

MOVING FROM LAMENT TO HOPEFULNESS:

The truth is that as we have moved into the next stage of the pandemic, I have heard a lot of laments from clergy and parishioners alike: Things are not the same. It's hard to stream worship and conduct in-person worship at the same time. And the one I hear most often: People are not coming back to church. What if they never come back?

The source of that last lament became clear in my congregation when the Council realized that many of the people who had served as ushers were not ready to return to in-person worship. There are several reasons for this.

Some people think the new coronavirus variants are too dangerous. Some are more comfortable and safe at home with a cup of coffee. Then there are those who are not returning messages, a fact that has struck terror in many a heart and raises the question: What will church be if we have nobody and no time, talent or treasure to work with?

There are no answers to these questions, at least not **yet**. But I am reminded of a story told by the Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber in her book *Pastrix*. Years before COVID, she started a new congregation in Denver for the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America called a House for All Saints and Sinners. She was serving 35 to 40 people. As in many congregations, worship attendance dropped dramatically in the summer. When fall came around, Bolz-Weber decided, she would hold a traditional Rally Day to celebrate the end of summer and the beginning of fall and to welcome all the children for Sunday School and their parents back to church. She knew she did yet not have any children in her congregation, but she thought the celebration would be a good way to invite people in.

Bolz-Weber made all the preparations. She sent e-mails promoting the event. She talked it up whenever she had the opportunity. On the day before the event, she picked up the cotton candy machine, the six dozen burgers and buns, the giant bags of chips and all the other fixings, and hoped that it would be enough. She spent \$300 to make it all possible and put out a basket for a free-will offering, hoping to cover her costs. She arrived at church early Sunday morning and readied the fellowship area for the picnic. When she went entered the sanctuary for worship, she found 26 people -- fewer than typically attended summer worship.

After letting go of her disappointment and regaining her composure, Bolz-Weber led worship, and the group that was present had a fine

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time. They enjoyed giving cotton candy away to passers-by and gave the leftover food to a group of hungry people in a park. The offering basket was empty. She had nothing -- and she felt all her efforts were for nothing, too.

Afterward, Bolz-Weber talked with friends and reflected on what this all meant. Making meaning when dealing with grief helps people heal from the suffering experienced because of loss. Bolz-Weber thought about the story of the loaves and fishes and Jesus' feeding of the 5,000 and realized, after being reminded by one of her friends, that in Matthew the disciples, when asked to get lunch ready, said to Jesus: We have nothing, nothing but a few loaves and a couple of fish. In her book Bolz-Weber reflects:

*The disciples' mistake was also my mistake: They forgot that they have a God who created the universe out of nothing," that can put flesh on dry bones nothing," that can put life in a dust womb nothing." I mean, let's face it, nothing" is God's favorite material to work with. Perhaps God looks upon that which we dismiss as nothing, insignificant, and worthless, and says, Ha! Now **that** I can do something with."*

As we lament the losses caused by COVID, and experience our own "nothingness," there are at least three things we can remember that may help us: 1) The stories of God's amazing grace that take the scarcity of nothingness and transform it into abundance; 2) we don't have to bring about the transformation all by ourselves; and 3) lament brings us into a closer relationship with God.

Questions for reflection:

1. How has your congregation responded to the need to lament?
2. What are things you are lamenting regarding COVID?
3. What transformation of "nothingness" have you experienced?
4. What biblical story or stories sustain you when you experience "nothingness?"
5. As we move from this pandemic time, how could you use this next year to engage one another in a time of "pause" to *lament, trust* the Spirit and *discern* the future of the church?

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Gathering in 'God's Backyard' In the Summer of 2020 was fun and typically small. This summer we have stayed inside and most prefer being inside even when the heat is tremendous because some really need the strength of the pews and want to hear other than CD's. The gathered want to hear the piano and feel the rhythm and sing. We have maintained our bubble of sameness; meaning the same people gather and we all feel safe and respect the position each has taken regarding the vaccine.

Home visitation works best when I **do not** call to schedule a visit. Calling first only gets a I'm too busy, I don't need a visit, don't want to feel a need to tidy up for a visit. Once more the reality is that one really sees if there is a real issue by a drop in visit. I don't even have Helen call to arrange visits anymore as the response to her is No, not now OR I don't need or want a visit.

I do leave a note when I stop by and nobody is home. To date nobody has responded to any note that was left on their door. We really have a very independent minded membership.

Amy stays away from people all the time. I drop off the upper-room at her front door; the following day it is gone so I know it gets picked up and taken inside. Amy responds to those who have gone through similar treatments, you know other's who have walked the walk and they are their own little support group. That is good.

MediLodge was AGAIN closed to visitors so I did short 2 to 2 1/2 minute messages for Lucille Trombley on VOICE MAIL. MediLodge would take the iPad down and play it for her and I am told it makes her laugh and smile and once more whoever took the iPad down listened and got a positive message for the day. I haven't done any this week as visitors are allowed once again. The through the window visits were like no visit at all. MediLodge does not require their employees to be vaccinated. That will change come September giveth recent presidential order. The last two shut-downs there were because employees came in and were positive for the virus. The shut-downs are so hard on the residents as they must stay within the small area of their own four walls, can't go to dining area, can't walk up and down the halls for exercise. Residents really are isolated when a shut-down happens.

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If you have watched or came by for in-person worship you will have noted that the Table is on the lowest step, then a taller plant stand on the next, and then the lectern. Most lay readers won't go over to the railing to come up the steps so as long as there is the Table, the plant stand, and lectern, each has the assurance of something to hold on to for balance as they come up the steps.

Helen's office computer takes forever to get anything up/down loaded and VOICE MAIL she can't open at the office at all. She just wanted Council to be aware. Our weekly pastor's meetings continue and all but two pastor's from the Eastern Association come regularly. We support each other and keep sanity in the picture for each other.

I will be gone September 17-18-19. Because it is STEWARDSHIP Time I am hoping that two council members will lead worship and another either use my sermon or their own. Jack will be also gone so someone will need to operate the power point. Pam, Joyce's daughter, did it one time and I know Ron can also do the power point.

Of late, because I know that some would like to hear a male voice once in a while, I did send another's sermon out to some of the guys, just because. I understand this need and am happy to oblige once in a while.

Worship during Good Old Days will be at Trinity Lutheran at 10:00. Alex, Tom and I will lead worship and they facebook like we do. Whoops, almost forgot; the neighbor two doors North from the church uses our lot and has permission and has made a donation to the church to use the lot. The people across the street now park in their own yard. When another family three doors down on S. Forest asked, they also had permission to use the lot for their daughters graduation party. They made a donation to the church.

Respectfully submitted,
Rev. Katie Dailey, Pastor 8/19/2021