



*I am about to do  
a new thing;  
now it springs  
forth, do you not  
perceive it?  
I will make a way  
in the wilderness  
and rivers in  
the desert.*

~Isaiah 43.19

Dear Northern Great Lakes Synod,

God is indeed doing a new thing, and if we are not perceiving it, we haven't been paying attention. While bingeing Netflix certainly has its place, especially during a pandemic, there is value in taking a break now and again, to consider what God is up to in these days. 😊

I see God at work as the Church discovers again what is necessary and what can be dispensed with. Many of our congregations have taken a hiatus from in-person worship at some point. Some still are, as cases continue to rise in their counties making in-person, inside worship irresponsible. But what I think we have discovered is how much we miss in-person, inside worship. We miss the gathering, seeing each other, the liturgy, the rhythm, the fellowship, the food, and more. For something that we took for granted in pre-pandemic days, we now know, without a doubt, that no matter how necessary online worship is, it will never completely replace the blessing of being together as the community of faith in worship.

I believe online worship is here to stay. But we will eventually be able to gather again as we did, with singing and trumpets and

sharing the peace with hand shaking and hugs shared. Not yet, but someday. We would do well to be patient as that day will not come soon, even though we are well past wanting it to be today.

I also think we would do well to acknowledge the power of grief and lament in these days. Grief is a powerful force, even when it is unacknowledged. In these last months, we have experienced significant loss. Even if you have not lost a loved one to COVID-19, even if you have not had to navigate what a funeral looks like in these days, there is still loss.

Church is not the same. Gathering with family and friends is not the same. Work and school are not the same. Visiting is not the same. We can't sing, even if we do gather. Meetings are canceled or online. "You're on mute" has become the most frequently uttered sentence in all of history. We feel ourselves stretched thin. We sigh more often. We have trouble making decisions. There's maybe a lack of motivation. A lack of patience, a lack of energy, of having a shallow emotional stamina to cope with anything else that comes at us. Maybe you feel your reserves are spent, wrung out, dried up, close to tears more often than you'd like to own. This, my dear synod, is grief.

When a person is grieving, it helps to see that the shadow that is cast, is indeed the power of loss over our lives. This is your cue, to be gentle with yourselves. And since we are all experiencing grief in some capacity, then please be patient and gentle with each other as well. Grief can present as anger, as a quick temper, as impatience. So I ask you again, breathe deep, and exhale. Do not let fear, or

grief, or all that comes with it, steal your joy, undermine your faith, or add to your worry. God is up to something. God is at work. And God is with you, and your congregation, and your pastor, and your leaders, as you together figure out, in prayerful discernment, how to meet our current challenges.

As we continue to journey through these wilderness days, these days darkened by the shadows of death and loss, be comforted as it is precisely at these times that Christ our Lord promises to be with you. Though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, Christ is with you. And God will indeed make a way in the wilderness and will guide us along that way toward all that we are becoming and all that God would have us be.

I pray that you have such a sense of God's presence with you, that your spirit will find peace, that your fears will be at rest, and you will be surprised by joy and unexpected blessing.

Yours in Christ,

Bishop Katherine Finegan