

The Parish Light

The Parish of the Northern Lights Newsletter - December 2019



Minister's Message.

The Wise still follow the Star!!

The Magi, "after they heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed." Mat. 2:9-10.

"I am tired of Christmas" one young mother told me. "All the baking and cooking, and shopping I have to do just because it is Christmas. And no thanks do I get. I wish it would go away." This young lady is not alone with her thoughts. Christmas has become so secular a holiday that many cannot get any sense of what the season used to bring. For many, Christmas has become a holiday of giving and getting gifts. The value of what you give or get often depends on the relationship you have with that person. It is no wonder many people will have a blue Christmas this season. They have lost the meaning of what Christmas is all about regardless of what the media and commercials are saying.

Now there is nothing wrong with presents. Even the wisemen gave gifts to the Christ Child. But they were given out of a sense of awe, gratitude and love, not from a sense that they had to, out of hope for what they would get in return. When we lose sight of the real reason for Christmas, we tend to put our own in its place and that often leads to disappointment as with the young mother.

Christmas is a time to remember and celebrate the birth of the Saviour, born in a manger, so long ago. And in remembering we recommit ourselves to following Him who was born in a manger, died on a cross and rose three days later, all on our behalf. At Christmas we remember God's great love for us and we commit ourselves to continue to love him in return. Our love is from gratitude that stems from thankfulness of the gift that God gave to us in sending His Son to us. The gifts we give to each other are in following the example of Christ. As we realize that out of love Christ gives the gift of himself to us, so our gifts to other is a sign and symbol of our love to others, or should be.

It is in regaining this remembrance of the coming of Christ, in recognizing the love shown to us and in our expressing our love to others, that we will sense the true meaning of Christmas. The gift is at best an inadequate symbol of our love, although it is usually appreciated.

Let us as individuals and as a parish strive to get back to the real purpose of Christmas; that of remembering the birth of the Saviour who came to earth as our gift from the Father, His gift to us because he loved us. May we as we remember that precious gift, commit to loving those around us, by helping those in need and sharing God's gift of Jesus with those around us. May we like the wisemen kneel at the foot of the Christ child and give thanks.

Sheila and I would like to wish each of you a very blessed and merry Christmas.

Bishop Larry and Sheila Robertson

Dear Beloved of God –

May grace and peace be yours in abundance (1 Peter 1:2a).

Hanging in my office is the beautiful image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, also known as the Virgin of Guadalupe. The image is a reproduction of an original painting by a Roman Catholic Priest, Father Salvador, who my wife, Cathy, and I, and several other adults visited in 2001 in the community he served in the Parish of the Holy Spirit and St. Mary of Guadalupe in Ecatepec, Mexico.

According to tradition, an indigenous peasant, Juan Diego, had a vision of the Virgin in 1531. As he was walking among the hills, he heard a song which sounded like birds singing - a song soft and beautiful. He wondered if he was dreaming but he followed the sound and was met by the Virgin Mary who appeared to Juan Diego as she does in the painting - as an indigenous woman dressed in royal garments. She spoke to him in his native tongue calling his name and asking him to go to the bishop and tell him to have a shrine built in her honor on the place where she had appeared to Juan Diego. He went to the bishop and with great difficulty was finally able to see the bishop who responded with great skepticism to Juan Diego's request.

The Virgin appeared a second time and Juan Diego begged the Virgin to send someone more important. "I am insignificant," he said, "a piece of rope, the last rung of a ladder." She responded, "My child, the smallest, the least, I send you. I have many messengers, but I have chosen you." She said that she wanted a building to be erected where she could show and give love, compassion, help and defense to the inhabitants of the land; a place where people could listen and find solutions to their miseries, pain and sufferings. The bishop responded to Juan Diego insisting that he needed a sign.

A third time the Virgin appeared to Juan Diego this time asking him to collect roses which were nearby (very rare flowers not grown in the area) and to take them to the bishop as a sign. Juan Diego gathered the roses in his cloak and when he opened his cloak to show the bishop, out fell the flowers and imprinted on his cloak was the image of the Virgin. The bishop immediately fell to his knees and asked Juan Diego for forgiveness at not having listened to him. A church was built on the site where the Virgin had appeared and today, on this site, hangs the cloak and its image of the Virgin in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe - a worship site visited by more people each year than the Vatican in Rome

One of the things that intrigued me about this story is that from the margins - the fringe - of his world, Juan Diego, an indigenous Mexican, was prodded awake by God's presence in the world through the appearances of Mary. Like many before him, Juan Diego was a reluctant prophet begging the Virgin to entrust the mission to someone of importance. But she would not take no for an answer, and Juan Diego's awakening to his mission would precipitate the awakening of all of Mexico to God's love through Christ.

As we journey this Advent and Christmas season, listen carefully - listen closely to how often God will chose someone on the margins to carry an important word: Mary - who gave birth to the Savior of the world; Zechariah - who, serving in the temple, is unable to speak until his son John the Baptist was born; Elizabeth - who gave birth to the one who would prepare the way for the Messiah - John the Baptist; and shepherds in the field - who were chosen to welcome and announce the birth of Jesus.

This Advent - this Christmas - listen carefully - listen closely - for God at work through the poor, the lowly, those on the outside, those on the edge and then ask the very Lutheran question: "what does this mean?"

The God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13).

In Christ Jesus –

Shalom,

+Larry

The Rev. Dr. Larry Kochendorfer, Bishop
Synod of Alberta and the Territories
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada



"If you have been affected by any of the issues raised in this drama..."

Lessons from the High North

Community Spirit

It was Spring in Baker Lake, a town of about 1200 people. Near the end of May, the sun had returned in its fullest. There was light most of the time. I had already dug down the 5 – 6 feet of snow to my open wooden boat to clear the snow so the weight of the spring snow would not crush it. There was a joy in the air as people began to get ready for break up and the disappearing of the ice making it possible to use boats instead of snowmobiles to get to the spring camps. There was also a watchfulness looking for the signs of break in the river when the sheer volume and weight of the river ice would push the 4 – 5 feet thick of ice up on the shores of Baker Lake. Heaven help anything in its way; snowmobiles, boats, sheds and anything else left behind would be crushed under the massive weight of the ice as it crawled up the shore. This was our Advent season in a way, watching for the telltale signs of what we knew was going to happen. We just did not know when.

It was Sunday and we were halfway through the service where the telltale extremely loud creaks and crashes of the ice began its journey up the shore. Every head of the 120 people, mostly Inuit, shot up, all looking at me. I nodded to the elders and in mass every man stood up, slowly, sort of, acknowledged the cross and walked, sort of, to the door. From there they flew to the snowmobiles and 4 wheelers (ATVs).

Only the ladies and a few very elderly people were left. I can tell you that it was the quickest end of a service I have ever done. No sermon, a blessing and away we all flew to the shore. I was worried about my boat. I had cleared the snow but it was still in the hole. I did not need to have worried. What I saw that day taught me more than any sermon I could have preached. When I got to the shore every man in the community was there. I saw men from every church and those that never went to church, working side by side, pulling machines, boats, kickers (outboard motors) and anything else in the path of the ice. It did not matter who owned what, everything got moved. I noticed my boat was already out of the hole and moved well up on shore, which was good because where the hole was, now contained the edge of the ice flow. Had it not been moved, the boat would have been crushed.

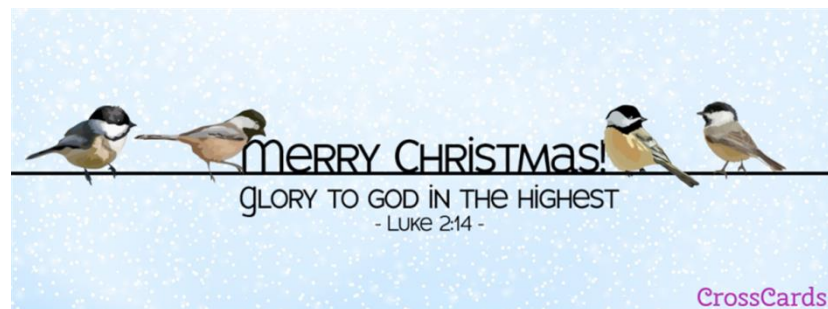
For a couple of hours we worked and watched. Food was brought by the women; Bannock, dried and frozen fish and caribou. Once we had to move things farther up the bank. The ice was travelling more than normal. It was then that I noticed how close we were to the old mission house built in 1930. There was no way we could move it. It would not have been the first building to be destroyed by the 4 foot wall of ice crashing through its walls. This building held many

memories and people watched anxiously not being able to do anything about it. Then about four feet from the mission house, the ice stopped moving. For a while the elders watched and then said that it had stopped. The people in the area gathered around, we had a prayer of thanksgiving said the Grace and went home.

Jesus calls us to love those around us. He does not say love only family members or friends. He said love your enemies, Love the unlovable, love those inside the church and outside the church. Love those in other denominations. Love those you have grudges against or those who have grudges against you. When he says to love, he means to show that love with our actions. On that Sunday morning on the shores of Baker Lake, I saw the love of Christ in action. I saw true Community Spirit. A Spirit that accepted everyone, regardless of who they were and what their relationship was in the past. Accepted them as fellow human beings and reached out to help in the time of need. That is what the north taught me.

Blessings.

Bishop Larry Robertson.



COULD DECLINE BE A GOOD THING FOR CHRISTIANITY?

..... Rev. Erik Parker, Winnipeg, Manitoba

You might have figured this out already, but I write a fair bit about the decline of Christianity in North American. And **by decline I mean the aging and shrinking membership of churches** as people drift away from church membership and attendance.

I talk about it, preach about it, and I blog about it here.

I have been a pastor for nearly a decade, but I am still just young enough to be considered a millennial. Millennials, of course, being the generation much lamented as the ones who stopped going to church (here is a secret: it was our parents who started the exodus).

As churches and denominations experience the effects of decline, both in terms of fewer members and smaller budgets, there has been a lot of hand-wringing and lamenting and finger-pointing and worrying. There has been conflict about who is to blame, experts are brought in to teach churches how to “bring people back.”

Often the habit of those still committed to upholding congregations and denominations is to try to diagnose the reasons that people have stopped coming and churches are shrinking. The Lord’s Prayer no longer being said in public schools, Sunday shopping, sports on Sundays, etc... As if just changing one of those things send people back into church in droves. **We long for the magic bullet fix that will turn the church back into what we remember it being...** something that was never as great in actuality as it was in memory.

Decline is very scary for churches today. It is the thing that makes us wonder where all the young people went, that makes us tired and want to pass on responsibilities to someone else, it can quite frankly make us feel depressed every time we walk into big mostly empty sanctuaries with just a few bodies dotting the pews for worship.

Yet, I wonder if we have ever considered whether or not decline is actually a bad thing for us.

Could the decline of Christianity in North America even be a good thing?

We often imagine, describe and speak about decline in unhelpful ways. We buy into the notion that more is always better. We think of churches like companies who if they aren't growing, taking in more people and more revenue, are dying.

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But churches aren't companies trying to survive in a downturned market. Churches are more like living creatures. And when living creatures only take in more and more and more it is not healthy. In fact, we know that never-ending growth for a living creature will lead to death.

Instead, living creatures need moderation and balance. When we have too much of something we need to cut back in order to be healthy.

The decline that we have been experiencing lately just might be God putting us on a diet. God is calling us to cut back, in order to be healthy, in order that we might live.

Just step back for moment and consider all that the things that need to be true about the church if decline is truly bad and limitless growth is good.

It means that the Gospel is nothing more than a numbers game, a tool to increase attendance and revenue.

It means that the Kingdom of God is retreating from the world as we shrink, and that God can only do as much as we are able to provide the money and people to do.

It means that real ministry is about attraction, sales, and consumerism because the goal is to get more people through the doors, rather than sending more disciples out.

It means that if we could reverse the decline we lament, the church would become a virus growing until everything is consumed by it, all people and all resources.

If these things are not true, is it possible that decline might be a good thing?

If decline is a call to give up the excess, the things that don't help us live but weigh us down... what is it that we are being called to give up?

The churches in the area I serve in are dealing with this question in concrete ways by working towards 5 congregations being served by 1.5 pastors.

But to get there we had to sort out the difference between important things and essentials. There are a lot of important things that we had to let go of. We had to let go of the hurts and failures of the past, the much beloved traditions and expectations that feel so central to our identity as churches. We had to sacrifice comfort and security for the sake of ministry, and for the sake of our brothers and sisters in faith.

And in coming to what was essential, we had to ask what were the things that God called us to do that made us church... things that we had to do no matter how big or small, rich or poor we are. Surprise, surprise, it turned out to be the same stuff that Martin Luther and the reformers said was essential to being church. The same stuff that Jesus commanded us to do – Word and Sacrament ministry. And while we would not be able to do a lot of the important things that churches are used to doing (programs, events, committees, traditions, expectations), we discovered that we could make sure that everyone had the essentials.

As we have taken the first steps towards a paired down focus on the essentials, on Word and Sacrament ministry, it has been surprising how good it is for us. It is like eating healthy food and doing exercises for a church, focusing on the stuff that we need to keep doing in order to still be Church.

And we are still figuring out what to do with this new smaller, leaner Body (of Christ) it clear that **a lot of churches and denominations in North America just might benefit from decline as much be hurt by it.**

No, we will not be the churches we once were. Not everyone will come back, not every fall supper, craft sale, dinner theatre production, scout troupe, curling bonspiel can be resurrection. Maybe not even every Sunday School or women's group or men's breakfast. We cannot go backwards, we cannot return to what we once were.

Because it was unsustainable. Memories of full churches with lots going on, and more people and finances than we knew what to do with could be described in others ways. Full and growing can also mean bloated and gaining weight. Filled to the brim can also mean burdened.

God just may be calling us to let go and cut back on the stuff that no longer works, stuff that we struggled to find volunteers for, that we tire ourselves trying to maintain, that we wish there were others to take over for us.

God just may be telling us to stop.

To stop relying on social pressure or favorable shopping hours to bring people to church, but instead let the Holy Spirit call people to faith.

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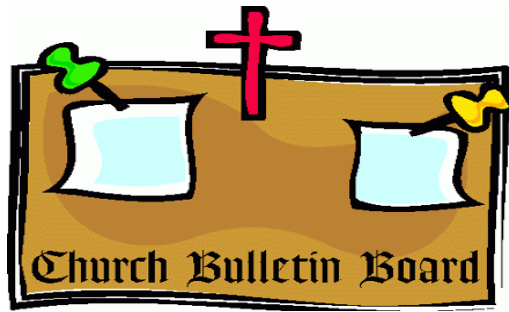
To stop seeing church membership as an act of citizenship, but instead a practice of faith.

To stop focusing our energy and time on maintaining budgets, facilities, membership roles, committees, programs and local traditions, but instead let the disciplines of Word and Sacrament ministry govern our communities. To let the rhythms and patterns of the liturgy and church year show us where to spend our time and energy.

To stop trying to do everything for all people, but instead refocus ourselves on the Gospel – the story of Christ's saving death and resurrection.

The longer church declines and more we try to go backwards... the clearer it becomes that God is getting us ready for the future. But first God is shedding us of our old selves, cutting back on the things that once worked for us, but now weigh us down and keep us from moving forward.

Decline isn't a bad thing. It is a diet, a diet so that the church can be healthy again.



December 8th – St Nicolas Day Celebration – St Andrew's Zion, Colinton – 10:30 am

December 13th – Christmas caroling at St Paul's, Boyle – 7:00 pm

December 14th – Open House at the Rectory (4620 Pine Avenue, Boyle)

12 noon – 3:00 pm **EVERYONE WELCOME**

December 15th – Lessons and Carols Service, St Paul's, Boyle – 10:30 am

December 16 – Parish Council Meeting, St Paul's, Boyle – 6:45 pm

December 22nd - Lessons & Carols service, St Andrew's Zion, Colinton – 10:30 am

December 29th – 5th Sunday Service in St Paul's, Boyle .. 11:00 am

– potluck to follow service

Christmas Eve Service Schedule:

1:30 pm – Christ Church, Wandering River

7:00 pm – St Andrew's Zion Church, Colinton with St Thomas Church Perryvale also attending

10:00 pm – St Paul's Church, Boyle

