



When I am afraid, I put my trust in You. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me? (Psalm 56:3-4 ESV)

January 20, 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ at Trinity Lutheran Church,

I pray this letter finds you well in the New Year! We are also in the season of Epiphany, which reminds us that the light of God's salvation and love revealed in Jesus Christ continues to shine brightly in our lives, especially when we find ourselves in dark moments or situations.

Last year, we witnessed extraordinary changes in every aspect of our lives. It is impossible to rehash everything that has changed. However, the purpose of this letter is to share with you some thoughts, updates, and encouragement for our church going forward in 2021. We may not know what the future holds, only God knows, but we still should plan for the future in an effort of faithful stewardship and leadership, and ask that the Lord would continue to guide us as we do.

I'll start by sharing a pastoral concern I have. Over the past year, we have seen total in-person attendance range from roughly half to two-thirds of our pre-pandemic attendance. Praise be to God for allowing that! However, it also means a good portion of those who would regularly attend prior to the pandemic are not doing so now, and those who were not attending regularly are even less likely to do so now.

This means a large portion of our congregation is not receiving regularly the faith-strengthening Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. In addition, while we have posted online services since March of last year, and while those are getting fairly good attention, the numbers indicate that a large portion of our congregation is not being regularly fed with God's Word either.

What does all this mean? Well, to be honest it's hard to say, but I will make a couple comments. All along, we have encouraged people to make the best decision for themselves regarding their health, well-being, and safety. That hasn't changed. However, as we enter this New Year, it also seems necessary to encourage each other that, along with our physical health, we need to make the best decision for our spiritual health, as well. And while our physical health is important (after all, our life and health are gifts from God and we should treat them as such), our spiritual health is important, too. In fact, Jesus makes it clear that there will be times when we will have to uphold the importance our eternal lives, soul, and faith over and above even our physical lives (Matthew 16:24-26).

Please understand, I am *not* saying that people have been making wrong decisions. Instead, as your pastor, I am encouraging everyone to continue to make the best decisions for what we, as Christians, know is most important. Does that mean that some may need to continue to wait until the pandemic situation improves before they enter large social settings? Undoubtedly, yes. Does that mean we continue to guard and protect the health and well-being of our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ by practicing reasonable safety precautions at church? Of course.

But does it also mean that the time may soon come, or is already here, when some need to consider making different choices regarding their worship and faith-strengthening practices? I believe that is also true. And for those who haven't received God's Word or Sacrament for quite some time, that decision should be made sooner rather than later for their sake and the sake of their faith.

Remember what God's gifts of Word and Sacrament are (e.g. what we receive in the Divine Service). They are first and foremost *God* serving *us*. He gives us our faith as a gift. He has graciously provided us the means to have our faith strengthened by Him (i.e. Word and Sacraments). And God will faithfully continue

to deliver to us the promises of that faith until the day we see Him face-to-face. Yes, the Third Commandment demands our obedience in “remembering the Sabbath,” but cherishing God’s Word and Sacraments means much more than doing what we’re obligated to do. It is recognizing that God has graciously invited us to partake in all that He has wonderfully provided so that we may live eternally with Him. Our partaking is not an inconsequential option. Making use of what God gives us is both necessary *and* an amazing act of mercy and grace on His part. It is eternally significant.

For those who are not yet regularly receiving God’s Word or Sacrament, again, as your pastor, I would simply ask you take these thoughts to heart in the coming weeks and months, and then I would ask you to let me know how I might best support your decision and be your shepherd.

Perhaps it means that as the COVID situation gradually improves, God willing, you are able to join in ways you weren’t previously able to do. Perhaps it means you need to schedule with me to receive Holy Communion individually until you’re ready to join in worship at church. Perhaps it means that you need to continue to be careful for your health or the health of someone around you, but there could be something that your church can do to better support you. Or, perhaps it means the time is now to return to church. There is no *one* correct answer for everybody. In all these situations, our goal is to live as the Body of Christ, connected to Him and connected to one another. That’s what being the Church means.

Finally, in conclusion, I would also like to mention a few updates that we are anticipating in the near future, so that everybody is aware. The Board of Elders recently discussed and agreed upon the following:

- Our weekend service schedule will continue for now: Saturdays at 7 p.m. and Sundays at 9 a.m.
- We need to continue to follow reasonable and necessary safety precautions, such as physical distancing and wearing face masks in church. These seem to be the most important and effective ways to protect one another’s physical well-being.
- We will have in-person services at 7 p.m. for Midweek Lenten Services, beginning Wednesday, February 17th, 2021 (Ash Wednesday). Perhaps these would be good services for people to attend if they are “easing” back into things, as it’s usually a lesser-attended service.
- In recognition of the importance of hymnody to our lives of faith and worship, we will be adding one hymn to our otherwise modified service, likely near the end of service. This doesn’t mean we are rushing back to normal; obviously we haven’t so far. But it is hopefully one more step in a process of steps to enjoy the full complement of God’s gifts as we gather as His Church. We will still keep our masks on during the hymn.
- We will discontinue taking temperatures at the door. The Elders agreed this was likely a mostly inaccurate and ineffective way to keep people safe. Much more important are the face masks and physical spacing, as well as people staying home when they’re sick, which we were sure most people already do.

Thank you for reading this lengthy letter. I hope it has helped to communicate the importance of the addressed topics. These current times show us that while many decisions in life are not black and white, we can be unquestionably certain that God is always there helping, leading, and guiding us. I pray for His continued provision and wisdom for our church, for our leaders, for you, and for me. And as always, if you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

In the Bright Light and Life of Jesus Christ,

Pastor Joe Polzin and Your Board of Elders