

*“May the God of hope
fill you with all joy and peace
in believing,
so that you may abound in hope
by the power of the Holy Spirit.”
~Romans 15:13*

Dear Northern Great Lakes Synod,

There is a scene from the movie, *The Shawshank Redemption* where the protagonist, Andy, is convicted of a crime he did not commit. He spends some 30 years in a dreadful prison until finally he escapes to begin a new life in a little oceanside village in Mexico. He sends a letter to his inmate friend, Red, and invites him to join him after Red is paroled from his own lifetime sentence for a regrettable crime he committed in his youth.

As we watch Red ride a bus towards Mexico, we hear his voice say, “I find I am so excited I can hardly keep a thought in my head. I hope I can make it across the border. I hope to see my friend and shake his hand. I hope the Pacific is as blue as it has been in my dreams. I hope.”

Hope is a powerful force. It pulls us forward through the present as we reach for a different future. It was hope that made Andy’s and Red’s prison time more bearable. And it is hope for so much that pulls us forward from our present circumstances toward a future that promises:

- an end to the pandemic.
- gathering around tables with coffee-filled cups and bakery in hand.
- laughter and conversation once again filling fellowship halls, restaurants, and living rooms.
- voices raised in songs of praise, in harmony, with great gusto.
- ministry without masks.

I can hardly wait!

I Corinthians 13:13 proclaims, “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”

The greatest of these IS love. But this year, in the year of our Lord 2021, our theme will focus on HOPE. Make no mistake, we need love and faith too. But right now, we *really* need HOPE.

As I write this, the inauguration looms large. Plans for armed and potentially violent demonstrations outside each state’s capitol building are being reported, and the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff has issued a public reminder to all military branches of their oath to defend the Constitution. It is more than a little unsettling that they felt such a reminder was necessary.

By the time you read this, whatever happens next week and before the end of January will be in the past. We all will have watched the news, heard the reports, and prayed over what right now has not happened yet.

And still, whatever is going to happen, does not change what we have always proclaimed to be true, that our hope is in the Lord Jesus Christ. What that means for our present circumstances has taken on more urgency. The more we feel the chaos and uncertainty of our present, the more we reach for that which is true and solid and constant.

I hope we find a way towards healing, in our congregations and in our nation. I hope as people of faith we have a witness that is authentic to the gospel message of Jesus. I hope our congregations and pastoral leaders can hold on a little longer. I hope. I hope.

*“O God our help in ages past
Our hope for years to come
Our shelter from the stormy blast
And our eternal home.”*

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing.

Yours in Christ,
Bishop Katherine Finegan