed at the play value of a simple \$10 plastic sled. Plunk an adult on the sled on a modest hill and soon you have a world of giggles. Give the sled to a child and you'll wear yourself out running up and down the hill. When the child is just a bit older, you can plant one adult at the top of the hill and another at the bottom and the child can pull the sled back up the hill. Another year or so and the child is capable of entertaining themselves with the sled. Helmets are a good accessory for sledding and there are plenty of children's helmets with insulated liners to keep the ears warm. The helmet will cost more than the sled. Despite their fragile appearance, those plastic sleds last quite a few years. We made it through two children with only two of those sleds and now we've obtained our third for our grandchildren. The other two were thoroughly worn out by the time we got rid of them, but the deterioration was probably as much from sun exposure to the plastic as from the use they got and they really got used a lot.

Kids, however, don't really need very many toys if they are given access to the outdoors. They can manufacture lots of imaginative play with things readily available in the world. Sticks and rocks and leaves and dirt are wonderful playthings. One of the great joys of my life has been standing or sitting beside a river with my children and later with my grandchildren and throwing rocks into the water.

Have fun, be safe, and get outdoors. It's even good for people my age.

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## **Christ the King – November 20, 2016**

Today is Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of the Christian calendar. Next week we begin a new year in our cycle of readings and observations of holidays. Christ the King, also known as Reign of Christ, is a feast day and a relatively new addition to the western liturgical calendar. It was first declared in 1925 by Pope Pius XI. The original date was the last Sunday of October - the Sunday immediately preceding All Saints day. In 1970 the observance was moved to the final Sunday of Ordinary Time, which means it falls between November 20 and November 26. Thus today is the earliest the observance can fall (which also means that Christmas Day falls on a Sunday).

The holiday, along with many other days traditionally observed primarily in the Roman Catholic Tradition, became a part of Protestant Christianity with the adoption of the Revised Common Lectionary, assembled in 1983. The Lectionary, which grew out of the 1974 Consultation on Church Union, was a combination of various Protestant Lectionaries with the 1969 Roman Catholic Lectionary produced following the Second Vatican Council.

That is quite a bit of church history trivia, but the point I want to make about the feast day is that its observance is something that became official in the corner of the church where I serve after my ordination. I began my career serving churches without observing the holiday in any particular fashion and then, when I was serving in my second call after graduating from seminary, began to delve deeply into the then new Revised Common Lectionary, upon which I have based worship planning and preaching since.

As I have adjusted to the new calendar and its related holidays, my attitude toward the feast of Christ the King and its observance has shifted. Like many of my colleagues, I carried a slightly negative attitude toward the triumphalism inherent in the observance. For many years, I preferred the term "Reign of Christ," though I'm not sure that it is much less triumphal than "Christ the King." The basic though behind the observance is to remind faithful people that the resurrected Christ is sovereign not only over the church and its believers, but over all of the world. We believe that the grace of God in Christ is offered not only to those who follow our traditions and ways, but to all people. We also believe that there is a power higher than that of worldly governments and, on occasion, people of conscience are called to follow God's command even when it means standing defiant of the rules of the government.

This latter calling has been evident at certain points in the history of the church. In the first centuries of the Christian Church, before Christianity became an officially

recognized religion of the Roman Empire, Christians were persecuted and at times killed for their faith. The faith persisted and was handed down despite harsh punishment for some of its observers. They based their actions on the belief that God's calling was higher and more authoritative than the rules and commands of earthly leaders. This stood in direct contrast to the theology of the empire which asserted that the emperor was a representative of God and therefore spoke with the authority of God in all things.

Throughout the centuries there have been many other times when people of faith have stood up to secular authorities. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor who became an anti-Nazi dissident during the dictatorship of Adolf Hitler. He was especially outspoken against Hitler's program of genocide of Jews. He was arrested and, after two years executed by hanging as the Nazi regime was collapsing. Bonhoeffer was an instrumental member of what came to be known as the Confessing Church movement. The tenants of the movement were simple. The members confessed allegiance to Christ and only to Christ.

In the span of my career there has been a part of Christianity in America that stands somewhat in contrast to the Confessing Church movement. Known as American civil religion, it has been identified by sociologists since the 1960's and refers to a quasi-religious faith with sacred symbols drawn from national history. You can observe civil religion in the emotional tone of programs at certain national monuments, in the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance and the singing of the national anthem. The emotional stirrings of patriotism are perceived by many to be very similar to the experience of religious faith. The observance of public rituals, symbols and ceremonies on sacred days and at sacred places stands outside of the traditional framework of the church, but are also incorporated into church observances. An example would be the fourth of July. A national holiday, it is also frequently observed within the church with special decorations and activities.

Although I am persuaded of the value of the official separation of church and state from the point of view of civil government, I also know that it is impossible, and not desirable to establish firm lines between civil and church observances. Our church is made up of citizens. We do all of our activities within the context of the country where we live and in which our church is located. Furthermore, our particular faith tradition, Congregationalism, literally grew up with our national government. The principles on which our democracy are based arise from religious documents, including the Mayflower Compact. The people who formed our government, including 17 signers of the Declaration of Independence, were leaders in our church. Trying to make an absolute distinction between civil and religious doesn't make sense.

So our observance of Christ the King Sunday is always a bit muted. We have mixed feelings about the holiday. It is easily lost in the observances of Thanksgiving and other occasions that are a part of the season. Nonetheless there are aspects of the holiday that are genuine reflections of our deepest beliefs.

Few of us will ever be faced with the terrible decisions of early Christian martyrs or of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, but I'd like to believe that if we were placed in such a situation we would find the courage to confess our faith in Christ as our only allegiance. It is a thought worthy of our consideration each year.

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## **Babe in Arms – November 21, 2016**

I was at a gathering of The Well, an emerging congregation that often meets in our church's building, last evening. Also present was a young family with two children. For most of the evening, the youngest of their children was sleeping, being held by one or the other of her parents as they passed her back and forth. Watching them filled me with warm memories.

I know that one of the best feelings in the world is holding a child next to your own body, but knowing how wonderful that feels isn't the same as remembering exactly how it feels. Fortunately we have grandchildren to remind us and we are often blessed by being allowed to hold the children of others. Yesterday morning I was given the gift of baptizing another young child. She was the fourth grandchild in the same family that I have baptized and her sister and two cousins were there to witness her baptism. They probably don't remember their own baptisms, but they will likely remember hers.

At the end of the evening, as I lay in my bed drifting off to sleep, another memory came rushing to my consciousness. It is a memory that frequently comes to me and one I may have previously mentioned in my blog. When our daughter was very young she suffered from frequent ear infections and her doctor recommended a small surgical procedure to insert tiny tubes. The only incision in the procedure is a tiny one in the ear drum. The tubes allow pressure to equalize between the inner and outer ear, thus providing relief from pain and avoiding a tear in the eardrum. The procedure is fairly quick, and performed on an out-patient basis but does require general anesthesia because the child must be perfectly still during the operation.

We agreed to the procedure and I took her in to have it performed. Then came the moment when I had to hand her to the nurse and wait in a small room while the procedure was performed. As I handed her away it was almost as if I could feel her small weight and presence still in my arms. I sat down in that waiting room chair and was overcome with a feeling of intense worry. I knew the procedure was safe. I trusted the physician who was performing it. We had made an informed decision. Still, I couldn't help but wonder what I would do if something happened to this precious little child whose care had been entrusted to us. Fortunately, the procedure was soon over and she was returned to my arms.

Raising a child, however, that feeling comes back over and over again. Her first day of Kindergarten, the first time she rode her bicycle out of my sight, her first day of high school, the day she got her driver's license, the time she left with a group of students for an exchange in Japan, leaving her at college, her departure to a job in New Jersey, a trip to Costa Rica when she went through customs by herself, saying good bye when she moved to England for two years, saying goodbye when we visited her in England. The list goes on and on.

And I know I will carry parts of that feeling with me for the rest of my life.

Right now I am intensely aware that two weeks from today she and her husband will board an airplane bound for Misawa, a city in the eastern Aomori Prefecture in the northern Tohoku region of Japan, where they will live for the next four years. Fortunately we are in a position to be able to visit them while they are living in Japan. Fortunately we live in the age of Skype and FaceTime and other technologies that enable us to see each other frequently. But seeing isn't the same as having a hug. Chatting over the Internet is wonderful, but it isn't the same as sitting down for a cup of coffee across a table face-to-face.

I know that I have nothing about which to complain. Many families have endured separations that are far more painful and permanent than ours. When it comes to children and worries and problems, we have been so exceptionally fortunate that I am constantly aware of living in a state of blessing. Still, that tiny baby I once held in my arms and about whom I worried more than was necessary is now an adult and off on adventures of her own. I am amazed at how comfortable she is in her world and how competent she is to move about the whole world. So far her mother and I have never contemplated living in another country.

I'm already practicing for the time they will be living in Japan. Now, as I write, it is 8:23 pm in Misawa. The sun has set under partly cloudy skies. The temperature is 40 degrees. I've bookmarked the online course in basic Japanese conversation on my computer. We have the guidebooks in our living room.

Like many other Americans, our family story includes the time of separation when our forebears left the European continent and made the journey to North America. In our case the generation that came never traveled back. They said goodbye to friends and family and never saw those people again. They forged a new and different future in a new place. Frankly, I'm glad they did. They invested in the future at deep personal cost to themselves and I am among the beneficiaries of that investment. Anticipating my daughter's departure to a far away land, I know a bit of their feelings. And we know that our daughter and son-in-law will live in Japan for only four years and will return to the United States when this assignment is complete.

So I pray that the young family I was watching last night is able to treasure and deeply enjoy the feeling of their baby in their arms. I hope they never forget how wonderful it is. It will soon be over and they will be on to new adventures.

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## **Anticipating Thanksgiving – November 22, 2016**

The media have been carrying quite a few stories about people who are dreading Thanksgiving this year. The presidential election didn't just divide the nation, it has split some families. Discussing politics has long been a challenge for some families. They have experienced disagreements and know that they don't see eye to eye. There have been arguments and awkward moments as they gathered around the family table. In a sense there is nothing new about this. Based on the news stories I've seen there is something, if only a matter of degree, different about this year. Even the BBC did an article, filled with quotes from Twitter, about people who are dreading the holiday. Quartz magazine ran a feature on how to manage "difficult political conversations with people you love." The New York Times has a guide on how to "argue fairly and without rancor." The Los Angeles Times advises arriving "a little late so no one's blocking your car in." "It's really hard to storm out of an argument if you have to get your uncle who's yelling at you to move their car."

I have friends who have advocated calling the holiday off. The intensely militarized confrontation with peaceful protestors gathered at Standing Rock has disillusioned some and left them without hope of any fairness in dealing with authorities. Recalling the 1621 harvest feast the Pilgrims shared with Native Americans, one friend looked to the celebration of Thanksgiving as the celebration of the illegal seizure of Native lands and the beginning of the attempted genocide of indigenous tribes. One even commented, "I assume Trump supporters will boycott Thanksgiving since it's a celebration of illegal immigrants."

Like most other holidays, the story of the celebration of Thanksgiving is complex. The Pilgrim celebration with Natives was not the first such celebration on this continent. There were indigenous celebrations of thanksgiving before any settlers arrived. Gratitude is a virtue celebrated by many tribes. Then, as early as the 16th century French and Spanish settlers celebrated feasts of thanksgiving. Celebrations were routine in what became the Commonwealth of Virginia as early as 1607 - decades before the Pilgrims arrived in what is now Massachusetts. The Pilgrim celebration was a three-day affair to celebrate their first harvest. They had suffered many losses during their first winter and as their second approached, they were grateful for the Wampanoag tribal members who had taught them how to catch eel and grow corn and had given them food during their first winter in the new-to-them land.

The first national proclamation of Thanksgiving was issued by the Continental Congress in 1777 while the British were occupying the national capital at Philadelphia. Samuel Adams is credited with drafting the proclamation. George Washington issued a similar proclamation in December of the same year celebrating the victory over the British at Saratoga. There were other sporadic and irregular proclamations of thanksgiving during the early years of nationhood.

The establishment of an annual celebration, however, came in the middle of the American Civil War, proclaimed by President Abraham Lincoln through a document written by Secretary of State William Seward. Lincoln's successors followed his example of annually declaring the final Thursday in November to be Thanksgiving, as it remained until President Franklin D. Roosevelt broke with that tradition by clearing the fourth Thursday to be Thanksgiving day rather than the fifth in years when November has five Thursdays. It has been speculated that Roosevelt was responding to a push from retailers, including the founders of what came to be known as Macy's Department Stores, to move Thanksgiving earlier to allow for an extended Christmas marketing season.

Marketing, dates and other issues aside, it is important to remember another thing about the years following the presidency of Abraham Lincoln. In those days national holidays served to provide a forum for bringing a divided nation back together. Say whatever we might about the divisions that mark our political scene today, they are not as deep, not as violent and not as destructive to families as were the divisions of the Civil War that literally matched brother against brother in a violent shooting war.

Chief among those healing holidays were Memorial Day and Thanksgiving. While Memorial Day recognized the deep loss and shared grief suffered by both sides of the conflict, Thanksgiving focused not on what was lost, but rather on what remained.

I am fortunate that I can look forward to celebrating Thanksgiving in a context that will not be marred by arguments fueled by overconsumption of alcohol. Our celebration will be a time to remember the many blessings that we have experienced and an opportunity to celebrate good friends and relationships that endure over the years.

On the other hand, Thanksgiving will not be a gathering of my family, where there are some pretty staunch and emotional supporters of Green Party candidate Jill Stein, Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Donald Trump. Some of my siblings are simply not talking to each other in this post election season. It isn't the first time we've experienced intense arguments and differences of opinion in our family.

All of that aside, there is much for which I am deeply grateful this year. I acknowledge that some of that gratitude stems from privileges that I have not earned, but have come to me because of my gender and race. I am fortunate to have been born in a time and place that afforded great privilege to me. I am extremely fortunate to have been blessed

with a long-term loving and supporting marriage. We have been blessed with wonderful children who are making their way in this world. Our grandchildren are a blessing beyond measure. While we don't live close enough to be together for this particular holiday, we have the luxury of being able to travel and to be together as members of our family on a fairly regular basis. We visited in the homes of both of our children this year and our children and their families will be together the week after Thanksgiving before our daughter flies off to her new home in Japan.

Among my holiday prayers this year, however, will be prayers for those who are not as fortunate. I weep for those who are unable to celebrate. I mourn for those whose celebrations will be marred by argument and anger. I acknowledge that our holidays are imperfect.

I pledge to dream, pray and work towards that day when all people will find things for which to be thankful and we can together share a holiday of gratitude.

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## **Community Thanksgiving – November 23, 2016**

Last night I stood in a prayer circle with friends and colleagues as we prepared to lead a community Thanksgiving service. For our town, the group was fairly diverse. We were black and white, male and female. Of the group, I've been serving the longest, but there were two colleagues with whom I've shared service for more than a decade. Others have been around shorter amounts of time. We were Church of God in Christ, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian and United Church of Christ. Worship in the congregations we serve ranges from pentecostal to high church. Before our prayers we were talking about what services we would be offering on Christmas this year. Since Christmas Day is a Sunday, all of our schedules are a bit different than other years. Most of us, however, have very similar schedules: two services on Christmas Eve and one on Christmas Day.

The worship service, as is our custom, reflected the liturgy and order of our host church. Last night we were at Emmanuel Episcopal Church, so the liturgy was formal and written out with careful and precise language, a bit different from last year when our Presbyterian hosts had a less formal service with more impromptu prayers and roles for pastors. I also had the opportunity to sing with the combined choir, which was a delight with good direction and a lively anthem.

It is our tradition to invite the newest clergy person to deliver the message. Our preacher for the evening serves two congregations on the north side of our city: St. Matthew's Episcopal Church and Woyatan Lutheran Church, both of which are predominantly Lakota congregations.

As I settled into my seat in the choir and allowed the formal language of the liturgy to wash over me, I was aware of how “at home” I was feeling. Although it isn’t my personal tradition, the Episcopal order of worship is very familiar to me and the traditional language of the Book of Common Prayer holds deep meanings of the faith that we share.

In a season where our attention has been distracted by deep divisions in our nation it was very good to be celebrating our unity.

While my feelings about the service are warm and positive, it is worth noting that our mostly-mainline gathering is not all inclusive. Rapid City is home to many fundamentalist congregations who, despite persistent invitation, have chosen not to participate in our celebration. And the mostly fundamentalist Rapid City Christian Minister’s Association has erected barriers that exclude some of us from membership. We certainly do not celebrate Christian unity in our community. There are a few notable bridge builders, however, who faithfully persist in trying to find places of shared faith and common ministry.

There is something about human nature that prevents us from fully living God’s promise in this life. We speak of the beloved community. We work for that community. We reach out and build bridges. We find common work and occasionally worship together. We have, however, failed to discover the essential unity of discipleship. Most of us have experienced deep Christian community in our own denominations, but there are certain aspects of the faith to which we have been called that are not scalable - close community doesn’t reside in mass meetings of huge numbers of people.

As a result, each gathering of our people is confessional in nature. We have glimpsed a vision, but we confess that we live it out imperfectly. There remain many invitations that are yet to be issued and many others who need to be included.

The wonder of God’s grace, however, is that we can fully be the church in our times of worship even though we are imperfect people. We can sing and pray and listen to Scriptures together despite our differences. We don’t have to wait for perfection in order to be people of faith.

Our gathering is no small feat. Our shared liturgy is more than ritual. Our persistence in gathering every year is more than habit alone. It is with deep gratitude that I offered thanks to God not only for the blessings of my personal life, but also for the blessing of community. I am deeply grateful for my colleagues who share ministry in this community with me. I am deeply grateful for congregations who call such diverse and capable leaders. I am grateful for faithful church members who go outside of their comfort zones to worship with those outside of their usual circle of contacts. I am grateful for gracious hospitality extended by our sister church and for the opportunity to share our hospitality when it falls to us to host.

As I commented in my blog yesterday, Thanksgiving is a holiday of mixed emotions with a varied history. It has been both uniting and dividing in its observances. The urge to give thanks, however, is an important and powerful drive in humans. Gratitude is a virtue that can be ennobling when expressed.

After the service, one person commented to me that he was disappointed that more people didn't participate. The congregation was probably about the same number of people as an individual service in a single congregation. It would, I guess, be nice to have a larger congregation - to pack the pews. However, I don't believe that faith is about counting numbers or having the biggest crowd. I was pleased to see people sitting with those with whom they don't normally worship. I was happy to see a racially, culturally and economically mixed congregation gathered for a simple liturgy of praise.

Our preacher reminded us that we each bring our own story to the place of worship and the combination of those stories becomes a song of gratitude to God. The stories in the room last night certainly are sufficient to constitute a symphony that is complex and subtle and glorious. Despite our divisions, we are blessed to live in community together. Despite our differences, we are one in the Spirit of God.

Thanksgiving doesn't reside on the calendar or in the feasts we prepare. It resides in the heart.

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## **Thanksgiving, 2016 – November 24, 2016**

It would be easy for me to write a Thanksgiving blog that was a list of the privileges I enjoy. I am well aware that many of the things that inspire gratitude in me have come to me not because of my own earning, but rather because of my race and gender and cultural identity. Today seems like the wrong day for a public display of wealth and position though privately I do offer my thanks for the many blessings I have received. And blessings, like grace, come to me unearned. They are not the result of my works in this life, but rather the graciousness of God.

Today, however, I would like to offer my thanks for some of the friendships I have been granted that help to give perspective to my celebration.

I am grateful for my friends who live with cognitive disabilities. I am thinking specifically of two different friends who live in residences administered by Black Hills Works. They struggle to survive on very small disability payments and occasional support from extended family members. Challenges in their lives include roommates whose disabilities require restrictions on the freedoms of all who live in their home, dependence upon public transportation in a town that has limited resources, jobs that

pay the lowest wages in our community, and loneliness that has its roots in the judgmental attitudes and rejection by some of their peers. My friends never go to go to prom, never were considered for college scholarships, and will never receive promotions to the corner office. They are not, however, defined by their disabilities. They bring brightness and joy to all who take the time to get to know them. They add to the quality of life in our community through their art. They add their enthusiasm to sports events and other public gatherings. They give generously of their love and time through volunteering and through their attention to the details of special days such as birthdays and anniversaries. Their thanksgiving greetings to me were heartfelt and deeply appreciated.

I am grateful for a friend that I visited last night who is being held in a detention facility until his trial. He does not have the money to pay his bail and, frankly, is relieved to be detained because it has helped him become sober and lessened, if only temporarily, the chains of addiction on his life. Still he longs to be with his family, who are struggling to survive with very little support. He wonders how the electricity bill will be paid and so the power will remain on. He wonders how much serious trouble his son will find without proper supervision. He wonders about food and clothing for his grandchildren. He knows the stigma of society and the ways others look at him. He bears the pain of rejection of those who said they were his friends but who have abandoned him since his arrest. He did not turn to me for financial support or legal advice, but rather as a friend to visit him in the midst of the loneliness and boredom of incarceration.

I am grateful for my connections with a couple who live not far from me and are of a similar age and who are recent survivors of suicide. After years and years of struggling with mental illness that seemed to defy effective treatment. After countless trips to hospitals and clinics and appointments and rehabilitation and alternative living facilities. After investing a huge number of dollars and time and effort and energy in a daughter who has been legal adult nearly three times as long as she was a minor in their care, their table will be painfully empty this year. They are only beginning to be honest with the sense of relief that has come with the end of the struggle and they are hopeful for the peace to which their daughter has come. Still there is an emptiness and a longing for what might have been. There is a fear of the stigma of mental illness that has hung around their family for decades. They can't figure out how to interpret the silence of their friends. They still cry more than they think is normal and are so glad for those who really listen.

I am grateful for water protectors who are living in the camp at Cannon Ball, North Dakota. Their commitment to peace and prayer is truly inspiring. They do not know why their presence has inspired so much fear in the governor and other officials of North Dakota that they have to endure the constant noise of a circling helicopter and see the constant presence of heavily armed military vehicles at the edge of their camp. They are dismayed that unarmed people have been attacked with dogs, sprayed with pepper spray and tear gas, beaten with batons, blasted with sound cannons and sprayed with

water in sub-freezing temperatures. They don't know why the Governor has insisted that a public highway and essential corridor for transport of food and access to hospital remain blockaded with armed guards. They believe that their actions and their encampment is for the protection of water for all people, not just those who are of their heritage or political belief. They are trying to be reasonable as their case is pursued in court, and don't understand why the opposition will not wait for the judgment of the court.

I am grateful for friends who are struggling to raise two African-American sons in a urban area in another state. While they are justifiably proud of their sons and the accomplishments they have achieved in school and sports, they are fearful for them as young drivers. They have seen too many "routine" traffic stops turn into violent death. The videos of young black men dying in confrontations with police are too prevalent. The stories are too frequent. They know how quickly the simple act of wearing a hoodie on a dark street or becoming defiant with a police officer can become dangerous. They don't like having to warn their sons of the dangers of injustice, but they know the realities of their city.

This thanksgiving, I am grateful for all of the people in my life whose lives are very different from my own. I am grateful that they pray to the same God as I. I am grateful that God hears every prayer.

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## Made for Relationship – November 25, 2016



I started my day by staring out the east window as the waning crescent of the moon. We've still got four or five days until the new moon, so there is still quite a bit of light reflected. It is a beautiful orb. Along the edge where the illuminated portion meets the dark side the craters and mountains cast long shadows making them easier to observe.

In the wee hours I sometimes have the impression that I am the only one awake and looking at the beauty of the world. Of course I know that this is not true, but there is a sense of private blessing in the beauty that surrounds me. It is a day off for me, a rare time of Sabbath in a busy and hectic schedule. I don't often stay away from my email two days in a row and I know that there will be an extended mountain of junk in my inbox when I take time to catch up, but I'm grateful for the peacefulness of a holiday that gives me extra time to look at the world.

Yesterday afternoon a small group of us took a short walk in the woods near our friends' home, a place where we have often walked. The path leads up to the crest of the hill where there is a beautiful view of the valley spreading below and the higher hills in the distance. Someone has erected a small shrine there with a bench, a cross and a small statue of Mary the mother of Jesus. We can tell that it is still regularly maintained by the bits of new paint and additions of plastic flowers or other items from time to time. In the

eyes of someone that we don't know it is a sacred place. Who knows what earnest prayers have been prayed from that vantage point?

It gives me a different perspective to think that the beauty I witness is being witnessed by others who are unseen by and unknown to me. It seems to point to another important truth: we are not alone.

I get other reminders of that truth in different ways. From time to time different readers of my journal will drop me a note. They always come as a bit of a surprise and joy to me. I know rationally that people read what I write. The whole point of publishing to the web is to make my words public - to share them. But sometimes I forget about the people who read what I have to say. I rise in the wee hours of the morning and write because I can't really figure out another way to live my life. I feel compelled to write in order to express and understand the dynamics of my life. I wrote before I decided to publish the blog with very little thought about who might read my words. Now that I have been writing publicly for a decade I am still guilty of writing without much thought to my readers.

The bottom line, however, is that we have been created for relationship. My inner drive to write is also an inner drive to share. The words that I cannot keep inside are not meant to be mine alone. The beauty of the moon, the glory of the setting sun over the hills, the awe inspired by our creation are not mine alone. They are to be shared.

Because my life is one of working with others, I sometimes have a tendency to be a bit of a recluse on my days off. My family noticed this early in my career as a pastor. I remember commenting to my mother many years ago that a gathering of my family was so much like the work I do every day that I couldn't tell I was on vacation if I spent my time off trying to understand the dynamics of my brothers and sisters. Throw in a couple of my cousins and I'm completely snowed and soon feel the urge to run away and hide.

Still, I don't hate my family. I long for time with them. I want to listen to the stories of their lives and the things that are most important to them. I grew up with these people and they are a part of my life no matter how far apart we live or how infrequently we spend time together. As one of the stories of creation from Genesis puts it, "The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone.'"

It is not good to be alone. We were created for relationship.

Or to put it another way, we need one another.

Throughout the history of the Christian Church there have been many mystics and other seekers who have given in to the urge to move away from society. Hermits, ascetics and monks have sought lonely places to explore their faith and deepen their relationship with God. Their stories have provided inspiration and theological clarity for generations

of Christians. Similarly there are those who practice other faiths who have gone off by themselves and lived in remote locations for the purpose of spiritual quest.

If you study their writings, however, you discover an intense sense of justice and service to others that continually emerges. Taking time alone and apart from others seems to produce a heightened awareness and concern for the well being of those others.

Even as I seek out and revel in my days off when I stay at home and don't venture into the mix and pace of every day life, I'm thinking of those I am called to serve. Don't look for me at any of the Black Friday sales today. I'm likely to be at home with a book or in my yard catching up on chores. I might even take some of my time to clear out a bit of the mess in my garage. But I will be thinking of those I am called to serve and I plan to be back on the job with renewed energy and enthusiasm by tomorrow.

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## Late Season Paddle – November 26, 2016



There was a small rim of skim ice along the shore of the lake as I launched my kayak yesterday. The air temperature was above 40 degrees and later neared 50 degrees but the water temperature is dropping. It is always hard to predict when ice up will come to the lake. A little skim ice around the edge is a long ways from a frozen lake and I'm sure that the ice was all gone by the end of the afternoon. Still, the ice is a sign that winter is on its way.

There is a problem with paddling on days like yesterday and it isn't what someone who doesn't paddle might expect. The problem is that I get too warm very easily. When I paddle, I always need to have a plan for self rescue if some unthinkable problem should arise. I always have contingency plans to keep myself safe. That means I have to be able to survive a wet exit. Were the kayak to roll inverted, a situation that is nearly impossible given the particular boat I was paddling yesterday, and were I to be unable to right the boat without exiting it, I would find myself in the water. Surviving a wet exit would be a tricky adventure without proper preparation.

Cold water carries heat away from the body 25 times faster than air of the same temperature. As a result the body core begins to lose heat to the outside environment. This cooling leads quickly to loss of dexterity, disorientation, unconsciousness and ultimately death. Once the water temperature dips below 50 degrees, a person with no protective clothing has a loss of dexterity in under 5 minutes and will be unconscious within 30 minutes. That is less than half of the amount of time that you have when the water is over 50 degrees. People have survived with proper flotation for up to six hours in water above 50 degrees. For the sake of planning, a kayaker needs to consider not the maximum survival time, but rather the point of loss of dexterity, because once dexterity is lost, reentry into a boat becomes impossible. Clambering up a steep bank may also be beyond the capacity of a boater who has been in the water too long.

In addition, getting out of the lake isn't an absolute guarantee of survival. Once core temperature has begun to drop, steady decline in temperature continues after the person is removed from the water.

You get the picture. Paddling in a mountain lake without protective clothing can quickly lead to disaster even if the paddler remains close to shore.

So, I wear protective clothing when I paddle. I have to dress with enough protection to allow for dexterity to remain for the amount of time it would take me to get out of the lake and to walk to shelter, which is most likely my car on a day when there are no others at the lake, and still have enough dexterity to use a key in the door lock, start the car and turn on the heater. That means neoprene socks under insulated paddling booties, a layer of hydroskin that seals from the tip of my toes to my neckline, leaving only my hands and head uncovered, waterproof pants and paddling jacket with velcro closures at the waist and an elastic band holding the spray skirt to my waist over both the top and pants. I also have gloves with a water tight seal to the arms of my jacket, and a knitted stocking cap covered by two different hoods. OK, that is too much for paddling on a day like yesterday, so I quickly shed my gloves, carefully tucking them into my life jacket so that I could put them on quickly were I to make a wet exit. I also removed the hoods from my head to allow some cooling to occur there. But underneath all of that waterproof clothing, I'm sweating and, you get it, sweat is water, and it is wicking body temperature away from me.

The margin of safety on a day like yesterday is extremely wide and all of the clothing is probably overkill, but I've seen the statistics on survival in cold water and if you love paddling as much as I do, you are willing to endure a bit of discomfort in order to achieve a long paddling season. The reward of having the lake to myself and the space for quiet contemplation is very high and worth all of the layers and preparation.

The day was calm and there was no danger of capsizing anywhere during my paddle and I was home with the boat back in storage a half hour after I pulled the boat from the water. With any luck, I'll get the boat in the water next week. Weather doesn't look too

good for Monday, but if you add one more week, it will be December - not bad for a paddler in South Dakota.

When I got back home I looked back in my journal. My first paddle of 2016 was on March 7. There was a lot of floating ice on the lake that day, but the edges had opened up enough to allow paddling most of the way around the lake. I took a plastic boat on that day so that I wouldn't have to worry about scratches if I got next to the ice and at one point even pushed my little boat up on top of the ice for a few minutes. Early March to late November isn't bad for a paddling season in country where there are ice fishermen who can't wait for the water to get solid enough for them to venture out with their snow machines and temporary shelters.

All of this takes place within a dozen miles of my home. I am aware of how fortunate I am to have access to such superb recreation just around the corner.

I've always said that I don't mind winter, and it is true that there are wonderful charms when things turn very cold. Still, if I'm able to paddle into December this year I'll be setting a personal record for the most days paddled in a single season. Not bad for a guy with a full time job!

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## **Advent Begins – November 27, 2016**

I have a strong memory of looking forward to holidays when I was a child. My birthday stood out each year. It was in June, not long after we got out of school for summer vacation. Mine was the only birthday in my family in June, so it also stood apart from other family events. Our mother used to make some pretty fancy birthday cakes, so I knew there would be a surprise and a treat at the end of the meal. Then, of course, there were the presents. I can remember a few. I got a bicycle for my sixth birthday. Mostly I've forgotten the birthday presents, however.

The end of December was a golden season for family holidays. Our parents' wedding anniversary was December 15. They usually celebrated by going to Billings, a city 80 miles away. We knew that part of the trip would be Christmas shopping. I have a brother whose birthday is December 24, so there were no early Christmas celebrations for our family. Then our father's birthday came on December 28. One of the traditions in our family was for one of us to purchase a bag of chewy orange slice candies. I don't think these had very much actual fruit in them. They were soft and chewy like a gumdrop and covered in sugar. As soon as he opened the package, they would be passed around the table and we each would get one. The treat was repeated daily at dinner until the candies were gone.

New Years came on the heels of dad's birthday and I had two brothers with January birthdays, so the celebrations continued. Other family members had their birthdays spread around the calendar, so there were frequent family celebrations.

I can remember lying in my bed at night anticipating whichever celebration was next with fantasies about how it might go. As I got older, the celebrations continued, but my excitement faded a bit. I still enjoy holidays, but somehow it isn't quite the same as when I was a child.

Today is the beginning of Advent. It is the first day of a new year in the Christian calendar. Our readings return to the gospel of Matthew this year. The gospel has a structure that roughly follows the cycle of Jewish holidays, so a careful reading of the texts reminds a student of the cycle of observances that was a part of Jesus' life.

Advent is an interesting season. We are called to focus on preparation and anticipation. It begins with the vision of the prophets of a world that is radically different from the everyday realities of this life. In the vision, people live at peace with one another without war or violence. There is no need for courts and punishments because people understand what is right and do it. Justice is established in the hearts of every person and injustice disappears.

Like an adult growing out of childhood celebrations, we have come to the point where we hear of the prophetic vision but don't expect its fulfillment in our generation. We know that injustice will continue. We understand that violence still occurs. We compromise on our vision and seek ways of surviving in an imperfect world. Too often we enter the season of Advent with no real expectation that things will change at all.

It may be our attitude that leaves us most in need of the season of Advent. When we are unable to believe that anything will really change, we are most in need of the poetic words of the prophets to remind us that the vision remains. The peaceable kingdom isn't just a fantasy about an impossible world. It is the way that God intends for us to live.

Advent, at its best, is a season of recommitment to the basic principles of Christian living. It is the season to ask ourselves what the world would be like if we really lived out the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. How would our world be different if we truly loved our enemies and prayed for those who persecute us? These aren't esoteric and elusive concepts. They are not pie-in-the-sky ideals. They are real principles that offer peace and freedom in the everyday living of our lives. The visions of the prophets and the teachings of Jesus are real world possibilities. That is what makes Advent such a significant season. It reminds us of what is possible if we dedicate ourselves to living lives of faith.

It is a new year. It is an opportunity to begin fresh. Advent can inform not only my preaching and teaching, but also the way I live my life day to day. I know that there have

been many times when I have been silent, when a word might have made all the difference. I know that I have harbored dark thoughts about those with whom I disagree instead of praying diligently for their health and safety.

I not only believe in peace, I know that peace is possible. Although my influence on political processes and world leaders is minimal at best, the way I choose to live my life can make a big difference. I am capable of working for peace in many different arenas and through a myriad of relationships with others. Peace is at the core of the vision of the prophets and one of the fundamental commitments of Advent. I come to Advent this year with a renewed commitment to peace.

Recovering the excitement of my childhood is probably not possible, but I still find myself, on occasion, lying in my bed and not sleeping. Instead of worrying, I could invest that time in imagining a world at peace and praying for that world to come. Perhaps recovery of the vision is as critical as any other part of dedicating our lives to peace. We have to imagine a world at peace in order to work for it.

Blessings to you as you begin this season. May you join me in envisioning a world at peace.

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## **Listening to the Wind – November 28, 2016**

The east slopes of the Rocky Mountains are places that experience quite a bit of wind. As the jet stream passover the mountains, and surface winds align in direction, the moving air meets the uplift of the mountains and race upwards. Reaching the top, the air tends to continue to rise leaving a low pressure area underneath in the shelter of the mountains. The result is that the air rushes towards that low pressure area and the winds accelerate as they head downslope. The town where I grew up was in a kind of perfect wind corridor with the Yellowstone Valley forming a kind of funnel for the air coming down paradise valley combining with the winds clearing the Bozeman pass.

My home town averages over 200 days each year when the peak wind gust blows at over 30 mph. Each year there are 20 or more days when the wind reaches 60 mph. Record gusts are over 100 mph. When I was growing up my father attempted to maintain a weather station, but had trouble keeping functioning windspeed indicators. The wind blew the vanes off of the anemometers. Later, when cable television came to our town there was a channel on the local television that showed the local weather. When the wind gauge read 0, all of the locals knew that the wind was blowing hard enough to bust the gauge.

My parents operated light airplanes from the local airport. When the wind was gusting over 30 mph, it was dangerous and difficult to taxi the small planes crosswise to the

wind. They developed all kinds of techniques to protect the airplanes and maintain their operations. One technique was to simply ease the plane out of the shelter of the building and face the nose into the wind. A Piper Super Cub with the flaps down will fly at just over 42 mph. That means that a wind blowing 45 mph with gusts of 50 is sufficient for the plane to rise off of the ground without the need of a runway. And on windy days the airplane will actually fly while going backwards across the ground. You make a lot more progress flying downwind than into the wind.

At one time there were so many accidents with mobile homes, trailers and other high profile vehicles that it was difficult to get any insurance for moving a mobile home between Columbus and Bozeman. There were a couple of local businesses that depended heavily on salvage contracts to clean up vehicles blown off of the road. We knew which curves to check for blown over trailers.

All of this is to say that I grew up with the wind. The sound of the wind seems natural to me. Wind gusts this morning are around 36 mph. That's enough to rattle the storm windows on our house. Yes we live in a house with old fashioned storm windows. We have double-glazed casement windows with single pane storm windows on the outside. The storms have sliding panels with screens in the bottoms for summer ventilation. It is an older system, but it works well and provides good insulation for the home. The wind, however, can get between the storms and the regular windows and make them rattle a bit.

Outside the main sound on a windy day is the unique noise of wind in the pine trees. It happens to be a sound that I like very much. It is calming and not bothersome. We don't get the super high wind speeds here, but we do get our share of wind even with the protection of the hills and the trees which shelter our home quite well.

The wind is a reminder that the earth keeps turning on its axis. It is the rotation of the planet that causes the atmosphere to lag just a little bit behind the planet and the effect is wind. This combines with irregularities in surface shape to create variations in pressure and differences in windspeed. Throw in differences in the amount of water vapor suspended in the air and differences in temperature and you have weather.

Higher winds often signal a change in weather. It doesn't look like anything dramatic is in store for us this week. Temperatures are going to drop, with highs in the 30's midweek, rising into the 40's by the weekend. The extended forecast calls for the possibility of snow next week.

The sound of the wind outside, however, is a reminder that winter is coming. It is also a reminder of how comfortable our home is. The indigenous tribes of the plains developed well-insulated tipis that were very resistant to the wind and were often double-walled for winter protection. They were, however, not completely air tight. If that had been the case there would have been no ventilation for the smoke that was produced by the fire

which was the heat source. You can bet that those sleeping in tipis were aware in changes in the wind and temperature.

Early settlers on the plains made homes out of sod dug from the earth. Here in the hills there were plenty of trees for logs for cabins, which were sturdy shelters, though chinking the logs was a challenge and the wind could whistle through any gaps that were left during construction.

By comparison, we have it very comfortable in our well-insulated and well sealed home with a layer of Tyvek air and water barrier between the siding and the sheeting over the walls. Our doors and windows seal tightly. Our thermostats control the temperature.

Still, I am grateful that I remain aware of the weather outside. I am fortunate to be able to go outside every day and sniff the air and feel the wind. I have no desire to live in a place that is so climate controlled that I lose touch with nature. We are a part of this world and we are affected by forces that are much bigger than we. We have tasted enough harsh weather to understand and respect the power of nature.

And the wind rattling the storm windows is music to my ears. It reminds me that I live in a world that is constantly changing and that holds fresh surprises for tomorrow.

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## **I Won't Accept "Post-Truth" – November 29, 2016**

The Bible cautions against repeating gossip in a several different places. In Romans, Paul writes a list of sins and problems caused by people's turning away from God's law. The list of sins includes gossips and slanderers (Romans 1:29b-32). There is a reference to gossipers who say things they should not in 1 Timothy (5:12-13). And there are several different sayings about the dangers of gossip in Proverbs. The main point of these teachings is that repeating false information can be damaging to the community and that wisdom involves discretion about when to keep silent and not pass on false information.

My mother's father practiced as an attorney in Montana in the early decades of the 20th century. He was, as they said, a stickler for the truth. He believed in the power of words to accomplish good and to do evil. He asserted that the legal system of our country is based on telling the truth and that care had to be taken to discern who was telling the truth and who was passing on a lie. That high regard for the truth was passed on to his daughters. I learned as a very young child that I was expected to tell the truth and that passing on information that was false was wrong regardless of the source. If I came home from school with a rumor, it was quickly checked out to determine its accuracy. When it was false, I heard about it in no uncertain terms.

As a result it is distressing for me to read the words of the pundits who are describing our current situation as life in a “post truth society.” Wikipedia now has an entry on post-truth politics. Ralph Keyes has written a book called, “The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life.” In the book he argues that post-truth is beyond lies, it is the abandonment of a standard of truth. He also observes the basic concept that my grandfather argued so many years ago: a lack of truth erodes the foundation of trust that underlies a healthy civilization.

Much has been said and written about the role of social media in this pandemic of dishonesty. Recently I have also seen a few proposals for technological innovations to address the issue. Software that does an automatic fact check on an item before allowing it to be posted might be helpful, for I am sure that some of the passing on of direct misinformation and lies is the result of not knowing the truth. People pass on the stories that they want to be true without checking to see whether or not they are true. I’m all in favor of the development of those technologies, but the technologies that we do have already make it pretty easy to discover the truth if one simply takes time to check out a rumor before spreading it. What seems to happen is that people see something on Facebook and pass it on without any attempt to discern its truthfulness. “Like” and “dislike” seem to be the only standards of that particular media.

In our contemporary society there seems to be little penalty for passing on false information and very little reward for truthfulness. Getting caught with a drafted branch of the family tree, an unearned college degree, or a nonexistent award in one’s resume seems to be simply par for the course instead of a black mark that will affect one’s future employment. Passing on a blatantly false rumor is viewed as an acceptable political technique instead of cheating.

I hope to hold myself to a higher standard. I am not very active in social media circles to begin with, but I’ve resolved to simply refuse to pass on information that comes in e-mail, is posted on Facebook or appears as a Tweet unless I have done some independent fact checking. Mostly I simply don’t pass on the information, even if it is a cute story and even if the request of the sender reads like an old fashioned chain letter. Promising me blessing for sharing this with my friends or threatening a curse for not doing so is a pretty sure way to get me to move the story into my trash bin.

The problem is so evasive and such a threat to honest society, however, that I think I will need to go a step farther. Just as I am attempting to address the issue in this blog post, I intend to be more vocal in my challenges to false information and to call others to speak and convey the truth. When I discover obvious falsehood in the posts and comments of others, I have tended to be silent and simply not respond. That may not be good enough in a society that is threatened by this plague of gossip and lies. Being silent may be viewed as acceptance of the practice.

It can be tedious and it will probably annoy some of my friends, but the time has come for me to speak out for the truth and I hope that you will join me. When we observe obvious lies, let's let the senders know that we are aware of the truth. Beyond that, I intend to ask people to stop passing on misinformation and lies. I'll probably be unfriended by some of those who currently have me on their list of friends. On the other hand, an acquaintance made by sending a request over Facebook isn't really the same thing as an actual friend. I've never paid attention to how many "friends" I have on Facebook and I don't accept friend requests from people that I haven't met in person. As a result, my impact on that particular media is minimal and I don't expect to change the way it passes on misinformation.

Still, I think it is important to take a stand for what is true and to hold the other people in our community to a higher standard than is currently the norm.

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## **Beginning to Look Like Christmas – November 30, 2016**

Regular readers of my blog already know that I'm not into the post-thanksgiving shopping frenzy that carries the name "Christmas," but bears little resemblance to the celebration of the incarnation of Jesus. I have a deep appreciation for Advent and am in no hurry to rush to Christmas. And when Christmas does come, I like to hang onto the season rather than dropping the celebration after a single day.

There is something that seems a bit strange to me about living in a neighborhood where the majority of the houses are covered with lights and the lawns are filled with inflatable figures of snowmen and Santa Claus but I haven't even had a single conversation with the majority of the people who live on my street. Nights in this corner of the world are filled with bright lights and impressive displays. The days are kind of comical with lawns littered with deflated figures like a kind of strange landscape of plastic waste. The wind of the past few days hasn't been kind to all of the decorations and we're looking a bit bedraggled before the second Sunday of Advent has even arrived.

It seems likely that some of my neighbors think that ours is the home of a "Grinch" who doesn't like Christmas because we haven't decorated with outdoor lights and we haven't headed to the hills to get our Christmas tree yet. The Christmas tree in the front window is our most prominent decoration most years, but I'm not in too big of a rush to cut a tree. And when Christmas arrives, I won't be taking down my tree as early as my neighbors, either.

One preparation for the day of Christmas that has entered my mind is a bit of thought about selecting gifts for grandchildren. Since they live a ways away, we will send the gifts early so they can be coordinated with their family's holiday traditions. And I'm thinking of Christmas decorations this week because tomorrow our daughter and son-in-

law are flying to the city where our son and his family live and they'll be doing a bit of early celebrating by all going together to get a Christmas Tree on Friday. I admit that I would love to be a part of that adventure.

Mostly, however, I find many of the trappings of secular society's Christmas observances to be a bit distracting. I'm glad that there are volunteers raising money for charities this time of year, but I hope that people understand that the need for food goes on all year around. Sustaining those who are impoverished requires more than a big meal on Thanksgiving and a gift basket for Christmas. I've no doubt that the Salvation Army invests the funds raised in good projects, but putting a few coins in a red kettle does little to inspire year-round generosity and thinking that our community can fund essential services with spare change doesn't really help us to understand our deep social problems. And it is a good thing that I'm mostly quiet about my thoughts regarding a group that calls itself a church and yet stands at the door to the grocery store asking others to pay for its mission projects. The congregation where I make my biggest donations has been serving this community for much longer than that group and we never beg others to fund our ministries. And we certainly don't ask others to volunteer to beg for us. Fortunately the volunteers are more big-hearted and generous than I and outside of this particular rant, I'm mostly quiet on the subject.

What I do know is that more than the outward signs of celebration, I need an inward change during the season of Advent. I need to look once again at my own preparations to receive Christ into my life and into our community. I need to read the prophets and be inspired by their visions of peace and hope. I need to sort through my priorities and shed some of the excesses in my lifestyle. I need to listen and visit with the most vulnerable in my community and forge relationships that are transformational rather than paternal.

That serious soul searching takes more effort than a trip to the nearest big box retail store.

At its core, Christmas is the declaration and celebration of an audacious and radical theological concept that is fairly hard to understand. God is so invested in relationship with people that God became human - fully human - with heart and hands and voice and a nervous system that was capable of feeling pain. God experienced real human hunger. Despite the idealized carol that refers to "the little Lord Jesus no crying he makes," God became a human baby, vulnerable, fragile, in need of care and regular changes of diapers, dependent upon his mother for the food to sustain his life. I'm thinking that the real baby really cried on occasion. I hope so, soothing tears is one of the ways parents bond with their children and God entered human form for the fullness of the experience. Rather than declare that Jesus came to save me, I affirm that God comes to us so intimately that every human experience from birth through death is an opportunity to move closer to God. There is nothing in life or death that can separate us

from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. I didn't make that up - it is holy scripture for those of us who believe.

So I pray that my neighbors will show their usual patience with me and understand that I'm not unaware of the season of the year. It just takes time to take it all in and genuine changes of heart and mind don't come quickly or easily. I don't dislike the decorations of my neighbors. I'm not opposed to their displays of light. But I'm not likely to join in with all of the trappings of the season.

I hope that Christmas will be more of an expression on the inside than a show on the outside.

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