

## **Learning a bit of Greek.**

**January 2022.**

It is interesting how we have become a little bit familiar with the Greek alphabet these days. We have been watching as variants of Covid19 go traipsing around the globe. The World Health Organization has been labelling them as they appear. And their names of choice are letters of the Greek alphabet. Some have become generally known like the Delta variant and the Omicron variant of late. There has also been Beta, Gamma, Epsilon, Kappa and more. These are the names of actual letters in the Greek alphabet.

I have no idea who gets to name variants but using simple letters is not as flashy for sure as is done with hurricanes and tropical storms that are given people names. If you would ask someone, do you remember Katrina or Sandy? Many will catch on right away that you are talking about hurricanes. Perhaps giving storms people names makes them more distinguishable from each other and, I think, even makes them more menacing, almost as if they are alive and moving in on their targets.

This hasn't been done for the pandemic variants. I really don't know why but perhaps because as a variant shows up, too little is known about how it will go, whereas a hurricane's destructive pattern we have become familiar with. You can't see Covid variants on Doppler radar and there are no virologists in front of green screened maps predicting their course of travel. And perhaps the unknown of a delta or an omicron is scarier than a hurricane you could evacuate away from.

As we continue along this global pandemic path that the Lord has us on, it may be helpful to remember two more letters of the Greek alphabet that represent the start and finish of it all, namely, Alpha (first letter) and Omega (last letter). There is only One who can truly claim this as a name, the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End, the One who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty, our Lord and Savior God in Christ Jesus. (Rev. 1:8, 22:13)

No matter what variant may rage around us or even through us, we still belong to the only Alpha/Omega. By His grace and peace we are enabled to endure and persevere, to trust and hope in Him that nothing in all creation, not even the brokenness of illness and pandemics can separate us from the His love. So the next time we share about our worries, fears, frustrations about omicron or some other lettered variant, let's bring this before the First and Last, Alpha & Omega, the Almighty, Christ our Lord. Let us trust that this too, He has in His powerful nail-scarred hands, and so we do not have to fear.

Pastor Colin.

# CHRISTMAS GREETINGS 2021



How long does your Christmas day last? I heard on the radio recently a person talking about how abruptly people are done with Christmas right on or after the 25th. She commented that on her street all the real trees that were used for Christmas trees suddenly appear at the end of the driveways, some already on Christmas Day and the rest by Boxing Day. It is as if there is such a frantic rush to get everything “ready for Christmas” that by the time it arrives, people are tired of it and done with it.

How long does your Christmas day last? For many centuries of church history in the West, Christmas Day marked the start of two weeks of Christmas celebrations, including the 1st and 2nd Sunday’s of Christmas, all of which comes to a close on January 6th. That sounds like a better idea than .... rip open presents ... have some pancakes, bacon and eggnog ... and then chuck the tree to the curb.

Could the urge to be done with it all right after Christmas Day come from a sense of disappointment after a months+ of build-up? Our secular Christmas celebrations just can’t live up to the hype. Christmas stuff shows up in stores earlier and earlier, the run up to Christmas is longer and longer, so the sudden shutdown afterwards seems more inevitable.

But what if we took the weeks following Christmas, right through the New Year celebrations, as a time of continued reflection on how the Holy Creator has come to us to rescue us sinful humans, by Jesus born in Bethlehem? What if we took more time to savour our Saviour’s birth?

In our household, we put up decorations around the weekend of the first Sunday of Advent (except the outside lights? ... that I do on the last predicted warm day of Oct or Nov!). We leave them up until after the first Sunday of January, and even then we are not in a hurry to pack it all away.

We got to know some Armenian Orthodox Christians who came to Canada from Iraq during the recent wars there. Their Christmas Day is celebrated on January 6th each year. What a wonderful gift. In coming to Canada their families joined us on

December 25th and then celebrated again on January 6th. I wonder if they give each other two sets of Christmas gifts?!

At least celebrating on Jan. 6th in Canada kept their Christmas Day celebration of Christ's birth away from all the commercialized Santa stuff of our secular culture. Seems to be some wisdom in that.

Well at the very least, we are leaving our decorations up till after our brothers and sisters in Christ from the Middle East finish their celebrations. And in so doing, we can keep the first coming of our Saviour in view a bit longer than just one evening and day.

So from our household to yours, may the Lord grant you His grace and peace in these Christmas weeks ahead! As we ponder what He has done, may we be filled by the Spirit with humble gratitude in this, the greatest gift of all.

Pastor Colin & Anita.

**March 2, 2021**

### **PERSEVERANCE IS NOT A MAD RUSH FORWARD**

Remember the massive forest fires in California last September? I remember reading about a group of hikers in the wilderness who were fast getting trapped by the oncoming blazes that were starting to surround them. Their only option became to abandon one of their vehicles as the fires cut off their roads out and hike a wilderness trail to their other vehicle still left to them. So they set out on foot, having to stay through the night on that hike in the midst of the forest region that was on fire in all directions as far as they could tell.

The hikers made it to the second vehicle and were able to drive out of the inferno to safety. They made it, in part, because they followed an old hiker's adage that says, *"Slow is smooth and smooth is fast: if you move slowly, you'll make the right decision and it will ultimately be faster."* As one hiker commented on that adage, *"You learn how to be slow and methodical even when there are scary things happening."* [Their story can be found here: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-54169561>]

I thought of this account as our region moved from GREY to RED Covid19 zone. I think it is safe to say that all of us are done with the shutdown restrictions. We would all love to go back to normal please! But if we decide to rush our steps through this time, ignore local health protocols, move fast in this, we may find ourselves going backwards again. For those hikers, it was all they could do to keep from rushing out of the situation towards normal again. But they had enough sense to know that as difficult as it was, they needed to move slowly, deliberately carefully to reach safer surroundings.

Romans 5 gives us a calling to persevere in times of suffering. This is one of

those times. And it seems to me that perseverance is not about speed but slow and steady walking through difficult terrain. We may feel the pressure to rush fast towards normal, but the future is not in our hands but His. So we persevere in being careful to show love to our neighbors by adhering to protocols because we care more about others than we do about our own inconveniences. *“If you move slowly, you'll make the right decision and it will ultimately be faster.”* Romans 5:3 ... **because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.** May we showing that love, so generously poured out in our hearts, to our neighbors and communities being a source of encouragement through this time as we walk, not run, but walk carefully forward.

Your fellow “hiker,” Pastor Colin.

## January 24, 2021 Sermon

### **REVELATION 2:1-11**

#### **BE FAITHFUL AND LOVING**

By Rev. Colin Vander Ploeg. January 24, 2021. Use by permission only.

All roads in Asia Minor led to Ephesus. Well, all of the provincial main trade routes did anyway. If you wanted to expand business, you travelled to Ephesus to make connection with new wholesalers and retailers. If you wanted to lobby the government for favourable policies, you went to Ephesus, for she was a darling of Rome.

And if you wanted to party for a weekend, you went to Ephesus. They had the best festivals and displays and a world renowned red light district. If the gods that affected your life were going to be appeased or goaded to bless you, it was by way of participation in the celebrations and worship in one of the temples of Ephesus.

You may have heard the phrase, “the seven wonders of the ancient world.” These were seven architectural masterpieces that existed in ancient times in and around the Mediterranean Sea. The only one still existing today is the Great Pyramid of Giza in Egypt. The other 6 are known from ancient descriptions and coins and some archeological finds of remnants of them. Well one of those 7 wonders of the ancient world was the Temple to the goddess Artemis in Ephesus.

It was the Eiffel Tower of the time, you just had to go there if you were in Ephesus. And worship there was a matter of offering sacrifices, monetary, goods and wares, celebrating at great feasts with all manner of food that you provided or bought that was dedicated at the temple and also participating in the legal and encouraged, ritual prostitution with one of the many temple prostitutes. For Artemis was a goddess of fertility, and intercourse with one of her servants was how you gained her favour for your crops or your business or your household.

And all around the city the symbols of the presence and rule of Rome were visible, in the various other temples in which you could go and pay homage to divine Caesar, king of kings and lord of lords. This also put you in good stead with the Roman authorities, they then felt they could trust you and would then be more willing to help you along in achieving whatever goals you were after.

It was a city boasting a 25,000 seat stadium built into a hillside, holding theatre performances and athletic games second only to those of Olympia. The city had numerous wonderful views of the busy harbour and enjoyed magnificent sunsets. Ephesus was a cosmopolitan, wealthy, opportunity filled city of dreams.

And in that grand context, among the quarter of million residence of Ephesus, the Lord placed one of His lampstands. It as a church was planted by Paul, watered by Apollos, pruned by Priscilla & Aquila, and further tilled again by Paul years later, as we can read in Acts. And the Lord made this congregation grow.

The apostle John lived there for some time and most likely wrote his gospel account and letters from there. And he was most likely arrested and sent off in exile to Patmos from Ephesus. This was the church closest to Patmos to which the scroll of Revelation would first be sent.

**To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:** It is an oracle of the Lord, a Word of the Lord for His one Church in the world of all times and places. So today too, we listen openly to what the Spirit says to the churches wherever we gather.

**These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands:** Recall from last week in Chapter 1, that the lampstands are the churches and the stars are the angels or messengers of each church, perhaps all those who lead by Word and Sacrament in these churches.

It is the Lord's reminder to us ... *"as I am among you right now, I tell you what I have seen and know of you."* What follows is a pattern that will be repeated for each addressed church. Both description of what is and a call in the face of what will come. Of the seven churches that were the actual ancient congregations, which nevertheless represent the church through the ages, only two of the seven do not receive a warning, a rebuke from the Lord. This is not a shiny family album to be proud of but the sordid truth of the struggle of the church in the world.

Verse 2, **I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name and have not grown weary.**

Does that sound like a congregation you would want to be a part of; a testimony from Jesus about them sticking with the truth no matter what happens? They know what the Bible says and

are not giving in to lures to wander away from what it says. That's a congregation to be proud of. The "Hold fast to the Truth Church" of Ephesus.

And that doesn't come easy. It is described as hard work and requires perseverance even under pressure and attack. It requires diligent and thorough vetting of leaders to be sure that what they are teaching is of the Lord. And they keep up their morale and work at this willingly for the sake of the Holy Name of Jesus the Christ, who walks among the lampstands.

Should not Jesus reward their good deeds here? Should they not be held up as an example to follow, as Paul would say? There are churches today that continue to strive to stick with the Word of God. Is that not what we value here in Bethany? Yes we do! It is not always easy. There are pressures to compromise and adapt the Word of the Lord to suit the desires of this world.

And there is always the work of discernment of the truth, the calling of elders in overseeing the faith of the congregation and especially the preacher. Jesus once told his disciples to be on their guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, for they were missing the boat about the truth.

Well apparently so were the Ephesian Christians at this point. Verse 4, **Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.**

What is this "first love"? What was it that the Ephesians did at first that they have since turned their backs on? Well, what is the first thing? What is the greatest thing? It is to love God above all and to love your neighbor as self for "**all the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments**", as Jesus declared in Matthew 22. The heart of our calling as Christians is to love. It is to give ourselves to the Lord and to one another.

Here we have a congregation that was embattled and pressured on every side by a powerful, pagan world with all its culture intertwined with its idolatry and immorality. It was all they could do to keep themselves from being polluted by the corruption around them. But Jesus says that is not enough!

He calls them to repent of this great sin of forsaking their first love, of moving away from the things they did at first. For then he warns, **If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.**

In other words, if you do not bring back to life your love for God and for others, your congregation will be gone from Ephesus. Your church will fail. And then the Lord says in verse 6, **But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.**

We get the sandwich effect structurally in these verses. The bread is the resistance to wickedness and lies, the meat between is the love of God and neighbor. We are not exactly sure who

these Nicolaitans were but the churches in John's day certainly did. What seems to be an ancient consensus from writers who wrote shortly after John's day, was that this was a group of believers in the church who followed teachings of one Nicolas, possibly the one mentioned in Acts 6 as one of the first deaconate chosen.

They taught along the lines of ... *"since we are freed from the law by grace, we can live as we please."* And under the pressure of living in a pagan society, living daily with non-Christ following family, fellow workers and the authorities all around, they tried to accommodate themselves to the values of the world they lived in, to make their Christian faith more palatable to their community around them.

Perhaps this is who's teaching Paul was quoting in 1Corinthians 6: 12, **"Everything is permissible for me"—but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible for me"—but I will not be mastered by anything. "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food"—but God will destroy them both. The body is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord.**

It was a false teaching that ignored the moral law of God and basically went with, "relax, go to it, if it feels right to you and you want to, there's no sin in it, we are free from sin in Christ." And so the Ephesians in their perseverance for the truth resisted, rightly hating such practices which the Lord also hates.

But the meat in the middle of the structural sandwich here is so crucial to faithfulness that without it, all the obedience to the truth of the teachings of the Lord are not enough to ensure the survival of the congregation. As Paul wrote so powerfully in 1Corinthians 13, without love we are nothing.

We are once more as the Lord's Church today, in a similar situation with us heading in one of two seemingly opposite directions. One direction has us so striving to be in truth. And so we circle the wagons so to speak, dig in our heels, and defend what is right against what is wrong on a host of life choice issues. The other has us so striving to be to loving to other people that we are willing to say or do anything rather than hurt people's feelings in some way.

The Lord in His Word to us this morning has a warning for us all. It is not either or, it is both and. We must both seek to persevere in the truth AND love God and neighbor above all. These two, says the Lord here, are not opposed to each other. They are part of what it means to be the Body of Christ in this world.

The North American church in general is divided by labels like conservative and liberal, traditionalist and new approach, and it seems we in the CRC are also headed for another round of 'being right verses being loving' as we discuss human sexuality. There is no winning in such a battle formed in this way. In fact the Lord warns that such a dichotomy ends with the disappearance of the church in those places where she is busy only arguing for the truth or only arguing for being loving to people.

Both are part of the same calling to be disciples of the Lord. Both are deadly serious matters. It is crucial to persevere in the truth of the Word of God and to resist waywardness in doctrine and morality. And it is crucial to be in loving fellowship with God and with our neighbor, loving them as we would love ourselves.

Doctrinal truth alone leads to cold dead religious ideas that end up having little to do with the living Lord who gives grace, reconciliation and healing. Loving our neighbor without a truth compass leads to accommodating to the unbeliever's or our own desires and under the pretense of loving them, failing to bring the call to strive for holiness and obedience to the Lord.

Notice that John records the Lord here saying that he hates the *practices* of the Nicolaitans. And He praises the Ephesian church for resisting the wickedness of false leaders who seek to teach what is not right to the people. That was the right thing to do. But they missed the other side of the coin so to speak. To all of them there, Nicolaitans among them included, comes the call to repent, which means, *"you're going the wrong way so turn around and go the other way."*

The height from which they have fallen is the height of the union of tender loving-kindness rooted in the truth of God's Word. When those two things are intertwined, then the world sees Christ among us. Jesus died for our forgiveness of sin, so that we can be restored to his likeness in holiness in God's presence. He did not die to forgive our sins so that we might continue to sin, but that we might turn from sin and live a new life in Him. This flows from the loving-kindness of God that moves us to compassion and love for our neighbor.

Verse 7, **He who has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.** Notice even though this passage is sent to the church in Ephesus, it is the Word of the Lord who is the Spirit to the churches (plural). **To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.**

What is it here that the Spirit calls us to overcome? The either or of love versus truth. Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus chapter 4:15, **Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.**

What is the truth? We search and study the Scriptures. We find that worship of anything of the creation is idolatry. That changing the commands of the Lord leads to death. That we are called to be a people set apart for the Lord.

What is it to love? We search the Scriptures and we find it is to be patient, kind, not envying or boasting, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. It delights not in evil but rejoices with the truth.

The Scriptures never separate truth and love for together they bear witness to the one who walks among us. Separately, they point to no one but ourselves in our own self-righteous pride. But truth and love together is the power of the Gospel moved by the Spirit in the hearts of

people called to be His. And they receive life and life fuller, life that wells up to eternal life.

That is the gift of the tree of life from which Adam and Eve were barred when they fell into sin, but which in Christ is now made available again to all who are His. But take note ... this way of the Lord is not without its cost.

With the words to the church in Smyrna, we see that this may cost us everything in this life. In this truth in love journey that is following Jesus, we are not without our adversaries. And the Lord does not say he will spare us from suffering. No, he calls us to persevere **even to the point of death**.

Satan, the world, and our own sinful flesh, that's the **unholy trinity** that deceives us at every turn. The corruption that seeks to lure us with promises of a better life now, if only we will give in to the siren call of immorality, or offer some of our worship to another cause other than Christ's. Even Satan's power, here described as putting some in prison to test them and suffering persecution is limited by the Lord. Ten days is not literally ten days only but a way of saying, it will not last. In fact compared to eternity, it is mere days.

**These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.** In chapter 1 vs 8 the Lord God was described in the same way, the first and last, Alpha & Omega. Here the Lord Jesus is described this way. Christ is the Lord God.

It is he who has conquered the very death that threatens us. **Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.** This is the life of the Tree of Life, life eternal with the Lord. Verse 11, **He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.**

In John's gospel chapter 11:25 we read, **Jesus said to [Martha], "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"**

Truth in love, love in truth. Both must be our priority as we seek to be faithful to the one who calls us to suffer, even to the point of death for the sake of His Name and His Kingdom. For He is here among us and holding us in His glorious hands. Let us pray.

## **January 6, 2021**

A new sermon series begins this Sunday.

"Grace and peace to you from Him who is and who was and who is to come." These are the words of greeting from the first section of the book of Revelation. Lord willing, starting this Sunday, we begin a journey through the book of Revelation. This is going to take some time and some extended focus from us all. Of the books of the Bible, Revelation is one of the most difficult if not downright bizarre.

To prepare for this sermon series I ask you all to take time to read the book of Revelation. If at all possible, read it through in one sitting. And do this more than once in the weeks to come. It is 15 pages in the church bench Bible, perhaps a bit longer in other versions or study bibles. Quite doable if we are willing. Reading it through in one sitting and a number of times starts to move us past the details that are confusing and strange and draws us into the larger message of the book. In 23 years of preaching, I have only preached 3 sermons from this amazing book. A number of you have suggested this series to me over the past few years and since I was able to take week long zoom class via Regent College in Vancouver this past summer on the theology of the Book of Revelation, the timing is right to begin this journey.

John Calvin, our spiritual forefather in the Reformed tradition wrote commentaries on most books of the Bible, but not on Revelation. Martin Luther did some study of the book but considered it just too full of symbols and visions and images to be of much use to the Church. Luther even wondered if this book should be in the Bible or not. Such great scholars of the Reformation and no help from them on the book of Revelation! So it is with some humble fear that I begin this sermon series.

There are various approaches to this book, the most popular of which comes from the Dispensationalist perspective. This is the view of the Bible that says that God dealt with humanity in different ways through different eras (dispensations) and that each time he moved on to a new way of dealing with us. Thus the Old Testament becomes of far less use to believers today than the New Testament. And the book the Revelation is primarily about an era still to come, so it is primarily future telling. This view which began basically in 1830's has been popularized more recently by the Left Behind novels, tv series and movies. It is also a darling of a number of big name tv preachers who thrive off their predictions of what is going to happen and their lining up of present day world events to have been foretold in the book of Revelation.

In the Reformed tradition we do not hold to this approach. The Bible we understand to be speaking of one covenant of God with humanity fulfilled in Christ Jesus. The Old Testament is part and parcel of the New Testament. And God has not fundamentally changed his approach to humanity. Thus also the book of Revelation is not a puzzle map to the future for us to predict what happens next in the world. The same Gospel message that resounds in every part of the Bible is also declared in the Book of Revelation: Christ Jesus is Lord and Savior.

So save yourself the confusion of trying to plug the images and visions into today's political or global or military landscape. Don't waste your time trying to predict when Jesus is going to return, for He himself tells us in Matthew 24:36, No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but

only the Father. Instead, read and mediate on this book and prayerfully ask the Holy Spirit to guide us together to a deeper understanding of the fullness of the Gospel and growing willingness to live more and more as citizens of the His Kingdom.

Your fellow explorer, Pastor Colin.

### **December 21, 2020**

This year, actually today, this evening in fact, we might be able to witness an astronomical event that hasn't occurred in this way since 1623 AD. The Great Conjunction as it is called is the aligning of Jupiter and Saturn in the night sky in such a way that they appear as a single bright star in the heavens. If the sky is clear enough, take a moment to step outside between 5 & 6 pm, and see if you can find it (might need some internet help with where it is).

There has been discussions online about the possibility that this was the kind of event that produced the star that the Magi from the East followed to Bethlehem. In other words, is the Bethlehem star coming back this evening? There is no real way to answer that question with any astronomical certainty.

What is known from ancient times was that the appearance of heavenly events in the sky were often seen as connected with the coming to power of royalty. In Numbers 24, when the pagan prophet Balaam utters his 4th oracle about Israel and what God will do, he prophesies in verse 17, "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel."

First and partial fulfillment of that prophecy is found in King David who did subdue the enemies surrounding Israel. But the second and complete fulfillment is found in the King of kings, Jesus Christ whose death, resurrection and ascension overcomes all the enemies of God's people. A few months after Roman Emperor Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44BC, ancient writers recorded a star appeared that was so bright it could be seen during the day. They called it the Julian Star and saw it as signifying that the slain Caesar was now a god.

Astronomers are pretty sure this was a comet that passed by earth at that time. But it demonstrates the accepted notion of the day that the universe is affected by the coming of a royal ruler. And so Herod is not "disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him" by the star's appearance but only wants to know when and where, because this star indicates a challenge to his own royal power.

What was the Bethlehem star? A comet? A brilliant alignment of planets? Does it matter if we know or not? What we have is the testimony of God's Word from which our ancient brothers and sisters in Matthew's day would have immediately understood the significance. The birth of Jesus is the arrival of royalty.

And it was no difficult thing at all for the Creator of all the cosmos to orchestrate the appearance and movement of a celestial being to accompany his Son's birth.

In fact, we find in Revelation 1 the vision John saw in verse 16 of seven stars held in the hand of Jesus Christ explained in verse 20 in the following way, "The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches." The stars here are in fact angels, a word that also means messengers sent from the Lord God. Perhaps that makes the most sense for the account of the Magi from the East and the star they followed, it was a messenger sent from God. It brings them right to the place where Jesus was.

However we understand the Bethlehem star, if you get a chance to see Jupiter & Saturn align, remember that these planets and their movements are under the care of the Almighty Creator. May the appearance of this "star" tonight remind us that the Lord of the universe moves heaven and earth to bring about the salvation He promised to all who will receive it. And even astronomical phenomena serve His purposes in the mystery of His love revealed in the coming of royalty, Jesus Christ our King to whom be all praise, honour, and glory!

Your fellow servant of the King, Pastor Colin.

### **December 17, 2020**

"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord."  
Luke 2:11

On behalf of Anita & I, we pray that the Lord of Bethlehem grant all of you His caring presence during this Christmas time. And as we enter the New Year, may the Lord of all time and place remind you again of His never ending faithfulness to be with us and be our God in Christ Jesus.

This has been one different year for us all. And I am sure all of our Christmas celebrations will look a little different. It has been a whole new experience for us as a worshipping community as well. From suddenly being shut down and holding our first online only service on March 15, then continuing in that format for 13 more Sundays. We went through most of Lent, then Easter, Ascension Day, Pentecost, all from our homes.

Our Worship Coordinators led our Worship and Tech booth volunteers to adapt and developed better publication of these services. We are certainly blessed as a congregation. Then we were allowed to restart at 30% capacity and slowly but steadily, we as members returned to in-person worship. It took some time as we were all still learning about this virus and how to adapt to its presence. Some of us are still unable to come to church. It has been a long journey. Some of our extended family and friends fell ill. Some died. But it still mostly seemed far away.

Summer went by and schools began navigating the new realities of health protection. We as a church re-started some of our programs carefully and our Sunday attendance grew to the point of needing us to register to attend, another new thing we never thought we would do. The weather has turned colder. Niagara Region Covid19 numbers are going up and we may be moving into tighter restrictions in our area. Some of us have tested positive for Covid19, coming real close to home for us all.

We hear about the vaccine that is beginning to be deployed. So many are putting their hope in this vaccine. What an immense task that is going to be. Patience, we all need more patience. We may need to pivot again as a church. But our calling will remain the same, to seek together to be growing in Jesus. And what did Jesus do with the sick, the lonely, the outsider and the despised? We went to them, cared for them, healed them, invited them in, no matter the objections of the self-serving powerful around him. He did what blessed people, not what put people in harm's way.

Let us continue to care for one another and for any that the Lord points out to us. Let us continue to demonstrate care for our communities, our neighbors and co-workers. Our faith comes from Him so let's keep focused on His ways that lead us to live for others' wellbeing more than for ourselves. That's a Christmas present everyone needs especially right now. May the Spirit guide your conversations, your actions, your prayers, and your hearts desires to glorify Emmanuel, God with us.

Your fellow servant, Pastor Colin.

## **October 6, 2020**

As the leaves fall.

Autumn has been my favourite time of the year for as long as I can remember. Different seasons affect us differently. I think a lot of that has to do with memories that we accumulate that are somehow tied to the change in seasons. After living in both Alberta and BC for about 18 years, coming back to Ontario where I grew up brought with it a return to four distinct seasons. In Edmonton Alberta, we would joke by saying "I think Autumn will be on a Wednesday this year." We often seemed to skip from Summer right to sudden winter. In Abbotsford BC we would wonder if the tree leaves will have any change of colour at all or just rot off the trees in the drizzle that was Fall and Winter. But in Ontario ... all four seasons are present in their turn.

This Fall the leaves are turning colour with vigor. Drive to any high point on the land and you can survey the glorious palate of the Creator's design. I am not sure why exactly but the cooling weather, the rustle of dry leaves in the wind, and the colourful carpeting of the forest floor makes me feel nostalgic somehow. Our house in Woodstock was lined with large maple trees. As kids we had the perennial

task of raking the leaves into huge piles and then of course to jump into the piles and throw handfuls at each other, roll around and tunnel under them and so on. This was before most people had leaf blowers and mulchers. Leaves were for play before they were put on the compost pile or burned in a smoky fire somewhere in the back of the property.

Seasons can make us look back, remember fond memories. And with each year's return of cool wind and changing colours we are connected again to those times. Seasons can also remind us of bad experiences. It can also be a marker of another year past after the loss of a loved one, or a time of injury, or suffering. Sometimes major unwanted changes in life can become connected with a changing season.

In the 2001 drama miniseries, *Band of Brothers*, about the US military unit called Easy Company of the 101st Airborne, the episodes always began with a brief interview of one of the actual survivors of that Company. In one interview, at the start of the episode about the brutal cold winter battle at Bastogne, a war vet says that every winter, when it gets really cold out, he would always turn to his wife and says, "I am glad I am not in Bastogne." For him, cold winter weather reminds him of the suffering of war in the past.

Fall seems to be the end of things as the trees shed their leaves, as flowers finish their blooming and as insects slowly disappear again. Perhaps it is natural to look back during the Fall. After all, we do still turn our clocks back an hour in the fall. But there is something else we should see as Autumn comes. We should see the faithfulness expressed in a very ancient poem. Genesis 8:22, a poem of God's promise to Noah and all humanity and the creation:

As long as the earth endures,  
seedtime and harvest,  
cold and heat,  
summer and winter,  
day and night  
will never cease.

Seasonal change also points forward to the enduring providence of God as he continues to uphold the creation while his plan of salvation moves forward. When the leaves fall, creation itself reminds us that God is keeping his promises. And in Hebrews 13:8 we read, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. The Redeemer and Restorer of the earth with its changing seasons is as sure to His promise of God's unearned love as the seasons are to changing. So we look back, and we look forward and with eyes of faith, we see every season old and new, a season of God's gracious love in Christ Jesus.

Your fellow traveler, Pastor Colin.

**September 28, 2020**

Masks: to wear or not to wear, that is the question. (read Romans 13)

I want to say a few words about the ongoing struggle we have with wearing masks. It is encouraging to see how most people are abiding by the mask by-laws in place and are honoring the different business' requests to wear a mask when entering and so forth. Now I have not met too many people (not anyone actually) who loves to wear these masks. I have however met a number of people who are refusing to wear them or only wear them with constant complaint (and I am not referring to young kids).

There are indeed some legitimate medical reasons (physical and mental health reasons) for some be exempt. I suspect however, the number of such persons is smaller where actual documentation is required to verify it. Most of our Pelham and beyond establishments are graciously not requiring such documentation (unlike, for example, an airline). As churches in our communities we are under the same by-law and I am sure we experience the same range of responses to the mask requirement. However, it is more likely that those refusing mask-wearing without valid reasons are simply not going to attend a worship service unlike those who strut silently bare-faced into a grocery store while glaring angrily at the humble young attendant who asks them to wear a mask.

Again, haven't met anyone who is enjoying having to wear a mask (except some of the young kids!). So why does this bother us so much? Why does it bother us so much so that suddenly our government and health officials are now vilified as being against us as Christians? I don't recall any worries about government interference in church life as we follow government regulations for health and safety for sanitation or food preparations or for running programs and such. It is a bit ironic that a passerby in a car will honk in support of an anti-mask protest all the while obeying the laws of the road and wearing a seat belt.

As Christians we are called to honor those in authority over us, to pray for them, to give them the respect due their calling. We do this because we believe that all government authority comes from God. Our governments rule by God's design (see Romans 13). Does that mean blind obedience no matter what a government does? No, but that does mean that disobeying the law can only be done when the law is promoting evil rather than the good of our society.

If the government demands that we are to oust all newcomers to Canada and take their possessions away from them, which would be a law we must disobey. That example is pretty clear of course. How do we deal with more complicated or unclear laws? I can't see all the angles on things, can you? We could of course work from the starting point of "love God and your neighbor". Wearing a mask when asked to, does that show love to God and to my neighbor? Does it matter if I believe the mask helps me or not? Does it matter if I dislike masks or not? Does it

matter if I believe or not believe the latest medical studies about how to best deal with this pandemic?

No, it doesn't. It doesn't even matter if you believe this is all vastly overdone. Our local governments have instituted a by-law in their efforts to stem the spread of Covid19. I don't have a moral reason before my Lord not to obey. Wearing a mask is not somehow disobedience to God. It is in fact showing care and love to my neighbor, my fellow shopper, my fellow student, my co-worker or my fellow worshipper. And really, given all the suffering in this world, Covid related and more, we are just being asked to wear a mask and keep some distance between us. It is such a light thing for us to bear given what so many millions of people world-wide are living through right now.

So even if I want to discuss with someone in a grocery aisle the need for masks or not, I am still going to have that conversation with my mask on. Why? Because I love them as my neighbor and their well-being is more important than my individual rights or whatever. After all, God sought our eternal well-being even though it cost Him the Son's very life, which you and I had no right to ask of Him. Yet that is God's love for us. That should be our love for others, going out of our way to show that love.

your fellow servant in the Lord, Pastor Colin.

### **September 21, 2020**

1Peter 2:12—when in need of a tune-up.

This past week I was driving behind a school bus. That in itself is cause for thanksgiving as it indicated the start-up of schools after being shut down since mid-March. I pulled up behind the bus at the corner of Canboro and Effingham in Ridgeville. It was busy ... for Ridgeville that is. The bus waited its turn to head up the hill, with me following on my turn. But when the bus's turn came, I was suddenly idling in a thick black cloud of smoke.

Up the hill the bus roared and all the way along, I was driving in carbon soot. Seems the bus didn't fare so well sitting idle for so long. And I'm pretty sure the driver had no idea what filth he was spewing out behind him. His bus was moving at his command, and he didn't care, so it seemed, that it was in bad need of a tune up. He had to get where he wanted to go and I was left trying to close my car vents.

We can have a similar effect on people that we interact with through the day. We know where we need to be and are set on getting there. And the incidental people we have around us, the grocery checkout girl, the fella in front of us pondering lottery tickets, the older driver actually obeying the speed limit, the young fellow trying to keep track of how many people he has let into the store, all kinds of people, what do they experience when we go by them?

Do we realize that when we are in need of a tune up, a spiritual, moral, relational tune up, that we can be spewing toxic fumes at those around us and be oblivious to it? We might be so focused on our drive through order being correct, that we don't thank the one who just served us. We might be so intent on showing off the hemi under our hood that we ignore the fearful elderly person trying to make it across the street before the light changes.

Or maybe it's the transition home after work, and the irritation we have piled up from a frustrating day, we dump into the living room where our spouse or kids are greeting us. Or it's the irritation and sadness of the changes we all are told to accommodate during Covid19. In our self-justification and rationalizations, we cover the poor door attendant with ridicule; so much black smoke from our tune-up desperate hearts and minds.

In 1Peter 2:12 the Lord tells us, "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us."NIV As Christians in North America we are under indignant scrutiny when it comes to public reputation. We don't help others glorify God if our passing interactions with people are not experienced by others as moments of good deeds. When we interact, even briefly, incidentally, are others left with the fragrance of God's loving kindness or with the black smoke of our miss-firing motivations and attitudes?

Civility is not a pretention but an act of kindness. Yes we might be in a frustrated mood, or be angry with something that transpired today. But we are called to choose how, when and where we work through that. We are responsible for how we affect others. We cannot of course control how others react to us, but even if they accuse us of doing wrong, let our actions speak louder than their words, and perhaps, by God's grace, the same grace that accepts us, they too will give glory to Him.

Your fellow traveler, Pastor Colin.

**August 25,2020**

**DON'T GIVE UP MEETING TOGETHER.**

"Well this is certainly different ..." This was a comment from a couple with their kids at home when they watched their first worship service on line after the big shutdown descended on us back in mid-March. Fourteen weeks later and it gets said again, "Well this is certainly different ..." only now it is spoken as the couple walks through the doors of the church building to attend the restart of onsite worship. Masks, sanitizers, follow the taped paths on the floor, sit spaced apart, no mail slots or collection plates or coffee served afterwards; it all feels so different, maybe sad, wrong, frustrating even.

When things change in our lives, we always go through some period of grieving what has been lost in the changes. This time is no different. And more so in this situation, we keep clinging to the hope that this is all very temporary and all will be back to normal very soon. I think that was the feeling for most of us at Bethany during the first weeks and month+ of the shutdown. We moved the services online, taking advantage of the livestreaming we already had set up for those who now and again who could not attend service in person.

We learned as we went. We waited as congregation, as staff, as Council, as volunteers, we waited in our small bubbles of home or work ... waited for this to end. We were rightly thankful to the Lord for the technology and knowhow among us to continue to worship from home. We adapted our Sunday morning routines and did the best we could with what we had to work with. But it certainly was different. I don't think any of us were saying that worship via tv, computer, smartphone or tablet is better than in person. But we accepted it as a gift for such a time as this.

Now we are again in a transition. And we are hearing that it won't be until next summer that things might get closer to our old normal. That will most likely be true for Sunday worship as well. But thanks be to God! We were permitted to return together in smaller numbers for now. And so we re-opened at 1040 Balfour St. And here we came. Not a rush to get in like some Boxing Day sale, but entering cautiously, carefully. Because it all looks so different.

In the meantime many of us settled into the routine of watching the service online in our homes and, let's be honest, we feel a little resistant to have to switch it all up again and get ourselves back together in person. Some of us have been honest and expressed that we find it way easier to turn on the laptop while in our pajamas with a coffee in hand and sit back and watch. Others of us have so struggled with the masks or the spacing or whatever the adaptations, that we are going to wait until it all gets back to normal. Because that's easier to do for us.

There are of course legitimate reasons to be cautious about returning to gathered worship namely health risks to yourself or those with you. If that's you, give thanks for the livestreaming available and join in as best you can. But others of us need to take stock of our honest reasons for hesitancy to worship together again. What keeps us away right now? What makes us afraid? What makes us frustrated with the situation? And then ... what is the Lord calling us to do in response to our honest answers to those questions?

Bethany leadership is committed to doing all we do in a safe and wise manner. There's no government defiance or rash conspiracy theories guiding what we do. We strive to be obedient to the authorities God has placed over us as we respond to the call of our Lord to come together and praise His name, to receive His grace through Word and Sacrament, to pray for one another and this world, and to

encourage each other by being present with each other ... even as we are all wearing masks, sanitizing our hands, keeping our safe distances.

Hebrews 10:25 says, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” These words were written first to ancient brothers and sisters who struggled to come together to worship because it could result in persecution by the authorities, or by people of other religions. It was downright dangerous to worship in public together. And still the Lord called them also to come together as the Body of Christ, our Lord, who has conquered and lives and reigns forever ... still today in these certainly different times. See you soon.

Your fellow worshipper, Pastor Colin.

### **June 23<sup>rd</sup> Reflections**

#### **REFLECTIONS ON WAITING IN LINE AND GENESIS 21:5**

Line ups. That’s one of the obvious new ways of life for most of us that we don’t welcome. Of course around the world, lining up to obtain necessities of life are quite common. And we aren’t strangers to line-ups for entertainment opportunities. One of the reasons Disney World/Land is not a real attraction to me is the line-ups. When I was a youth, you wanted to go to Canada’s Wonderland or to the rides at Marineland on a somewhat drizzly day. That way there would hardly be any line-ups. I just can’t fathom standing in line for hours for a 2 minute ride on a rollercoaster.

And now it seems anytime we need to quickly run to the store to get something, there is a line-up, either at the entrance or at the cashier. Most of us are familiar with that, even if we are missing the old days where our consumer impulses could be answered in short order. Now we are texting our spouse with, “Hey I can see there’s no line up at Walmart! Quick do we need anything?” We now by-pass stores when we see a big line up and we turn in when we see little one or no wait even if we weren’t going there initially.

Truth is, none of us North Americans are much good at waiting for something. And I think our impatience at line ups, our frustrations at waiting to get near the checkout, our disappointments at continued empty spaces on store shelves, this is all a function of our general impatience with things getting back to normal. Yes, we know. This COVID19 situation is going to take a bit to get past. As a result we are starting to be resigned to these line ups. Nothing joyful about it; just stuck with it.

And there is more in our lives that we are getting weary of waiting for. We may feel like our life’s plans, that roadmap we so carefully thought out, has suddenly been shut down or at least detoured. Road detours irritate us because they take more time, go places we don’t want to go, and leave us wondering if we

are ever going to get back on track. And then there is inevitably the hold up when the road becomes one way and we have to wait for the other side to go first. But that of course is just driving. Our road blocks and detours might be prayers unanswered ... for years perhaps. Maybe it's strain in a relationship that simply doesn't get past it. Or maybe it is the unknown of what to do next in your life.

Jesus said in John 10:10 of his followers, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." And the years are going by and you are still waiting on something more full for your life. Illness, disability, scarcity, habits that won't change, plans that never ripen, we are waiting often a long time. And we are weary of it. What is the matter with God? Why the long wait?

Can you imagine Abraham & Sarah's thoughts and reactions to his firstborn son Isaac being born? "Well! It's about time, Lord!!" God waited until Abraham was a senior before he began His journey with this old man. Abraham was 75 years old when God called him to start out anew. I know retirement wasn't a thing back then, but wow. Why the wait? And then the promise of descendants when he and Sarah were barren.

That too took another 25 years to fulfill. Abraham was 100 years old when Isaac was born and Sarah was 90! But in God's timing this was the perfect time. Perhaps Abraham & Sarah needed this miraculous gift of a son in their old age to better understand the ways of God verses the ways of humanity. After all, they named their son "Isaac", which means, "he laughs."

Perhaps rather than an impatient "well finally!" Abraham and Sarah looked at each other, with infant in arms, and broke out in holy laughter at the amazing sure promise of God, fulfilled long after they ran out of anything to add to the equation. Perhaps in our next annoying line up, we might laugh a little, encourage those around us to patience. This pandemic is way bigger than you and me. But our God keeps all His promises as He works His pathway of redemption in this world in ways that make clear that our ways are really nothing in comparison. God in Christ has come to bring us life and life to the full. It's coming, keep watching and waiting on the Lord. It just probably not going to be according to our timetable.

## **June 9<sup>th</sup> Reflections**

### **PUTTING ON THE TOWEL: REFLECTIONS ON JOHN 13**

*"How come they get to protest but we aren't allowed to be with our extended families? How come a protest march is allowed but parties on the beach are not?"* These are some comments that are moving among our communities these days? Behind them is, understandably, the frustration and strain on patience under the constrictions of this Covid19 lockdown. As things begin to re-open carefully in the weeks ahead, there is the real potential for people to bolt ahead of the pace of re-opening. We can almost taste the return of free movement. And watching mass

protests against systemic and personal racism in Canada and the US seems to have the effect of putting our impatience about social gatherings on par with the protests happening in many places.

But also behind our complaints lies our selfish tendencies to look to our own interests first, and the interests of others second or a distant third. And in this case, when we are putting our desires to get back to normal life alongside the need for major and lasting changes with respect to justice and safety for non-white minorities in our midst, and calling the two things equal in value, we show pretty clearly how easily we stray from God's will (Micah 6:8!).

I cringe when I hear white Christians demanding their rights in the face of chronic ongoing injustice experienced by our Indigenous neighbors and new immigrants to Canada; by so many who are treated differently because they look different. I feel appalled when people liken a beach party to an anti-racism protest, using the latter to argue for the former, regardless of your stance on social justice issues.

When we demand to get what we want, we assert our power and positions in life as much as we can to get those things. And when we do this, we feel inherently justified in doing so (we believe we have a right to it!) and since we stick our neck out to voice those demands we feel compelled to defend our position (otherwise we might look foolish and weak!).

A recent email from Safe Families Niagara talking about authority and vulnerability pointed to Jesus' response to the power and authority he was given. In John 13 we have the account of Jesus washing his disciples' feet. The Apostle John records an astonishing contrast in verse 3-5: **"Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him."**

What a contrast to this world and our lives and how we normally function. When power and authority are given to someone, they take it and use it for whatever purposes they desire. We all complain that politicians are out simple to be elected and get re-elected. And so we find it difficult to trust motives and words and actions. And we view recent protests through the lens of power, of one group trying to take it from another. And yet Jesus, knowing he had ultimate power over all does no such thing.

The Apostle is deliberate in his words. Power in the ancient world was no different. Rome had power. The Jews wanted the power back, even as a sign of the Kingdom of God for them. But Jesus, the promised Messiah of that Kingdom, knowing who he was and what power and authority was given to him, does the

work of a servant in a very visible way. How should this demonstration of the use of power and authority impact how we talk about and respond to what is going on around us today? In verse 15 Jesus explains: **“I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.”**

Some churches practice foot washing because of this passage as a way to obey this command. I think that misses the point. Jesus used a visible cultural practice to demonstrate what we are called as Christians to do and be in this world. As we are called in this life to **“do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God”** <sup>Micah 6:8</sup> we are called to do this as Jesus did. Humbling ourselves, serving others, and making the needs of others a higher priority than our own needs. Especially when it is the need for major and lasting changes that raise up those who are trampled down, to uphold those who are in need, to welcome the stranger in our midst, to stand with those who have no voice, to, as Amos 5:24 says, **“Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!”**

And no, getting together with extended family or having a beach party are not the same thing as a protest against the injustice of racism. For in which context are we called to put on the towel and wash the feet of others?

Your fellow servant, Pastor Colin.

## May 27<sup>th</sup> Reflections

### REFLECTIONS ON BEING NEGATIVE

It normally is a criticism, being told you are negative. But when Premier Doug Ford is pushing to reach higher numbers of Covid19 tests done per day, more and more people, hopefully, will be told they are negative. And that’s what you want to hear. I just spent a few days repeatedly checking the Covid19 test results webpage, hoping to be told I am negative. And the Lord graciously granted that.

To me it has always felt a bit backwards the way medical tests use “negative” and “positive.” But of course they are using the words accurately. In normal conversation however we uphold positive and downplay negative. But in this case, you want to be told you are “negative” but only medically.

However, today, as parts of the world including around here begin to re-open to business, there also seems to be a rise in negativity. It’s not unusual for people when going through trying times to look for someone to blame for all the suffering. And so our leaders, to whom we looked to help in time of need, and for whom we were generally glad to have in place, they now become the target of all kinds of negative complaints.

I would not want to be a political leader in this pandemic situation. There is no way you can do right in the eyes of anyone. No matter what you do or have

done, you will be told either you did too much or you did not do enough. No one is going to tell the Premier or Prime Minister that they did everything just right. And the sad reality is, Christian leaders have been heard in a number of places in North America bad mouthing the authorities, defiantly claiming their rights over against diligent and cautious government leaders. I wonder if the unbelieving world watching today has any sense that churches and their people are any different than anyone else when it comes to negatively complaining against others.

And it is easy to do. Just this morning I was at the dog park to let my dog run (so that I wouldn't have to :) and in conversation with another dog owner there, I easily followed his lead into complaining about all kinds of things going on today. It felt natural and fitting to speak negatively about certain leaders, organizations, policies and even other dog owners. There's comradery in complaining and it is an easy club to join.

But I only want to be negative medically, not inter-personally. Ephesians 4:29 gives us the better way, Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. How fitting for us as followers of the Peacemaker. Notice, it is "do not let" an active action to stop ourselves from complaining and attacking. It assumes we are inclined to do this. And then the criteria for talk that comes out of our mouths is based not in what I want or need, but in what builds others up according, again, not according to what I think they need to hear, but according to the other persons' needs.

"That it may benefit those who listen." Perhaps this is more people than simply the one we are talking to in the moment. Perhaps this is the listening neighbors, society, and world in which we are placed in Jesus' name. The old children's song is still appropriate: "Oh be careful little mouths what you say ... for the Father up above is looking down in love." The only time we want to be known as being negative in the presence of others is with respect to medical tests. For the rest ... "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." Col. 3:12

## **May 21<sup>st</sup> Reflections**

Covid19 reflections on Matthew 11:28-30.

When you walk a roaming dog like our little Archer, you have to be aware of whose lawn they might walk on. I regard the city owned boulevards as somewhat common property and so I don't worry if my dog travels on the grass there. But wandering up someone's front yard towards the house is more of a no-no. I mean

if you are looking out the window and you see someone letting their dog explore your front yard and gardens, you're probably not all that thrilled with this.

The same can be said with people. The end of the driveway, whether it's the sidewalk edge or road, is sort of an accepted personal property line. People for the most part walk the sidewalks and do not wander up and down the driveways as they stroll. And we in North America are pretty protective of our property, owned or rented.

For a number of years as a boy and then also again later as an adult, I had a newspaper route. Both times I delivered early in the mornings before most anyone was up. To speed things up, I would go from house to house right across lawns and leaping over flowerbeds to get to the doorways to drop a paper. But not of course, if I saw or suspected the household dweller was in view. That just felt rude. And still today, if the person delivering the Voice of Pelham comes to my front door mailbox via the lawn near my front window, I am a bit bothered by that. After all, it's my property and it's my safe zone. Some houses in even have fences and gates across their front yards.

But something new is happening today. A lot more people are walking the sidewalks and in order to pass each other under social distancing rules they have to choose an option. Either move out onto the road or step up onto someone's driveway or front lawn for a moment while the other person passes by. Suddenly my property, which used to be part of my safe zone, an out of bounds area for uninvited strangers has become a safe zone for anyone who comes by all because of Covid19.

And no one seems to be reacting badly to this. I have walked a few steps up someone's driveway to make way for another and upon seeing the owner there, have received a friendly wave or hello, even when walking on amazingly manicured lawns. It is as if our property lines have become dotted lines with welcoming spaces for any to come on in. We are learning to welcome people to the safety of our driveways and front lawns. We are learning that this is OK.

Going back 50-60 years, most houses on most streets had front porches on which to gather and if you were strolling along a street it was the venue for conversation with neighbors. In fact, if you didn't come up to the porch to say hello, it may even have been considered rude. But over time, with the spread of the automobile and attached garages, the back deck replaced the front porch. Few houses today have much of a gathering space in the front. And with this change we enacted more control over who interacted with us at home. It became basically by invite only.

Do you ever wonder where the front porch of a church is? It has always been at the front of our homes, where our private lives meet the sidewalk or street. And today, because of Covid19, people are occasionally coming up the drive or onto

the front lawn. Do we have any kind of “porch” practices today to interact with them? Can we open up our lives a bit in some way to welcome the stranger, the barely acknowledged neighbor, the person we usually just waved to from the car, can we welcome them a bit closer? Or are we waiting for all things to return to as they were, and the boundary of our driveway or front lawn returns to a solid line that other should not cross?

If the church is the Body of Christ in the world, if we are the hands and feet, the heart and mind of Jesus in our neighborhood, then what Christ invites us to, is what we are to invite others to. The invite of Matthew 11:28-30 is indeed Jesus’ invitation to anyone to come and meet him in loving kindness. But is it therefore not also our invitation to the neighborhood? “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest ... I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls.”

Perhaps, rather than somehow making it seem that my property is off limits to strangers, perhaps I should put up a sign that says, “Safe zone. Feel free to come on over.” It reminds me of the three houses in a row on one of my old paper routes, that had a connected stone foot path along the front of all three houses. That simple path told me I was welcome to be on their property and that they welcomed each other as neighbors. Their path was for anyone who needed to walk it.

Perhaps through us, Jesus calls out, “Come to my people, all you who are weary and burdened, and through them, I will give you the rest I have given them ... for they are gently and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls.” Maybe I have to sit out front more.

### **May 13<sup>th</sup> Reflections**

Watch out for those pre-existing conditions.

As parts of the world slowly ... very slowly ... take tentative steps towards opening up society again, there is a steady rise in impatience with it all. We watch from here in Niagara region with some confusion at the scenes of American protesters decrying their economic freedoms being taken away and demanding them be returned. You can imagine the scene with a few hundred loud and crowded protestors shouting and waving banners, flags and placards, marching on the sidewalk in front of some government building with reporters trying to get some sound bites from some these defiant citizens while cars constantly honk as they drive by.

Picture also in the midst of the crowd a woman in medical scrubs looking too old and tired for her age, keeping her head down, making her way through the crowd towards the seniors’ residence at the end of the street for another double shift among some of the most vulnerable to the virus. If the reporter would point

her out to a protester and ask, “What about her?” the reply might be something like, “They are doing great job. Of course we have to still protect the vulnerable. They should stay in lockdown. But for the rest of us? We have no pre-existing conditions that put us at risk so let’s get back to life shall we?”

As time goes by, we will see a growing divide between “those with pre-existing conditions (including the vulnerability of old age) and the rest of us” when it comes to living with the presence of COVID19. You will be in one category or the other. It will seem like there is a great chasm between the two that cannot be crossed. Of course the phrase, “pre-existing condition” used to be attached to health insurance forms for travelling out of country. If you had such a condition, then you might be ineligible for insurance. Better be careful about that. Wouldn’t want to end up in a situation where you were in trouble and your insurance is no good because of a “pre-existing condition”.

Today having some “pre-existing condition” even becomes a sort of comfort to others when they hear that someone they didn’t really know well, dies of COVID19. They were healthy and young! What happened? Oh, they had a pre-existing condition. Whew. We, who don’t have such a thing, we are still safe. What is hidden in such banter is a fear of a deadly virus that no one could escape. That would send us into a panic far beyond what we see today.

I mean, what if we all actually have a pre-existing condition that makes us all vulnerable to suffering and death? What if our perception that some are more susceptible to suffering, misery, and death in their life than others, because of how they live, or choices they make, or the homes they come from, what if that is all an illusion? What if there are not two categories of people at risk but only one: all of us? What if the needs of those with pre-existing conditions are the same as those who are sure they do not have any such thing?

I wonder if the present plentiful “we are in this together” sentiments will slowly fade back into “you’re on your own” when the majority are able to return to their normal pursuits in life. I wonder if the outwardly broken people in our communities, the “sinners” in the New Testament sense of those unclean, those needing to be kept away from the rest of us, I wonder if they will be swept off the front pages of breaking news and be returned to the back pages among the obituaries and the articles for sale? We have always been pretty sure that society’s bottom dwellers are at the bottom because of their own pre-existing conditions of laziness or addiction or maybe (more compassionately), mental health problems. The priority in economic and political life has to be those who do not have such pre-existing conditions, right?

The Gospel is the great leveler. Before God, we are all on the bottom with this pre-existing condition called sin. And no one, no matter what their standing in the community is spared. There are not two categories of people before the

Creator. There is only one. Romans 3:23 "... There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," In other words, we are all in this together, this misery-filled, rebellious, dark-hearted godlessness of sinful life. We are all fallen in sin. We are conceived and born with this pre-existing condition, out of which we grow at get practiced at making self-centred poor choices all through life that simply show this condition.

"There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."

As we all struggle with our place in the changes ahead ... who gets to go to work, what gets to be open and what must remain closed, who has to wear masks and when ... let us resist the urge to create categories out of people to make a better spot for ourselves. In a sense, this virus, which attacks indiscriminately ignoring borders, political stances, economic position or anything else that we so normally rank people by, this virus reminds us of sin. It is present everywhere. It is so small it is insidious yet it attacks without warning and we spread it even unknowingly.

Of course sin is far worse and completely global. And so the rescue from sin has to come from outside of ourselves. It came from God himself in Christ Jesus. We all have the pre-existing condition of sin. I don't mean this simply to be a quaint metaphor but an actual reminder. As we deal with one another on this planet, we are indeed in this together, the misery and suffering of one is a part of all. For just as sin is part of all, so also the Gospel of salvation is for all to hear. And that needs to be enacted with loving kindness that welcomes and includes rather than isolates and sets aside.

For anyone, whose situation seems so different from ours, whether in the neighboring house or in neighboring nation, has more in common with us as fellow sinners in need of God's amazing grace in Christ than we often want to acknowledge. Pre-existing condition? Making us susceptible to suffering, misery, corruption? That's me too. We are all in this together. Thanks be to God for His indescribable grace in Jesus.

## **May 5<sup>th</sup> Reflections**

### **GOD'S NEW THINGS DURING COVID19**

I just recently came across some reflections written by Resonate Global Mission staff on the CRC Network website ([network.crcna.org](http://network.crcna.org)) asking about how we are responding to the "new thing" God is doing during this pandemic. In Isaiah 43:19 the prophet announces to God's people that in mercy God is doing a new thing in the midst of their suffering in exile. "See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs

up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.”NIV

I think for most of us, most of the time, we view this pandemic as an awful interruption to normal life, and to the ways we wish to follow the Lord in our worship, education, service, at work and so forth. So we are sort of waiting for this to end and things to go back to some semblance of normal. But more and more, we hear people “in the know” telling us that things will never return to the way they were. Newscast hosts are asking experts what long term and permanent changes will result from this global pandemic?

And perhaps you are also in the space between what you’ve lost and what you want to have back. And yet you have that sneaking suspicion that in some ways we are not going back to the way things were. And this is not necessarily a bad thing. The virus is bad. It is not welcomed nor should it be. But its impact might also produce some new things. And we know as Christians that there is a God who is sovereign over all things and that even through the brokenness of a pandemic, itself a result of this sin-broken creation, God can and does bring about new things. The CRC Network article went on to list a few ways with respect to the church, that God is doing something new through COVID19:

“The church has never been so attentive to those who can’t leave their homes than it is right now...and there have always been people who couldn’t leave their homes. The church has never been so creative in supporting those who have lost their jobs or had their wages cut...and there have always been people struggling financially in our communities.

The church has never been so accessible to people who don’t know Jesus and probably won’t go to a physical church, but might watch the gospel being preached on YouTube or Facebook out of sheer curiosity...and there have always been people who were curious enough to listen but perhaps too afraid to come into our space.”

And that is just to name a few things God is doing. What if we took time this week to look around us, at our own homes, families, our own thoughts and habits? What if we took time to ask the Spirit to show us what new thing, Lord, are you doing? Could it be a new way forward in the desert of being stuck at home; a new stream of refreshment in a wasteland of previously shortchanged relationships? Notice in Isaiah 43:19 that the prophet asks if we perceive what God is doing? It’s not seeing what we are doing, or how well we are coping but seeing what God is doing in the midst of the desert and wasteland of daily life today.

If you are at your wits ends with your kids, ask the Lord, “What new ways are you showing me that I am not seeing in this situation?” If you are struggling with being alone and cooped up, ask the Lord, “What stream from your presence is flowing for me in the midst of this aloneness?” Isaiah goes on to announce that even as we

may not yet see what God is doing, the animals all around us do. Verse 20, “The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the desert and streams in the wasteland ...”

Makes me think of all the posts online about how the air is cleaner, people notice birds and wildlife in the cities and in the now calmer waterways that they never noticed before. Images of a kangaroo bouncing down a main street in Australia or lions lounging on the 9th hole greens on some African golf course or the alligator enjoying the poolside at some resort. But the new things God is doing, even as they may benefit the animals in some way, are in fact for the blessing of His people. “... to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.”

In Christ, that is you and me. What would cause us to proclaim God’s praise? Noticing what new things God is doing, even in the midst of hardship, worry, fear and suffering. Because God is a God of mercies that are “new every morning” Lamentations 3:22-23 we have reason to look for what He is doing. It is not so much about looking for some silver lining on the outer edges of what we are going through as it is searching out the renewing of the foundations on the inside, near the core of our lives. And there we find the renewing grace of God in Christ, which is always at work bringing us towards Christ-likeness because we are “the people he formed for himself.”

## **April 23<sup>rd</sup> Reflections**

### **Greetings brothers and sisters in the Lord.**

If you are willing to take a few minutes to read (and I suspect many of us have some extra time these days), I recommend following the link below to Rev. Shawn Sikkema's "Letter to My Middle Class Friends." It grapples with the impact of Covid19 for both poor and middle class people and what the Lord may be calling us to through this pandemic. This is shared with permission.

<https://www.jesusoncolfax.org/blog/middleclassfriends>

Rev. Shawn Sikkema is a CRC pastor serving a Resonate Global Mission sponsored church plant called “Jesus on Colfax Ministries” in the East Colfax neighborhood of Denver, CO. Shawn and his wife Diane lead a ministry that reaches out to people who live in a string of about 25 old motels along East Colfax Ave. (He is also Karl Vahrmeyer’s brother-in-law---thank you, Wilma for bringing this article to my attention!).

## April 21<sup>st</sup> Reflections

Have you noticed that the public way we say “good bye” at the end of a conversation has changed? At the grocery store check out from behind the Plexiglas shield, or at the end of a phone conversation with a repair shop, or even on the radio at the end of an interview with some social commentator or political analyst, people finish with, “Take care and stay safe.”

Of course this is entirely understandable given the pandemic risk we all face, and some more extremely than others. This threat to our personal safety called the Covid19 virus has unmasked our personal vulnerability. And it doesn't matter if you are youthful or seasoned, socially adept or you travel solo, have a door at work with your title on it or use a locker for your street clothes. It doesn't matter if you have a complex portfolio or you live paycheque to paycheque, if just English is native to you or you can converse in various languages, whether you are from here or are new here, all this makes no difference in the face of this virus.

Being vulnerable is really nothing new to us fragile mortals. However usually we live with a confidence that we have adequately protected ourselves from most daily dangers. It is probably a good thing that we do not spend our days pondering all the ways that we live at risk of some trouble happening. But today, people are adding the “be safe” or “stay safe” tag line to their farewells. I have also found myself saying this to people I chat with (from a hockey stick distance away of course).

The reality is however, that we cannot keep ourselves from all harm. We do our best to be prudent and live carefully, however, things happen. Terrible things happen. Think of the senseless shooting carnage in rural Nova Scotia recently. Our wish to one another to “stay safe” has an element of fear embedded in it. It doesn't sound or feel like our usual “have a good weekend” or “enjoy your day.” Saying “stay safe” assumes the danger lurking. And the farther away from affluent communities we look, the more “stay safe” moves from a relevant wish to an urgent prayer.

This pandemic dominates the news feeds. Yet much of the world continues to live in fear and poverty, instability, lack of necessities, war, famine, and homelessness. We have largely forgotten that just before this pandemic, the world was witnessing the largest refugee crisis since WWII. “Stay safe” becomes much more of a naming of threats and fears and a crying out for help as our daily footing slips as the ground shifts beneath us globally. We feel today especially, the forces in this world that are far beyond our personal control. When we offer our “stay safe” comment, are we not hoping that we have some control over this? If not, the phrase is missing something. Maybe we just need to add it: “May God keep you safe.” Is that not really our prayer?

## Psalm 121 (NIV)

- 1 I lift up my eyes to the mountains –  
    where does my help come from?
- 2 My help comes from the Lord,  
    the Maker of heaven and earth.
- 3 He will not let your foot slip –  
    he who watches over you will not slumber;
- 4 indeed, he who watches over Israel  
    will neither slumber nor sleep.
- 5 The Lord watches over you –  
    the Lord is your shade at your right hand;
- 6 the sun will not harm you by day,  
    nor the moon by night.
- 7 The Lord will keep you from all harm –  
    he will watch over your life;
- 8 the Lord will watch over your coming and going  
    both now and for evermore.

## April 16<sup>th</sup> Reflections

A number of you have been passing along articles you have come across during this time of waiting. So I thought I would share one from Back to God Ministries International ([www.backtogod.net](http://www.backtogod.net)), I encourage you to check out their website as it is full of resources including those that can be helpful at this time of pandemic. If there are other articles or internet resources you have found helpful these days and you wish to share them, do so, especially with those in your life who may not have the comfort of the Lord and His people. We miss gathering in person, but we are still greatly blessed with hope in Jesus and fellow believers who are praying for one another and helping where ever it is needed. May the Lord lead us to others He is calling to pray for and help them.

The article is found here: <https://familyfire.reframemedia.com/articles/where-is-god-when-your-world-falls-apart>

## March 31<sup>st</sup> Reflections

### OF NOT MEETING TOGETHER FOR NOW.

Back in 1970 (and yes I remember hearing this song on the radio ... I'm that old) Joni Mitchell made this common catch phrase even more memorable via song "*Don't it always seem to go—**That you don't know what you've got—Till it's gone—They paved paradise and put up a parking lot.***" (Anyone humming that tune

right now?) When I googled that phrase I found an article by Ashley Fern of the magazine-like website “Elite Daily” (June 26,2013) who commented by saying that *“What we really mean by it is, you knew what you had, you just never thought you would lose it.”* Her article starts with the question, *“Why do we often take for granted the very things that deserve our gratitude the most?”*

Ms. Fern states a truism, something that we know is true if we are willing to be honest about it. How many of us are realizing that we have been taking for granted our regular ability and freedom to gather on Sunday mornings for worship? And this we now see now that it is (temporarily) gone. I have been reading here and there thoughts from pastors all over North America about the experience of preaching to a camera and a mostly empty room rather than to a living, breathing, rejoicing, mourning, complaining, trusting congregation of real people. Seems we pastors generally agree that this Sunday shutdown is not our desired situation. I guess if you are a radio or internet preacher and never see your listeners you would have the habit of picturing in your mind those who may be listening. But it is new territory for most preachers, worship leaders, and for the rest of us Sunday worshipers.

**Hebrews 10:24-25** has this little brief shout out to the gathering of believers. I suspect it was about more than simply Sunday worship however it was at least about that. **“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, *not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*”** For many of us today, we are feeling the absence of one another in the fellowship of believers. But I also suspect that for some of the normal Sunday gatherers in churches all over the country, this social distancing may become the pretext to slip out of such gatherings indefinitely.

As the weeks pass, new Sunday morning rhythms are setting in for people. Our fears and worries about our own situations turn our focus inward more and more to within the very walls we are told to stay in. Many are doing life right now by themselves or with only the nuclear family without our usual distractions beyond home. We are in fact learning to let go for now the many things that normally keep us busy and moving in life. And that includes church. We may be setting aside for now, worship, praying, helping others, giving of time and treasure, discipling. We are being forced to stop. Where does the fellowship of believers in the local congregation fit in this? Is it one of those pieces of the business of life that we do because, well, it keeps us occupied but for now is stopped? Or is the fellowship in Christ something that under-girds the very lives we live, even in isolation?

When, Lord willing, things get back to “normal,” how quickly will we fill up the spaces in our lives again with all the business of life? How eager will we be to get

back to the pace of life that we as North Americans were so used to living ... before the virus? And will “**meeting together**” return again to its slot as simply one of those many things, necessary when convenient, expendable when our plans don’t make room for it?

Is our present experience during this crisis showing us that “church” is not as necessary as we may have thought? Or do we find ourselves longing to be connected to each other; that being part of the Body of Christ is somehow necessary to us; that the ministry of the Gospel of the local flesh and blood church is somehow crucial to our place and calling in this world?

In the weeks after the crisis of the 9-11 terrorist attacks in New York, the churches of New York and beyond were filled to capacity. But as the months and years moved on, slowly but surely, people went back to their normal lives and the churches returned to their largely under capacity gatherings. Today’s Covid19 crisis is sort of upside down. This crisis holds people away from gathered worship and ministry work. What will happen afterwards? Will the result be a growing longing for fellowship in our communities generally? Will people (re-) discover that the congregations in their midst are God-created places to find that longing answered? Or are the churches of Pelham and beyond simply places where certain religious type folks fill their Sunday mornings with something to do?

I think most people are experiencing the reality of Joni Mitchell’s song. They are realizing they had something that is now gone. May the Lord use His Church to guide our communities to find again in due time what is right now gone ... and so much more. Perhaps we should “**consider how we may spur one another along to love and good deeds**” for the sake of our neighbors now and especially when this is all over.

pastor Colin

## **March 24<sup>th</sup> Reflections**

Brothers and sisters, with some of our staff here at church today keeping our distance, we read together and reflected on Matthew 6:25-34. I encourage you to take some time to read this passage today or this week. But as we read Jesus’ instruction to “not worry” about the needs of our lives, we need to listen carefully to what Jesus is saying. He is **not** telling us to make light of the current virus crisis

and pretend all it fine. Jesus is **not** telling us to suppress our fears and worries and pretend that we are care-free. No, he is reminding us of the antidote to fear, which is bringing to mind again and again, that (as vs 32b) our Heavenly Father God knows what we need in the day to day of life.

The late Scottish professor and preacher James S. Stewart once made a helpful distinction between the foreground and the background of life. He used the metaphor of a painting in which there are distinct foreground images, items and persons that we see but they are surrounded and embedded in the background of all that is on the canvas that does not immediately grab out attention. This is a pretty good way to read what Jesus is saying in this part of Matthew 6.

In the foreground are the impacts of the virus on our lives. Some are ill. Some are in isolation for various reasons. Some are trying to navigate shopping for necessities. Many a parent now find themselves novice teachers at home. Some marriages are straining under the constant confines of the home with the growing financial uncertainties. In the foreground are the daily updates on numbers testing positive, numbers of deaths, numbers of financial losses. In the foreground are our worries and fears of what happens if I catch this or my elderly parents or my already health compromised loved ones get sick.

All our worries about food, supplies, jobs, businesses, family and friends, all are in the foreground. And the weight of our fears and worries can be overwhelming. So Jesus points us again to the background that encompasses all this. Our heavenly Father has been even caring for the birds and the flowers, let alone for his image bearers. The background is that the Creator and sustainer of the whole universe is our Father who loves and cares for His children. We are of much more value than the birds and the grasses.

Verse 33 says, “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” In other words, step back from the foreground details and view the whole canvas of our lives. We see “all these things” that we of course worry about, we see them embedded in the vast care of our heavenly Father. The antidote to worry is to recall once again that this thing too, whatever it is that you are stressed about right now, this Jesus knows and care for He gave His life for you that all these things are forever surrounded by God’s love and care.

Seeking His Kingdom and His righteousness is to remember again that you belong to the Lord, not because of how much you can stifle your own worries, but because of the righteousness of Jesus has given to you. And note the last line of this passage. “Each day has enough trouble of its own.” Jesus does not promise care-free days ahead. The foreground impacts of the spread of covid19 are real. But even more real is the background canvas of God’s unending love for His children, which will outlast this crisis.

When something changes for you this week and your emotions fill you with

fear, step back in prayer to our heavenly Father, and ask him to keep your mind and heart rooted in the vast canvas of His love and care for you in Jesus' name. This is His Kingdom and His world and He knows what you need in facing the foreground challenges.

Your fellow disciple, Pastor Colin.

### **March 20<sup>th</sup> Reflections**

Brothers and sisters, these are certainly strange times we are going through. Social distancing is a must right now, however this does not disconnect us from the Lord nor from one another in the bonds of the Body of Christ. I have been thinking on three realities within which we face the challenges of this virus.

**1. The Lord God is our Sovereign (Col 1:15-20).** Nothing in all creation is outside of His rule, including this virus. This is not our invitation to try to blame God for what is the result of a sin-wrecked creation, but our invitation to trust the King of kings and Lord of lords, that His Kingdom continues to manifest itself in this suffering. It is an invitation to trust the One who loves us, more than fear the thing we cannot control. We can and should talk about our fears and worries. We all have them and so do our neighbors. We can and should also talk about the comfort of knowing that we are loved by God because of Jesus. Offer to pray for anyone who is sharing their fears and worries.

**2. The Lord God has not forgotten us (Matt 6:25-34).** He is our Redeemer, meaning, he purchased us (think like when we redeem a voucher, we turn it in to get something in return). Q&A 1 of the Catechism says, "I belong body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ." This virus and the whole shaking of global foundations of "normal" life cannot change this reality. As people are stressed over what is happening to them, getting frustrated and angry that things are not being done for them fast enough, our community leaders have been reminding us of what all believers know: that this is not about you! It is about others. Being ill or being quarantined or getting laid off or having to shut down the business is not God punishing you. Our punishment was placed on Jesus. It is not God neglecting you or not listening to your cries. You have not become any less in God's eyes and neither has your neighbor to whom He wants us to show love. Which leads to the third thing.

**3. The Lord God calls us to live for Him (Romans 12:1-8).** I am still called, even as I am careful about contact, to love my neighbor as myself. I have met more of my neighborhood out walking my dog these days than I have in the past half dozen years. We have a ready made conversation starter that is totally acceptable to any stranger we meet: "How are you and your family doing?" Anyone I have asked that

of has willingly engaged. This is an opportunity for any of us to meet and greet (with social distancing in place) neighbors, fellow shoppers, clients, drive through workers, medical personnel, anyone we meet. Ask the Lord who is the Spirit to open your heart and mind to those around you that you meet today, in person or electronically. How can you encourage, offer something of support, let them know they are not alone? Listen with ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to you in those moments.

And may the Lord who is the Spirit, grant you His ongoing joy of the freedom to know and love God and neighbor as self. May we each reflect to others the Christ who died to save us and show the love of God to all whom the Spirit leads us to. All this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit (2Cor. 3:17-18)  
Your fellow disciple, Pastor Colin.