



Solitude and Community

KATHERINE FINEGAN

Dear Reader,

Grace and peace to you in these days of change and opportunity.

I am honored to be asked to contribute to *Word & World*. My submission is not one of scholarly argument but rather a pastoral reflection on the pandemic and its impact on people of faith. I feel the need to warn you that if I refer to some other scholars' documented thoughts, it is only by accident. I will not be quoting anyone, as I confess I prefer to read or, actually, listen while I drive to narratives that keep me awake on the road, rather than the insightful theological reflections of worthy professors and biblical scholars. I have often been envious of their focus and the attention they give to their subjects, but I remember the advice given to someone somewhere: "Write about what you know."

And to say that I "know" anything may be a stretch. But I offer you my observations from my own experience, from what I have seen in church life, the learnings I have gleaned, and the questions that still linger regarding solitude and community as they relate to the community of faith and the individuals who make up the body of Christ in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and Northern Wisconsin—which may or may not be applicable to the larger church.

My Northern Great Lakes Synod is not really on the way to anywhere. To fly here is to endure at least one connecting flight, and maybe more. To drive here is to zigzag your way on two-lane roads that circumvent lakes, national

A Lutheran bishop reflects on questions of solitude and community in light of the disruptions of congregational and communal life occasioned by the last few years. The enforced apartness of the recent past brings the need for physical community into even greater perspective.

forests, and farmers' fields, slowing for unincorporated villages and small pockets of population that dot the territory, all the while keeping an eye out for the deer who are poised on the side of the road as they consider which car to fling themselves into.

When the pandemic was just beginning to burn through Detroit and Madison, we felt apart and not at imminent risk. Yet, the anxiety of Michigan and Wisconsin state leadership and the directives coming particularly from the Michigan governor resulted in a complete shutdown of all of our worshipping communities just after March 15, 2020. As I prepared for the first Sunday of lockdown, I went for a snowshoe walk on the seventy acres or so that make up our property. And I wrote the following article that was posted to our Facebook page and then made it into the local paper. It would be the first of many pastoral letters and reflections that, prior to the pandemic, had only been offered six times a year in our synod newsletter. But one unexpected blessing of the pandemic was the need for more communication and to set a tone that attempted to build resilience, to quiet anxiety, and to prepare people for the unknown to come.

From March 20, 2020

Dear Neighbors and Friends,

I was glad to get away yesterday, away from the news, away from my phone, away from my computer. Away . . . to the back yard, for a snowshoe walk in the trees.

However, in February, we heeded the advice of a friend of ours who knows trees and works for a logging company. He noticed signs of bugworm and advised us to log now, both to prevent the spread of the disease and to make the most of the value of the wood while it was healthy. So, we had our back woods logged. As I walked, I was glad to see that there was still plenty of standing timber, but the path had become a road, and new roads had been cut, like stripes through the forest.

As Zoey the dog and I walked, I noticed well-used deer trails that crisscrossed through the trees, not always following where the logging trucks had prepared a way. As I wandered along, sometimes on the well-used trails, sometimes on hoof-beaten paths, I found myself in a completely new area of the forest. I didn't recognize it. And as I walked, I realized very little of our back woods felt familiar. The landmarks had changed or been removed. Many younger trees curved in an arc over the path, their tops tethered to the frozen layers of snow and ice on the ground. Zoey and I had to walk under and over, just like the deer who had left behind tufts of hair that had snagged on the tangled boughs. Between the logging trucks and heavy snow, many trees were bent and the melting snow revealed piles of clumped debris. Large tree limbs had broken off and away from their trunk, leaving twisted and distressed fibers exposed and hanging.

But there was more light, more sky. I could see farther and had a more expansive view of the rise and fall of the hills, of rocky outcroppings I hadn't noticed before, dips in the land previously unseen. With the dense growth removed, the topography was revealed. It was a new landscape, and I knew it would take some time to get my bearings.

Isn't that where we are in these days? The landscape is changing. Familiar landmarks and predictable paths are no more. We journey into unfamiliar topography. Sometimes I think it helps to simply stop and take a breath, see where we are, look to where we want to get to. As things change so quickly, taking a pause is perhaps what is most necessary. I realized as I took some deep prayerful breaths in my now unfamiliar woods that I had been living on adrenaline for the past week. Such drive has its purpose. But we are only at the beginning of a journey that is going to take far longer than any of us would like.

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The challenges are real. So is the fear. But in spite of the fear, I see courage in how congregations, pastors, and leaders are finding new and innovative ways to stay connected and offer care from a distance. Phone call teams, online worship and Bible study, notes of encouragement, meetings in cyberspace. Congregations are getting their websites updated, joining Facebook, being intentional about communication.

We cannot yet see what is coming. We catch a glimpse in what is happening in other communities, and we are learning about the risks of doing too little. Perhaps this is counterintuitive, but in this current time, I invite you to see opportunity. We are blessed to discover again the value of personal devotions and family worship time in the home. We are blessed again to recognize that the church is not a building but people of faith who place their trust in Christ. And as we consider the needs of the community and our neighbors, we are blessed to be a blessing and to give witness to how love can cast out fear.

“Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the Lord” (Psalm 32:24).

The day will come when we can gather again. Until then, we wait. And in the meantime, we breathe, we pause, we pray, and we take this opportunity for all it has to offer us.

The Spirit of the risen and living Christ fill you, hold you, quiet the worry of your heart, and give you peace.

Yours in Christ,
Bishop Katherine Finegan

THE SHUTDOWN

In those first Sundays of shutdown, I felt more than a little adrift. Needing purpose, I spent many Sunday mornings either collecting sap from maple trees or

working in our vegetable garden, picking green beans and pulling weeds, in order to chase after a sense of productivity. And I realized that this work helped distract me from my own grief.

Depending on how motivated I was, I would access one or many online worship services to hear the preaching of pastors across the synod and share the peace with people. I found this online worship experience to be uneven and bittersweet as I was both glad to hear the Word proclaimed and know that people were engaged, and sad that the whole thing fell short of satisfaction and showed me once again all that was being lost. Worship was truncated to accommodate the short attention span of the online viewer. Liturgy was either skipped in order to shorten the service, or painfully present in a way that did not translate well for the semi-engaged online viewer. To discuss Holy Communion practices would require more space than I am allowed, but suffice it to say I lost some sleep and took comfort in the fact that this is God's church, and whatever mistakes we make in this pandemic time, God will have another hundred years to correct before the next major pandemic strikes. While I have always enjoyed singing, joining my voice to the song leader on the screen only made me aware of the absence of other voices. My grief over it all made it difficult to be grateful for what was being provided, and I felt surly and childish that I could not seem to appreciate all that was available.

For me, what began to provide balm for the loss of community was solitude. It was in personal prayer and a more robust devotional life that I felt some solace and a deeper connection to the divine. Snowshoe walks, woodland prayers, garden efforts, yard work, and writing helped pull me forward through days of adrenaline rush, stacked deadlines, and the general anxiety of the world.

Solitude also provided perspective. I believe being apart from the community enabled me to see the community and its needs more clearly. And from where I stood, I saw the pastors of my synod becoming weary. People were getting mean. The initial resolve of "we're all in this together" gave way to the polarization that had been a part of the previous four years. The perceived value of masks, safety protocols, eventually vaccinations, and the very existence of the virus itself all depended on political affiliation or the source of your news, or "news."

I began to wonder if there were more than a few people in our congregations whose faith was solely dependent upon the community. For them, solitude left them bereft of their faith and made them feel like their faith was threatened. I began to wonder if more than a few people in our congregations depended on their neighbors in the pew to sing and relied on the coffee fellowship to affirm their belonging to the body of Christ. I began to wonder if they did not know how to practice their faith alone, if they did not know how to pray at home, or if the sum of their Christian life was Sunday worship attendance followed by coffee fellowship. And I wondered, If people depended so completely on the community of faith to carry them, when prevented from gathering with the community, did they then become afraid of losing their faith, especially if salvation is defined as one's physical presence in the church building? If so, then to not be gathering in the

church building would certainly threaten their sense of the security of their salvation and raise the stakes of the necessity of gathering. Fear of losing faith—that is, of losing the faith that the community of faith provided—then might lead anxious people to push for in-person worship. I wondered if it was that fear of losing faith (even salvation? perhaps tied to communion?) that came at our pastors as anger: anger against the pastor, anger at church councils who limited attendance, anger at church leaders who supported protocols and encouraged masks to protect the most vulnerable among us.

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It's only a theory, but if true, I can more easily extend some grace and forgiveness for the emotional fervor with which some people attacked their pastoral leaders and church councils. More than a few resigned their membership in favor of the church down the street that professed with pride, "Faith over Fear," and met in person despite rising Covid-19 numbers in the community or Covid deaths among their people.

As I received more and more phone calls from weary pastors and beleaguered council presidents, I wrote the following article for our synod's September/August 2020 newsletter.

The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at." (Numbers 11:4–6)

Dear Friends in Christ,

Does your strength feel dried up? Is there nothing at all but online worship or half-empty pews to look at? Do you remember when we took regular in-the-sanctuary worship for granted? We remember the fellowship, the potlucks, the singing, gathering around the altar for the Lord's supper. Do you have a strong craving for going back to the way things used to be?

The thing is . . . we are in the wilderness. We have left Egypt (the good and the bad) behind, and God is making us, the church (and maybe society too), into something new. And if the experience of the Israelites is any guide, we are only in the beginning of our journey. If, as Dr. [Michael] Osterholm (an epidemiologist) says, we are only in the second inning of a nine-inning game, then we are only in the first decade of a forty-year journey, or in the first months of what will take a year to two years.

It is rather remarkable how the wilderness experience of the Israelites and our own pandemic wilderness experience are similar.

1. Moses was under a lot of stress, and so is your pastor.

Every day is full of new decisions. There is much to take into consideration, and pastors are being pulled and pushed into exhaustion. Do we resume in-person worship? How? When? What if cases in the community are rising? What if someone shows up and won't wear a mask? What if more people show up than we can accommodate for social distancing? What if the most vulnerable come—how can we be sure they'll be safe? What do I say to someone who doesn't believe the threat is real?

Please be patient with your pastor and your leadership. The way forward is far from clear . . . for returning to worship, fall programming, and so much more.

2. Moses learned not to be a solo leader, and others stepped up to help.

At first it was all Moses. He went up the mountain alone and came down alone. But then he appointed more leaders to help shoulder the burden of leadership.

When the pandemic first started, your pastoral leader scrambled to provide resources and/or an online worship. There wasn't time to recruit volunteers—there was too much else to do. He or she may not have had the means or initiative to get the council or others involved in meeting the needs of ministry in the congregation, much less the community. But now, as we settle in for the long haul, councils and other congregation members would do well to ask their pastor how they can help, if they are not already doing so.

Ask:

- Who needs a phone call and to be prayed with?
- What new technology can I learn that would help?
- Are there mailings I can help put together?
- Are there email lists and cell phone lists that need to be updated?
- Can I be a part of the online worship effort?
- Can I help someone use Zoom?

Or please simply send a note of thanks and affirmation so your pastoral leader knows their efforts are appreciated, and hold them in prayer.

3. As their wilderness journey continued, the Israelites complained about a few things, and so do we.

Wilderness times are full of high anxiety and stress. There is confusion. There is grief because we have lost the familiar and fear about an uncertain future. These feelings sometimes come out as anger or sadness or just untethered emotion.

Sometimes the best we can do is to take a deep breath and invite others to do the same. The words of Julian of Norwich come to mind . . . again: "All will be well. All will be well. In all manner of things, all will be well."

It is not up to you or me to fix the church or solve the pandemic or answer every question in the moment it is asked. This is a time of prayer and discernment, of conversation together to determine what is best, of asking how God is at work, and of erring on the side of care for the neighbor.

Easier said than done. But being gentle with yourself and others is a good beginning.

4. The Israelites arrived in the promised land a different people than when they left Egypt, and we will emerge from this pandemic a different people too.

We are practicing our faith differently. Not gathering for worship as we used to means that feeding one's faith is not as easy as simply showing up to worship. This pandemic has challenged us to find new ways to deepen our discipleship and our relationship to God in Christ Jesus. Many pastoral leaders have done their best to provide online devotions, Bible studies, emails of encouragement, phone call prayers, and more.

In addition, I see the need for congregation members to take a new kind of initiative. For some, it may be more difficult to turn on the computer than get in the car to go to church. It may be more difficult to pray at home than in the gathered assembly. Personal devotions depend on a person doing them. Online Bible studies are helpful only if one participates. Our rhythms are off. The regular habits of faith have been disrupted.

By the time this pandemic is over, new patterns and practices will emerge, new insights will give greater clarity, and who we are as Lutheran Christians in the Northern Great Lakes Synod will look and feel different than it does now.

5. The Israelites were closer to God when they were in the wilderness—intimately dependent on God in a whole new way.

In wilderness times—that is, in times of fear and uncertainty—we pray all the harder and more frequently. We look for God more fervently. We rely on the presence of Christ walking with us with greater dependence. God feels nearer, more palpably present, and this is an unexpected blessing.

As the Israelites traveled in the wilderness, their patience wore thin. They were tired of the journey, tired of Moses, critical of their situation and their leaders. I hope we can travel our wilderness road with a little more grace.

As your leaders consider next steps, please understand that their priority is your health. And their primary challenge is how to nurture your relationship with God in Christ Jesus while observing the best practices for the safety of all.

So as you travel this wilderness journey, watch out for your friends and neighbors. We don't want to lose anyone along the way. Check in on each other. Pray. Take your own initiative to deepen your discipleship and care for your congregation and community. Your pastor can only do so much.

And just as God led the Israelites through the wilderness, so does God lead you and me. These are trying days that will stretch into months and longer. But God is with you, with your congregation, and with the church that is the body of Christ.

Take heart and do not lose faith . . . or patience.

Yours in Christ,

Bishop Katherine Finegan

COMMUNITIES OF FAITH

The value of community cannot be overestimated for people who might count themselves among those who depend on the community of faith for their faith. That said, however, solitude is far from complete in its support of one's faith journey. With all due respect to the hermits of church history, while solitude provides a certain space for reflection, prayer, and centering, it cannot fill the void that is uniquely occupied by Christian community. The Israelites did not journey through the wilderness alone, and neither is the journey of faith only an individual experience. Both solitude and community are imperative. Both a personal relationship with God in Christ Jesus and the fellowship of other believers are needed, and not just in a pandemic year, or two.

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For all the comfort I took in moments of solitude, when I once again was blessed to be part of an in-person worship gathering, I had a hard time holding it together. In August of 2020, we arranged to gather outside for the ordination and installation of a brave new pastor willing to begin her first call amid a pandemic. This was the first time in five months that I gathered in person with a community of faith. The chosen gospel was the woman at the well, and I found that writing the following poem helped me process the emotions of the day.

It's been too long
People gather
 in their cars
 in lawn chairs
 in the Spirit.
The sun shines. The heart aches. Faces smile bravely, warmly,
behind their masks.
The worship begins and I feel it coming.
We sing, we pray, the feeling builds . . .
 A swell of emotion rising,
 a growing pressure, a flood piling up behind a dam
 filling my heart until it threatens to choke my voice, spill out my
 eyes.
Is this what the Samaritan woman felt
when she began to suspect just who it was who was talking to her?

Did she feel this?
This gushing up to overflowing?
This inability to contain
her grief?
Her hope?
The gospel, just reading it, speaking it aloud for those assembled,
pushes water over the dam.
I feel something give
as I see the words I will say next.
It's all there, THE reason.
This is why we are here.
This is why we take such pains to gather far apart.
It is for him, because of him,
and
this ancient conversation between an inquisitive woman of Samaria
and the living water that asks to drink from the well.
She says, "I know that Messiah is coming."
And Jesus spills out into the world . . .
"I am he."

Dear Reader,

May you be supported and inspired in your faith journey as you find comfort in solitude and supportive inspiration in the community of the body of Christ to give you what you need for the challenges ahead.

Yours in Christ,

Bishop Katherine Finegan 

REV. KATHERINE FINEGAN received her BA from Valparaiso University. She attended Luther Seminary and was ordained in 2002. She served for ten years as parish pastor and then as assistant to the bishop in the Northern Great Lakes Synod of the ELCA. In 2017 she was elected bishop of that synod. She is a member of the advisory council of Word & World.