

## ANXIETY AND HOPE

Greetings Saints, November and December are traditionally very busy times in the Church. This year that urgency is amplified, and general anxiety is intensified as well. The pending arrival of Advent/Christmas, the resurgence of COVID19 in our region, and the divisiveness of the Presidential election has many of us stressed to the point of feeling overwhelmed. It is times like these that test our faith and endurance. Getting out of bed and simply putting one foot in front of the other becomes a mantra for many of us in these days. I prefer to think of the words of the Prophet Jeremiah; he wrote to the exiles in Babylon: Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat what they produce, take partners have children, have grandchildren. Seek the welfare of your city and pray to the Lord. (Jer 29:4-7)

There are a number of things that are beyond our control, what we can control is the effort we put into those things over which we can have influence.

**-ADVENT/CHRISTMAS** Advent and Christmas ARE going to look and feel different this year. Most of our congregations are worshipping virtually. Even those places where in person worship is taking place, attendance is down significantly because of concerns of at-risk members. We have one month to prepare for this beautiful and meaningful season. We are currently working on providing some resources at the Presbytery level, liturgies and devotions will be available to share with your members. Perhaps this is the year to break with tradition and look for an experience that will remain strong within congregational memory in years to come. Clergy and members can tell their children and grandchildren how they survived and even felt God's presence in Advent and Christmas of 2020! Talk to your colleagues and your members and find that idea that will make 2020 special in its own way.

**-COVID CONCERNS** The region that encompasses John Knox Presbytery is dealing with a very serious surge in cases of COVID19. The positivity rate of Covid tests in Wisconsin as reported on November 1<sup>st</sup> is hovering near 30%. I have mentioned before that it is the responsibility of the Session to decide matters of in person or virtual worship for their congregation. Moderators and Sessions please watch the numbers in your County and take the measures that are appropriate for your church. Going back to all virtual worship would be a difficult step but having a long-term friend and neighbor get seriously ill would be heartbreaking. If the arrival of cold weather is moving you indoors please follow guidelines for safe gatherings. Some of our congregations have marked off pews with tape and signs to encourage social distancing. Others are worshipping with reservations to keep small sanctuaries from getting overcrowded. Wear masks when inside and encourage humming rather than singing. (For some this is actually an improvement 😊) We all prefer in person worship, but virtual gatherings are better than having friends get sick, hospitalized, and possibly even die. God has an amazing capacity for hear our prayers wherever we are sitting.

**-ELECTION CONCERNS** Presidential elections often heighten partisan differences between people. This year's election is undoubtedly the most divisive process I have witnessed in my lifetime. Political differences have become personal differences. Almost all of our clergy are dealing with the anxiety of their own concerns in the election while having the added weight of congregational divisions over party lines. Each of us can do our part by voting, the rest of the work is about reconciliation. God does not put much stock in princes or kings, they charge taxes, send soldiers off to war, and all ultimately fail and die. What binds our church community together is that we put our trust in God and God's son Jesus Christ. That is an important message going forward. There will be hurt feelings and broken hearts no matter who wins. But we should all support that everyone gets a voice, everyone gets a vote and that vote should be counted.

This is a lot of stuff with which to deal. Be in prayer for one another as I am in prayer for you. Get as much rest as you can. Be still and know that God is Lord of all. We will get through this time as we have gotten through all other times of stress. We will endure because the great promise of Christmas that tells us; the newborn child will be named Emmanuel, which means God is with us. God is with us! That is the good news! That is our hope!

Chaz Ruark