



Dear Northern Great Lakes Synod,

At the beginning of this pandemic, I likened our current times and days to that of the Israelites, wandering in the wilderness. I talked about emerging from this pandemic wilderness differently than we entered it. And here we are, more than a year later, and it feels like we can see the Promised Land.

As restrictions have eased, I have had the pleasure of gathering, maskless, with other faithful people in worship. What a joy! To sing! To eat! To share the Peace of Christ and see a person's whole face! It is such a blessing to gather once again as the Body of Christ and the community of faith. I will say that I am grateful for the vaccine, which makes me less anxious to actually gather with others. Our congregations are pivoting from online to in-person worship, from restrictions to protocols that allow for safe gathering. I sense a feeling of being done with the pandemic, done with masks, done with all the decisions and discernment necessary for safe gathering.

Perhaps we are done. I hope so. But don't throw away your mask just yet. Don't discontinue your online presence just yet.

If we are to learn anything from history and the Influenza epidemic of 1918-1920, and if we are to learn anything from what is happening around the globe, we would be wise to pay attention. For us, this pandemic has lasted just over a year. But the lessons of history would teach us to be prepared for closer to two years. With Covid variants making the news, with new waves of the virus plaguing population pockets across the globe, it makes sense to stay vigilant. I hope we do not have to pull out the masks again and limit the attendance of our gatherings, but mentally, emotionally, we need to be mindful of that possibility. Covid-19 continues to be a reality that lingers and mutates, as viruses do. I encourage congregational leaders to remain aware of Covid and vaccination numbers in your community and respond accordingly.

Currently, we are in a promising and hopeful trajectory. Covid cases are down significantly and the vaccination rate is slowly rising. But if Israel and India are any indication, we need to stay vigilant and be prepared to pivot, once again, if necessary.

I know that's not what people want to hear. I know that we are tired of protocols and masks and worry and we are ready to declare the pandemic over. But it is not over. Perhaps, for now, we can enjoy what low Covid numbers and rising vaccination rates make possible and gather once again for in-person worship, but please continue to make accommodations for those who cannot be vaccinated because of health factors or age.

I give thanks for the presence of Christ that we experience in each other. I am grateful for these past few weeks when I have been fed by corporate worship, fellowship, and hearing the voices of others raised in song and prayer. It feels like a drink in the desert and relief in the shade of an oasis. I hope we can stay here. But more than that, I hope that if we have to venture into desert territory again, that this reprieve from pandemic challenges will fortify us for the journey ahead. Whether we stay or whether we must go, Christ is with us.

Yours in Christ,  
Rev. Katherine Finegan  
Bishop of the Northern Great Lakes Synod