



SALT & LIGHT

a hope church publication

SUMMER 2020



NONPROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
HOLLAND, MI 49423
PERMIT NO. 607

Hope Church
77 West 11th Street
Holland MI 49423



CONTENTS

Summer	2
Resurrection Sprouts	3
Music Notes While Socially Distant	5
Support: What Does It Mean? How Now?	6
Knock Three Times	7
How Long, O Lord?	8
Working in Uncertainty	10
Wants and Needs, Politics and Healthcare	11
Answers to Your Medical Questions	12
Opening a Space for Grace	13
Stepping toward the uncomfortable	14
Poetry Corner	16

OUR FAITH

Hope Church is called by God and equipped by the Holy Spirit to be a witness to the unity, reconciliation and justice given in the saving grace of Jesus Christ. These touchstones drawn from the Belhar Confession give voice to the historic Christian faith in our time and place.

CONTACT US

Hope Church, RCA
77 West 11th Street
[616] 392 . 7947
HopeChurchRCA.org

Much Has Changed; Much Remains

Hope Church life changed abruptly on Friday, March 6. That day, a special meeting of Consistory was called. Consistory decided due to the COVID crisis to suspend any further in-person meetings at Hope Church. Life changed abruptly at that time in many ways literally all over the world. The particular impact on our life as a community of faith is a challenge we share in common as part of Hope Church. Since that March 6 decision, each day has been a new challenge of how to “do church” in new ways: how to worship; how to care for one another; how to nurture our children and youth; how to serve our community and world; how to pray for one another; how to stay connected; how to welcome others. Each of these is an ongoing challenge, but as together we’ve faced these questions, the Spirit has provided gifts through which fruitful and faithful paths have emerged.

One of those questions of how to “do church” is: “Do we publish a newsletter?” We have made an effort to step up our church communication in various ways, but we wondered in this period of less in-person programming if a newsletter was still needed. Well, to answer that, I will do something which is always a good idea, which is to quote my colleague Pastor Jill Russell! On Facebook (speaking of ways to communicate!) she posted this:

“I am currently reading through the content that has been submitted for the summer edition of Salt & Light. We wondered whether to do one. There isn’t a lot of church programming happening to talk about. No pictures from gatherings over the spring to share. But then we reminded ourselves that we were evolving Salt & Light toward more of a reflective magazine-like periodical anyway. So let’s ask people to share their thoughts and reflections in this time. Y’all—it is GOOD stuff! I am just overwhelmed with gratitude for the wisdom and creativity of those with whom I worship here at Hope Church. So grateful to be in this together!”

Well said, Pastor Jill! This is a time when so much has changed, and when both what we know and what is unknown are difficult. But this remains the same: faithful reflection and open hearts are needed, and God uses such honesty and openness among us to bring strength and hope.

Spirit’s blessings to all of you in this uncertain time, and may this publication be a source of encouragement as we travel this time together, held in God’s grace.

Peace – Pastor Gordon



Resurrection Sprouts



By Cindi Veldheer DeYoung, Chaplain, Spectrum Health Medical Center, Grand Rapids, MI

In case you think Easter is in the rearview mirror, I want to tell you about some resurrection

stories that continue to stir up hope and faith.

An ICU nurse told me our phone call needed to be cut short because the staff was about to do a “parade.” One of their COVID-19 patients was recovering, and they were sending this person off the unit with an overhead song and parade. After having heard so much about the intense respiratory needs of COVID-19 patients, a song and a parade represent a victory march for the patient and for the staff.

We peek into resurrection stories once in a while, and this is what stirs up hope. COVID-19 is only one

threat among so many lurking dangers. It stings to hear when someone has a stroke, or a heart attack, or receives a diagnosis of cancer—all of these and so many more conditions loom with the powerful claws of death threatening a lively, vibrant person.

In case you suspect I’m a worst-case scenario kind of person (which may be true), let me explain: Bracing for bad news means having a chance to prepare. I’ve not come to expect miracles because, miracles are exceptional. To expect miracles seems like an entitled directing of God’s grace. I do look for the graces arising in tragedies as signs of God’s imbuing hope.

I don’t know if I should tell you how giddy I get when I’ve planted some bean seeds and finally see the shoots of new growth appear above the dirt.



My giddiness at the sprouts likely reveals my confidence as a gardener: will those seeds really spring up? I have the same reaction when crocuses first appear, defying the odds of snow and wind and being stomped on by paws from a certain canine who seems not to care one bit that these signs of life mean so much to me. And yes, this has I Corinthians 15 all over it, as the bare seed is buried in order to rise as new life. Incredible, amazing resurrections happen with each plant's springing up from the dirt. That includes weeds, too, unfortunately. I'm not so sure about the theological implications of that.

I work in a hospital where people undergo stem cell, t-cell, or blood marrow transplants, which is a most amazing treatment. Patients know that their immune systems will be wiped out in the hopes of conquering the cancer that has invaded them; this is the death-resurrection cycle of such treatment. Patients sign consent forms informing them of the dangers, the symptoms, and the possibility that this treatment could cause death, despite the science and smart and caring clinicians. Indeed, I've seen the process take people very near death, holding my breath that the reversal of cancer cell invasion has already begun in order to bring these people back to life. Resurrections from transplants like these have no guarantee. They are staking their hope in a physical resurrection based on faith—faith in science, clinicians, and faith beyond anything they know or see. It is so very incredible to see some people get through this brutal treatment and do radiantly well.

One other treatment process may seem more subtle to patients

and families is the intervention by our stroke team. I still shake my head at the incredible sadness of hearing, many years ago, of the death of my friend's mother after experiencing a devastating stroke. And many times, strokes are devastating. However, there are several actions, some surgical, some medical, that have been developed in the past few years that have made for miraculous outcomes. Again, I hold my breath when I hear of someone having a stroke. And when these treatments "work," we inhale the spirit of hope at their recovery and new chance at life.

We groan with all creation, waiting for redemption, looking for resurrection. We know "God's mercies are new every morning." Not being much of a morning person, it sometimes takes a while for the new day to stir alive in me what others have already run ahead to see. Creation bursts with buds and flowers, birds chirping and taunting, squirrels doing their acrobatic ballet across the lawn. The world arises. "Christ is Alive! Let Christians sing!" is our call to action born of mysterious anticipation.

I love being able to say at graveside services that this is not the end of the story. We believe in the resurrection of the dead, after all. I wish we could find a sacred way to sing the exuberant chorus from the musical, Hamilton, "Rise Up!" Maybe the little shoots and stems from stumps, the crocuses and bean sprouts are already practicing their version of "Rise Up!"

Resurrections are happening. They happen in front of us, behind us, stealthily multiplying the evidence that the steadfast love and work and grace of God never ceases.

Music Notes While Socially Distant

By Rhonda Edgington

If you're curious what other area congregations have been doing during this period of social distancing and how they are holding worship online, the Holland American Guild of Organists (AGO) has been collecting descriptions from area organists. Visit the website of the local AGO to see descriptions from Third Reformed, Second Reformed (Zeeland), Grace Episcopal, and First Reformed, with more coming soon.

<https://www.hollandareaago.org/covid-19>

Also, I imagine many of you, like me, have been missing live music. Since the world has been on lockdown, the phenomenon of the livestreamed concert has been gaining popularity. While I'm not a huge fan of this format, it certainly does offer us a way to connect through music while so isolated, and for musicians, a new way to perform in front of others.

I heard about Andrea Bocelli's Easter Day concert, performed live in the cathedral of Milan, Italy. While Bocelli is not necessarily to my everyday musical tastes (I may have been heard calling him cheesy in the past), a colleague I respect told me this webcast

was powerful and moving, and even watching after the fact—the livestream apparently drew the largest simultaneous audience for a classical music event ever—I'll have to agree. This world-famous blind Italian tenor performs in an empty cathedral, accompanied only by the organist, with pictures of the empty streets of Italy and famous major cities around the world. If you need a bit of inspiration this week, look for it on Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huTUOek4LgU>

Also, for organ fans, there is a weekly livestream from the Spreckels municipal organ in Balboa Park in San Diego, California. Their municipal organist, Spaniard Raul Prieto Ramirez, often includes well-known classical blockbusters as well as crossover popular music transcriptions. The concerts often include fascinating glimpses into the inner workings on this large (outdoor!) instrument, as well as commentary by the organist and others. These are played live on Sundays at 2 p.m. Pacific Time, and are available on Youtube sometimes only for one day after the concert and sometimes longer. <https://spreckelsorgan.org>

Happy listening!



Support: What Does It Mean? How Now?

By Ginger Clark, Parish Nurse, R.N.



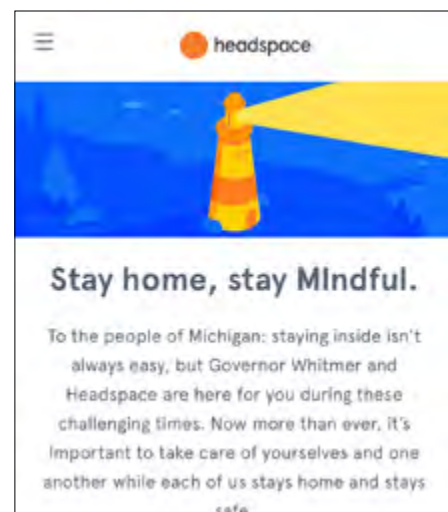
A few months ago, pre COVID-19, I committed to writing this article about the support groups at Hope Church. Support groups provide a chance to be together, sharing the same purpose and concerns, encouraging each other and understanding each other along the way. There are many benefits: you are not “going it alone,” you can express yourself openly without judgment, you can increase self-awareness, and you can reduce anxiety and despair. Learning new coping skills and improving social skills is a benefit, too. There is a lot to be said about being a help to others in the group and developing new and healthy relationships. The word “support” is defined as leaning all or part of the weight of, holding up, carrying, giving assistance to, and encouraging for success.

As I ponder this, I am overwhelmed with knowing how well Hope Church has been doing this—for themselves and each other for several weeks now. During my weeks of multiple calls, emails, and Zoom connections, I have witnessed a wonderful flow of love and care amongst us. We have been trudging through worries about ourselves, health, safety, our loved ones, jobs, lack of connection, loss of freedoms, social chaos, and the struggle to lean on hope for the future. Yet you have been able to rise above most of it and be what Jesus equips you to be.

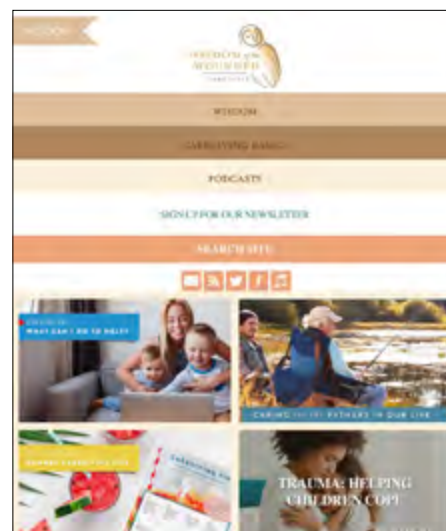
REST (Relax, Empathy, Share, Thanksgiving) is a group for those with caregiving concerns, in need of grief support and friendship. We meet the second and fourth Monday of the month, 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., in the Youth Room. Holding Hope is a support group providing connection and community around mental health. We meet the first and third Tuesday of the month at noon until 1:30 p.m. in the Youth Room. Wait a minute! We can't meet there right now! So keep this for future reference, and let's talk about our COVID-19 reality right now. REST is connecting via phone and emails and hopes to gather when it's appropriate. Holding Hope is meeting weekly via Zoom. Please call the church office if you desire to be involved in either of these support groups, and you will receive specific instructions.

Additional resources

- Meditation, sleep, and movement coaching: [Headspace.com/MI](https://www.headspace.com/MI)



- “Warm line” certified peer support: (888) 733-7753
- Encouragement for care-takers, including self-care: [Wisdomofthewounded.com](https://www.wisdomofthewounded.com)



- National suicide prevention hotline: (800) 273-8255
- COVID-19 screening at Holland Hospital: (616) 394-2080

Knock Three Times ♪-♪- ♪- ♪- ♪

By Peter Boogaart, Creation Care Coordinator

Judi likes to say, “There’s a song for every situation.” It’s a stream-of-consciousness kind of thing. The kids used to roll their eyes or, worse yet, slink away in embarrassment if this happened in a public place. “Oh Mom!” Time to shop for groceries— “Yes we have no bananas....” The end of a trip— “Six days on the road and I’m gonna make it home tonight...” Out to get the mail? — You get the idea. Fill in the blanks.

Now me? I tend to think there’s a Bible story for every situation. Lately I’ve been thinking of 2 Kings 5. Maybe you, too, remember the story of this Syrian general. Naaman is a hotshot cultural elite, and he’s got all the bells and whistles to prove it. Late-model chariot with the super-feature eight-hoof powertrain. Shiny sword and lots of parade field bling. And people. People everywhere. Usually saying things like, “Yes sir. Right away sir.” Oh, excuse me, I should have said staff. You know, those bright young men working their way up.

There’s just one chink in his armor. One flaw in the self-promoting narrative of esteem and greatness. He’s sick. He’s got leprosy. This is bad, and it’s going to get worse. He’s up against an invisible enemy, one that can’t be bullied, intimidated, or impaled. Life has thrown him a curve and there’s no way out.

Or, maybe there is. A servant girl uses a back channel to slip him a message, “Back in my country... you remember my country, right? You know. The one you invaded. The one you looted. The one where you killed my parents and

stole me away. Where was I? Oh yes. Well, back in my country there’s a prophet who can heal leprosy. You should check it out.”

All the physicians of Damascus had been worthless. And that hydroxychloroquine was a shill. So why not? What have you got to lose? Off to meet Elisha he goes. Desperate times call for desperate measures.

Naaman shows up at Elisha’s door—presumably in a nice, quiet suburban neighborhood. The remote satellite news vans have been alerted and everything is set for prime time. Big man. Big day. Big event. There’s just one problem: Elisha doesn’t come out. Instead, he sends a junior administrative assistant. “Go wash in the Jordan River,” he says. “That’ll take care of everything. Have a nice day.”

Naaman does what big men do when they feel slighted. He blows a gasket and stomps off. “I thought that for me he would come out himself and really fuss over me,” he says. “He should have been prepared with lots of special effects. Greatest healing ever! Something like that.”

Evidently vanity and political clout are no match for a bacterium-induced disease. Game over? Reenter the servants. “Hey hotshot, if he had asked you to do something hard—like a quest maybe—you would have done it,” they say. “So, what’s your problem with easy?”

And then an amazing thing happens. The story pivots and Naaman makes the transition from great man to wise man. He goes to the Jordan. Washes. And

is healed. In the end, restoration had nothing to do with Elisha. That was the point! It had to do with Elisha’s God. The God who is known as the Creator. Wellness and restoration are found when one lets go of pretense and enters into the stream of God’s flowing wholeness.

I said that I was thinking of 2 Kings 5—a story of ambition, disease, and restoration. The story speaks to me of our current situation of lockdown and death counts. I’ve listened to the reports of how COVID-19 virus jumped from animals to humans; how the destruction of habitat forces animals into closer contact with humans; and of how great, pretentious men couldn’t do anything to stop it.

I’ve been following the reports of climate change too. We’ve built the greatest civilization in the history of the world. We’re prime time! Reenter the servant girl. “You remember my creation, right? The resources you looted? The ecosystem you killed and the life you stole away? This is bad, and it’s going to get worse. There is in my country a prophet who can heal...”

Our issue is to determine whether or not we will transition from great to wise. That’s possible. Scripture points the way. “... If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land (2 Chronicles 7:14).

It’s time to wash in the Jordan.

How Long, O Lord?

By Carol Bechtel

Read

Read Psalm 13

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? (Psalm 13:1-2a, NRSV).

“How long?” Some version of that question is on everyone’s mind these days.

- How long until I can go visit my grandma?
- How long until I can go back to work?
- How long until we can hug each other?
- How long until we can go to church, have a party, eat at a restaurant...?
- How long until we can plan the wedding, the graduation, the funeral...?
- How long until we find a vaccine?

Me, I’m just looking forward to taking a walk. Here in Rome, we have been in a strict state of lockdown for the last two months. The only time I am allowed outside my apartment is to walk to the grocery store. That’s a five-minute walk—seven if I live dangerously and take an indirect route. But next week, the restrictions are due to be relaxed. We still can’t travel far, we still can’t eat at a restaurant, and we still can’t get a haircut. But glory, hallelujah—we can finally take a walk!

I have to admit, I watched the news coverage from the States this week with a fair amount of incredulity. Civil liberties notwithstanding, there is something deeply disturbing about the image of armed protesters lining the gallery of Michigan’s state capitol building (Michigan Protests). As political analysts have pointed out, some of these events are being fueled by conservative advocacy groups. But to be fair, we need to acknowledge the genuine frustration that is being expressed—albeit inappropriately.

It’s one thing to be frustrated with your governor; it’s another thing to be frustrated with your God.

But part of the “good news” in Psalm 13 is that we are encouraged to express our frustration to God. We’re probably going to want to leave our guns at home, but confrontation is still on the agenda. The psalmist’s tone is barely even polite. “How long, O LORD?” he/she demands. “Will you forget me forever?” Notice that this outburst is pointed, but not specific. The good news about that is that it invites us to fill in the blanks with specifics of our own. When the psalmist talks about having “sorrow in my heart all day long,” we get to name our sorrows. When the psalmist complains about generic enemies, we get to shake a very specific enemy virus in God’s face.



Complaints then turn to petitions. “Fix this!” the psalmist demands. This is our cue to enumerate all the things we would like God to fix. Don’t hold back. God has time. One small caveat might be in order, however. I have always found it wise to conclude my list with, “Thy will be done.” We don’t always know what is in our own best interest, after all. (Some of the requests I made in high school were particularly ill advised....)

Now comes the hard part: praise. Yes—praise. It may be the last thing we are in the mood for at this point, but almost all of the Bible’s laments end up there. “I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation,” the psalmist says. It might feel a little false at first, but even a half-hearted effort may move us toward trust. It’s a way of saying, “I know you’ve got this.”

Only God knows the answers to all of our “how long?” questions. But psalms like this one teach us how to lay our frustration at God’s feet. At the very least, we’ll feel better for it. And who knows—God may respond in surprising ways.

Ponder/Pray

Write your own lament using the pattern of Psalm 13: Protest/Petition/Praise. Then put your lament away where you can find it a month later...a year later...a decade later. You may be surprised at the ways God has responded to your prayers.

Listen

Listen to [Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen](#) by Mahalia Jackson. Note the way this lament leans toward praise at the end.

First published at [CarolMBechtel.com](#) in her “Roman Roads” series on May 2, 2020.



Working in Uncertainty

By Jason VanderLugt

I work as a pediatrician at Holland Hospital. One of my responsibilities is assessing and treating newborns when there is a problem. The parents will often ask me “Is he going to be okay?”

Thankfully, most of the time I’m able to tell them yes, he will be fine.

But here’s the truth: I’m lying. I can look a baby over well and be reassured that he looks perfect right now, but I have no idea what the future holds. Will he be diagnosed with leukemia in kindergarten? Will he be weighed down with depression or anxiety as a teenager? I’m

sure he will be hurt at some point, but that’s not really what we’re talking about right now.

Our health and our lives are often out of our control. With our current pandemic affecting so many aspects of our day to day, I have a couple thoughts based on my career working in the uncertain.

BE STILL. “Be still and know that I am God (Psalm 46).” “The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still (Exodus 14).” It is really hard as humans to let go, especially in our culture. You can’t ever completely let go; you still need to wash your

hands, social distance, and wear a mask when you go out. It is good to do things like help out at food banks and look out for the suffering in our community. But as you are sitting around the house watching news or browsing social media and you are feeling the weight of EVERYTHING, try to listen to God here. Be still.

GIVE THANKS. “Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you (1 Thess 5:18).” When I’m feeling stressed, worried and afraid, I will often meditate by stopping and thanking God. Sometimes I can articulate a specific thing I’m thankful for—a

“silver lining”—but sometimes that’s not so easy to see. Still, I try to give thanks. It may not be until later that I can see God in a given situation. One of the most heart-breaking births I have been to has become a memory of hope that I continue to think about at least once a week (check out Our Story for more information). When I give thanks and glorify God, I am fulfilling a purpose

that he made me for. It doesn’t make everything perfect and easy, but it does bring me peace.

I don’t know when this current pandemic will be over. New data and recommendations are coming out every day and it seems like at least in West Michigan our efforts are “flattening the curve,” which lets us in the hospital have the resources available to help those

that are sick. For that I appreciate every one of you who is doing their part. All of us at the hospital are also grateful for the support everyone in the community has shown us frontline workers from sidewalk chalk drawings to cards to gifts of food for the break rooms. I don’t know what the future holds, but with all the certainty that I can have, I can tell you that we are going to be okay.

Wants and Needs, Politics and Healthcare

By David Blauw



It seems to me that the human political process, whether national, regional or local, is mostly about maximizing the chances of meeting our particular “wants.” It often involves protecting oneself. It involves getting my share; protecting my own; assuring my way of life. Strength begets strength, with the strong more

often getting their wants met and the weak wondering if their needs are recognized.

On the other hand, healthcare is mostly about “needs.” When my gut or chest aches, I need help. When my car hits a tree, I need emergency help. When a virus takes over my respiratory tract, I need help to get oxygen.

In our decades-long healthcare reform debate, we’ve seen this collision between the political motivation to get wants met for our self-protection, and on the other hand, an awareness and drive to meet universal human need. Can or will the strong advocate for the weak? Can politics focus more on needs than wants?

Jesus lived most of his life in human need. He trusted his divine parent to supply. He trusted. And he also instructed and modeled meeting the needs of the sick, the dying, the hungry, the injured, the

imprisoned, or the forsaken. Meeting human need, not wants, was at the center of his divine mission.

In these COVID-19 days, we’ve seen the politics of “wants” collide with intentions to meet human “need.” And for the most part, in our area, so far, human need has been in focus.

As a chaplain at Holland Hospital, I’ve been proud of the way our institution has responded to needs. New workflow processes, safety rules, temporary furlough for many employees, and some pretty impressive flexibility on the part of all has been evident. Most COVID-positive patients have recovered and been discharged. Some have died. And, concurrently, there are the “usual” and “routine” health crises and deaths. Sometimes we’ve dropped the ball in communication with families who often can’t be physically present here. But for the dozens of COVID-positive patients and for more usual needs we’ve cared for, we’ve responded to their needs safely, to the best of our abilities and with human compassion.

As a community of hope—Hope Church—our intention for over 150 years has been to focus on human needs of mind, body, and spirit

and not just on human wants: justice for the weak; hope for the hurting. It is a battle to let our wants take a back seat to the needs of others. But with the Spirit’s continuing help, we press on.

...justice for the weak; hope for the hurting.

Answers to Your Medical Questions

By Peter Hoekman, MD, Hope Church deacon

We've learned a lot about COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, and we continue to learn every day. We've seen a clear association between increased clotting complications such as stroke and rare inflammatory complications in pediatric patients. We've learned that anticoagulation can help reduce complications, ventilators should perhaps be used more sparingly, and that hydroxychloroquine is not the breakthrough we were hoping for. Here are answers to some questions I've been hearing.

When should I contact my doctor?

If you believe you may have COVID-19, call the Holland Hospital hotline at (616) 394-2080. If you are scheduled for testing, prepare for a relatively unpleasant experience. Block one nostril at a time to see if one is more open, and request the swab test on that side. You could use a topical decongestant spray (like Afrin) within an hour before the test to open up your nose. Expect test results in up to three days. New symptoms have been recognized, so call the hotline not only with coughing or fever or shortness of breath but also with sudden change in taste or sense of smell, sore throat, chills, headache, or muscle pain. As before, if you feel short of breath, proceed to the emergency room and consider calling ahead.

Don't be scared about going to the emergency room with other concerns—people continue to have appendicitis, pneumonia, and accidents, and should still seek medical care.

We've been isolating. Has it helped?

Yes. Delaying our local peak has allowed for expanded capacity, time to learn more about how to treat this illness, and, most importantly, reduced the total number of cases we can expect. How high the peak is depends on our collective action. The lower and slower the peak, the less likely hospitals are to be overwhelmed—at this point, there appears to be quite low risk that hospital capacity will not meet the need locally.

Do masks work?

We know this illness is primarily contracted via droplet, so cloth masks or surgical masks offer at least a degree of protection, especially to

others if you are ill. This works quite well if widely adopted and if paired with regular hand washing, even in medical settings with known cases. Unless you truly have a medical contraindication, please wear a mask when around others. We all think they are uncomfortable, but this is one of the most important ways to protect yourself and those around you. Aerosol contraction (viruses suspended in the air rather than in small fluid droplets) is also possible but seems much less common—this is why a specialized mask known as an N95 mask is more appropriate for medical personnel who are caring for ill patients. If others are wearing more typical masks, this specialized mask probably does not offer any additional protection.

Is there any end in sight? Are we doomed to a larger future peak?

While undoubtedly relaxing social distancing rules will lead to more cases, some things in life have truly changed. Even if every restaurant would open tomorrow, far fewer people would comfortably go. Even if masks were not required at the grocery store, many more people would wear them. Even if the football season proceeds as usual this fall, attendance will likely be down. We are all washing our hands more than we ever did before. Decreased social distancing and mask wearing will mean more illness, however. The fact that we are all sick of isolation doesn't concern a virus.

I had (or think I had) COVID-19. Can I stop the precautions?

We think, given experience with other coronaviruses, that previous infection should offer at least partial protection against subsequent infection. This is, however, still an unknown. We also do not know if a subsequent possibly more minor illness after repeat exposure would render a person infectious to those around them. Unfortunately, many of the antibody tests that have been used to check for previous infection have proven to be poor tests. They may be useful for research or epidemiological purposes, but at this time they are not helpful for an individual person because of high false positive rates; a test with this characteristic is worse than no test at an individual level, offering a false sense of security. Better tests with a much lower false positive rate are in the works.



Opening a Space for Grace

Witness to Reconciliation, February 2, 2020

By Gordon Wiersma

My dad, Jack Wiersma, died on April 1, 2017. My dad died after 81 years of life—after several years of health issues that depleted his body—and after a number of difficult years of conflict between my dad and the rest of our immediate family. As a pastor, as a person, in my interactions with others over many years, I have found that when there is the death of a parent in which there is a good relationship, there is something of a shared familiar space of how to talk about it. In such a time there is

a space to share good memories and gratitude, sorrow and grief, comfort and support; it is deeply difficult and painful, but there is a more familiar way to ask and to speak about such loss.

But when my dad died after years of a conflicted relationship, I found it difficult to know how to talk about it. When someone asks, “How are you doing?” or says, “You must miss your Dad,” I am grateful for such kindness, but uncertain how to respond. I felt a push against pretending that

my feelings were in that more accustomed space of gratitude and grief; but it was hard to know how to speak differently.

I love my dad, and I am angry with my dad; I love my dad, and often did not like him; I love my dad, and there were actions that brought hurt; I grieve my dad, but my feelings are very complicated. So, I began to try to express some of that when people asked about my dad: “Thanks for your kindness. I had a difficult relationship with my dad, so it’s

hard to sort out all I'm feeling." "Thank you. I loved my dad, but there was hurt and conflict too, so I'm trying to sort that through." I know that I tried this out because I needed to for myself—in order to be true to myself; but I felt, too, that perhaps it could provide a space for others—not a space we share as often in public, but that many of us share in our relationships. I tried out saying things that way, and it went okay. People listened, people were gracious; I felt healing in me, and sometimes felt healing in them, too: a space opened up for grace.

Now, this is not a neatly tied-up story with a happy ending, but there is this: as I began to try to express honestly some of the complexity of my dad and me, I found too that it opened

up in me a space to hold more fully some of what I am grateful for about my dad, the good things my dad was and did. That wasn't what I expected, but it happened—and that is grace, too.

I don't have a lot of pictures of my dad, but after my dad's death my mom gave me an old photo of my dad and me when I was about 12, I think—very blond! long hair!—my Dad in his 40s. We're out on a boat, both looking ahead, smiling at something going on out there—together. I kept that photo close at hand in the months after my dad's death, and even as I was honest with myself and others about the difficulty of my relationship with my dad, I also looked at that picture and felt gratitude, too. And then recently my wonderful

wife put that photo into a frame, and I came home to it hanging in our house, and it was good. It doesn't feel like pretending; it is complicated, but it is real, and there is space to hold many different things together.

I love my Dad, and it is difficult—and that remains. And in that less-spoken-of space, I find the grace to live not in pretend or bitterness, but in honesty and gratitude. In this community of kindness and care that is Hope Church, you who have graciously received my care and have given care so richly to me, I pray that in seasons of grief we will have the space for many kinds of stories and relationships, and I offer to you to listen whatever your story is. Thank you for listening to mine.

Stepping toward the Uncomfortable

Witness to Reconciliation, January 26, 2020

By Ann McKnight

I like to avoid.

All kinds of things.

Parties with people I don't know. Being on boards and committees. Shopping. Hanging out in the Gathering Area without a clear purpose. Shoveling snow. Political monologues.

I just don't like to be uncomfortable.

When I was invited to share during the Season of Reconciliation, I thought I might get off easy. I could talk about Restorative Circles. Recent trips to the former Yugoslavia. Intergenerational trauma. Challenging subjects, for sure, but personally not so risky. Each time I tried to go in one of those directions it was just not happening.

Where I landed instead was the unavoidable ways reconciliation has been a consistent nudge and sometimes a shove toward opening myself to God.

Like I said, I don't mind avoiding. Ironically, avoiding sometimes brings a sense of empowerment and choice in the moment—choosing to step back, dodge the bullet, keep my mouth shut, or walk away feels good. Like I'm in charge.

This kind of sidestepping, when it comes to relationships, turns out to have some unpleasant side effects. I become bored and disengaged from the people around me. I feel hollow and cardboard-ish, as if I'm drifting around on the outskirts of family and friends and community.

One definition of reconciliation is "restoration of friendly relations."

When I think about these "friendly relations" being between my own discomfort and what is actually happening in life, I know this is the exact interface where God continues to shape me. Here are just a few realities of life I have not been able to avoid:

- Moving to Holland in 1992 at age 26, having never knowingly met a Republican (I was told early in life they were recognizable by their sulfurous smell).
- Receiving a Stage IIIb colon cancer diagnosis when Ian and Caroline were in elementary school—not knowing what length or quality of life I would have.
- Life-long, pain-filled relationship with my brother, who recently died.
- Difficult seasons of marriage.
- Challenges of motherhood—giving birth to two strong, lovely children who are here to live the lives God has in store for them and not the ones that suit my comfort. Letting go and staying connected.

I am learning that the abundant life talked about in John's Gospel comes specifically from the way I engage what is actually before me, instead of running with my fantastical ideas about The Way Things Ought To Be.

Rather than railing against, giving up, clinging, or resenting, I can take a step toward what is uncomfortable, including the full-on uncertainty that comes with it. In that uncertainty I can lean into God.

And in that space something happens.

(I love where there is a practical image for what I'm trying to convey.)

Anyone recognize these? We called them Chinese handcuffs at Arno Elementary School in Allen Park.

I try them out and there is a moment of panic. I want out! Pull harder to get free and I'm more stuck.

Three ingredients are necessary for reconciling:

Recognize I am stuck, that my idea of what should be working isn't. Realize that I DON'T KNOW.

Take a breath and remember these words from James Finley: "God is a presence that spares us from nothing, even as God unexplainably sustains all things."

Take a step closer toward that which feels most challenging, in trust.

In the midst of these three steps something often shifts: the situation, my perception, the other person, the context in which things are happening. The shift is mostly never what I originally had in mind, but often something that feels more infused with love and grace.

When climbing a mountain on the Appalachian Trail with Fish Club, after a long day of hiking, struggling with my own heavy pack on yet another switchback and wondering how many more "when will we get there's" I can hear before I will actually lose my own mind.

When on a mountain above Sarajevo listing to a young woman my own child's age, overwrought, sharing the small handful of memories she has of her father between the time he was released from a Bosnian concentration camp and his death from his injuries.

Realize that my desperate wish to make things different isn't working.

Notice my heartbeat. regain my footing: "God is a presence that spares us from nothing, even as God unexplainably sustains all things."

Take the next breath, the next step in the uncertainty, together.



Poetry Corner

Hosted by Rhonda Edgington and Randy Smit

I recently read that everyone is writing these days about the pandemic, and anything else may act like it's not about the pandemic, but it really is. That seems pertinent to this newsletter's Poetry Corner, and our thoughts preparing this column. On one hand, it's the elephant in the room, that we can't not write about. On the other, I'm getting a little tired of the subject, and if everyone's already doing it anyway, who needs another pandemic poem (Randy said I should share mine here, but it still needs work!).

The Academy of American Poets held an event in April called Shelter-in-Poetry, inviting readers to send in the poems that were speaking to them during this time. It was fascinating, as readers shared many writers and poems that have been around for much longer than COVID-19, and yet they still spoke in timely ways to this new moment. This poem came to me from one of those lists. I love the twist at the end. ~Rhonda Edgington

The Conditional

By Ada Limón (1976-)

Say tomorrow doesn't come.
Say the moon becomes an icy pit.
Say the sweet-gum tree is petrified.
Say the sun's a foul black tire fire.
Say the owl's eyes are pinpricks.
Say the raccoon's a hot tar stain.
Say the shirt's plastic ditch-litter.
Say the kitchen's a cow's corpse.
Say we never get to see it: bright
future, stuck like a bum star, never
coming close, never dazzling.
Say we never meet her. Never him.
Say we spend our last moments staring
at each other, hands knotted together,
clutching the dog, watching the sky burn.
Say, It doesn't matter. Say, That would be
enough. Say you'd still want this: us alive,
right here, feeling lucky.

The Writing Corner

(With thanks to Laurie Baron, my writing co-facilitator at the Allegan County Jail and Harbor House and simply a great person with whom to write)

Free writing about difficult experiences can help us process those emotions and experiences. With that in mind, I thought we could offer a writing prompt and encourage those who feel led, or even just intrigued, to get out your journal, an empty notebook, or a blank sheet of paper and see where it takes you. If you don't feel at all inclined, and in fact your first impulse is to dismiss the offer, you might instead wonder what sparks that reaction and write about that. Or take this admonition to heart by Abigail Thomas, from her powerful memoir, *A Three Dog Life*:

I didn't start writing until I was forty-seven. I had always wanted to write but thought you needed a degree, or membership in a club nobody had asked me to join. I thought God had to touch you on the forehead, I thought you needed to have something specific to say, something important, and I thought you needed all that laid out from the get-go. It was a long time before I realized that you don't have to start right, you just have to start. Put pen to paper, allow yourself the freedom to write badly, to get it wrong, stop looking over your own shoulder.

No one is looking over your shoulder—what do you have to lose? Here's the prompt:

List five things you have feared, and five things that have comforted you. Pick one or more from your list and start writing whatever comes to mind. Follow where this takes you. To take a cue from Abigail, you don't need to know where you're going, you just need to start.