



*I wait for the LORD;
my soul waits for him;
In his word is my hope.*

*My soul waits for the LORD,
more than watchmen for the morning,
more than watchmen for the morning.*

~Psalm 130

Dear people of the Northern Great Lakes Synod,

The very first summer I was in my first call, I led a group of teenage girls on a camping trip in the McCormick Wilderness. It was before the more recent trail improvements, so there were parts of the path that disappeared into swamp and we had to navigate the watery way by guessing which tufts of grass would keep us dry. Boots and socks were soaked before the trail reemerged from the reeds and rushes. Hopping from tuft to tuft, lifting packs over downed trees, crisscrossing over roots and around rocks - It was not an easy trail, but we did finally reach our lakeside destination some hours later having covered only a few miles.

The following day, we got it in our heads to “walk around the lake.” However, there wasn’t even a remnant of a trail to mark our path forward. Keeping the lake to our left, we bushwhacked our way through dense forest hoping for something worth seeing of lake, sky, and woods. But our progress was even slower than the previous day as it took substantially more effort, and we finally made it back to camp full of scrapes and bruises.

Before the pandemic, your pastoral leader walked with you along a well-traveled and wide path of congregational life blazed long ago by church tradition, expectations, and previous experience (the way things were always done). The way forward was not always easy, but at least there was a trail. Now we are, all of us, off the beaten path, whacking our way through a pandemic where every step takes effort. Forward motion requires a whole lot more - more energy, more thought, more decisions, more angst, more navigation - just a lot more. And unlike my ill-conceived hike around the lake, much of the effort is hidden. What you see on a Sunday morning, or as a weekly devotion on Facebook, represents hours of preparation and behind the scenes work. Your pastor, along with the Church, is blazing

a new trail, although the word “blazing” makes it sound easy. Think instead of your pastor, obscured by the underbrush, holding a knobby stick, trying to whack a way forward through dense foliage on uneven ground with no compass. What had been for the Church a pleasant journey on a well beaten path now requires huge effort that takes much longer to go a much shorter distance. Unfamiliar terrain and difficulty getting one’s bearings results in sweaty frustration, with scrapes and bruises along the way.

In this Advent season, as we wait for so much, please remember we are all feeling the weight of loss and the disorientation of an unfamiliar landscape, including your pastor. And your pastor is working harder than ever before even though that effort is relatively invisible, putting in more time for less return and a diminished sense of accomplishment with fewer voices offering encouragement and support. It is not an easy journey for anyone, but for leaders especially. Your council feels it. Your council president feels it. And so does your pastor.

As Covid cases increase and we wait for a vaccine - as Christmas draws closer and we brace ourselves for all that will be different - as emotions rise and we try to make sense of all that we feel - I encourage you to patiently and prayerfully embrace this time of Advent waiting. We wait, with anticipation, the completion of what is becoming.

Consider that the Church and our efforts in ministry are now “off road.” We choose more carefully where to put our energy since everything takes more work and more time. Online productions of worship and devotions, technology troubleshooting and zoom meetings, efforts to minister and stay connected consume more of your pastor’s attention and energy than you might imagine. We are blessed to wait and watch together, finding a space of quiet for ourselves and offering respite to those who feel exhausted by the effort it takes to forge a path forward.

We wait for the LORD more than watchmen for the morning...but in the meantime, we place our hope in the one who is already with us. Christ has come, is coming, will be here soon. We can wait.

Yours in Christ,
Bishop Katherine Finegan