

MAY 2021

CHURCH @ HOME

staying connected with God,
each other, and ourselves



INSIDE:

MESSAGES FROM
NICK AND VI

CHURCH UPDATE

SERMONS
& ARTICLES

SUBMISSIONS FROM
OUR COMMUNITY

BIRTH
ANNOUNCEMENT

FAREWELL TO COLLEEN

HUMOUR

red deer lake
united church

Friends,

How are you doing?

As the seasons again change and we take some more steps towards whatever is next, I hope this finds you safe, well, and full of hope.

Here at the church community, there is a lot going on. Which is so great, isn't it? I can't say enough about how proud I am that instead of shutting it all down or scaling it all back 'til the pandemic is over, we chose to innovate, learn, grow, and keep going. I hope you are proud of that too — even if you don't see or get in on it all.

Life here at the church is full. The memorial garden is showing signs of life, the building is being painted and cleaned, cyclists are coming and going in the parking lot, and we are working hard to keep people connected and full of hope, meaning, and purpose. Everyone is, for the most part, doing well.

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People are getting vaccinated, finding ways to stay grounded, dreaming about travel plans, and having babies. People are also spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically struggling and we're doing our best to care for them and walk with them through it all. We're asking everyone to send those folks some prayers and love.

Welcome to another edition of our Church @ Home magazine. It's full of sermons, some prayers, and submissions from the community. The hope is this helps you not only feed your soul but also feel connected with your church community. I'm so so grateful for the work of Vi and Katherine for putting the magazines together each month and to everyone who helps get them into your hands. We couldn't do it without them and we couldn't do it without you — thanks for being a part of this.

May this book remind you God is with you and for you.

May it inspire and challenge your faith.

May it make you feel seen and loved.

grace & peace,

n.



MESSAGE FROM VI

There is more activity happening around us these days . . . that is to say in nature. There are the stirrings of Mother Nature as she awakens into renewed life, a time of vibrancy, growth and birth. The trumpeter swans have been honking loudly overhead as they fly north and I eagerly await a sighting of the shimmering blue of the mountain bluebird returning for the summer and for the return of those resilient and fierce little hummingbirds after flying thousands of miles, all of

them returning here to nest and have young. I feel joy at these sightings.

It is a reminder for us that we too contain the capacity to be patient, to be resilient and to heal after a long winter of constant shutdowns, of holding our breath for “this all to be over” and done with. Mother Nature can teach us a lot about hope and resilience.

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I frequently find myself remembering this poem by St. Teresa of Avila, which centres me and reminds me that God is a constant anchor when the sands are shifting and we are being challenged to become resilient.

Let nothing disturb you.

Let nothing upset you.

Everything changes.

God alone is unchanging.

With patience all things are possible.

Whoever has God lacks nothing.

God alone is enough.

Deep gratitude to our ever-dedicated volunteers and staff who make these care packages happen month after month. They are amazing and we honour each one of them.

We hope these packages continue to help you feel connected to your church family. We also honour YOU for your continued presence amongst us, for your perseverance and resilience. We miss you, enjoy hearing from you and encourage you to continue to share and contribute to this magazine.

Please reach out to us if you need anything.

In love and peace,

Vi



CHURCH UPDATE

On top of doing things like this, our online services, pastoral and spiritual care, and the other programs we're running, we are hard at work asking some really big questions like, "What does church look like after the pandemic?" We know everything has shifted and it's our responsibility to respond to that shift while still being who we are.

To help us in that work we've hired a consultant to guide us through not only those big questions but some work we set out to do before the pandemic hit: create an action plan to implement the work we committed to at the end of 2019 (review our governance structure, focus on recruitment and retainment of community members, and develop leadership and staff). As that work begins, we'll keep you updated on everything and bring you into a conversation about how we can respond to those shifts we've experienced over the past year.

Colleen Micklethwaite, our amazing, wonderful, and indispensable Administrative Coordinator, officially retired in May. We could go on and on and on and on and on about how important she is to our community and how we could not be where and who we are without her. Her devotion, thoughtfulness, perseverance, energy, and time leave shoes we know we can't fill.

Her finger prints are all over this church and we wish her more than the best as she steps out into the next chapter of her life. We invite you to send her all your prayers of gratitude, love, and best wishes!

(We did our best to honour Colleen and her service to us despite the pandemic restrictions. Look for photos of her farewell celebrations elsewhere in this magazine.)

BIRDS, NIMROD, AND HOCKEY

A SERMON FOR PENTECOST (REV. NICK)

God be with you.

So around the world this weekend churches are talking about this thing called Pentecost. There are a lot of things to talk about when talking about Pentecost, one of them being that it's usually seen to be the birthday of the church. It's the Sunday we use to reflect upon, remember, and celebrate how the Holy Spirit empowered the fans and followers of Jesus to become this thing called 'The Church.'

That is a wonderful thing to remember and celebrate, but the more I think about it, the more I want to say that Pentecost is actually aiming at something that transcends and includes that . . . which is to say, it's more than that. It's bigger than that. I may even go so far as to say that to leave it there isn't just lazy but irresponsible . . . what Pentecost is about is something we all need to hear about, regardless of whether or not we're in, of, or fans of the church.

So because we believe in being bold and asking big questions, we're going to explore how Pentecost is most definitely tied to what it means to be 'the church,' but also — and dare I say more importantly — how it's tied to how to understand ourselves, this world around us, and what it means to be connected with God.

Are you with me?

And to start, let's begin with the truth at the heart of it all . . .

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There is a truth at the heart of almost every religious tradition, ours included. It's something science has backed up again and again, and it's also something we've all experienced. This is a truth we both know (heart) and know (head). And that truth is this:

we are spiritual beings who live in a spiritual world.

And while we can take 'spiritual' in a supernatural I-believe-in-God kind of way, what we ultimately mean when we use this word is that we are all, in some way, shape, or form, intimately and essentially connected. Our tradition would put it this way: **we all, literally, breathe together.**

Whether it is something supernatural or just our own energy, words, actions, ideas, and moods, we are all connected in ways we can't fully see. The space between us is full of things that pull us together or push us apart, and lift us up or tear us down. It's such a universal thing that we've got these phrases to point towards this interconnectivity. We say things like:

'Oh, he's just getting caught up in the ... spirit of things.'

or:

'Oh, I was really feeding off of people's ... energy.'

or:

'Oh, there was something in the ... air.'

I remember once I was playing hockey with some friends at a charity tournament and there was this guy who had clearly missed the memo that said, 'We play until we're thirsty. Beers after the game!' and had come to the game with this thirst quite quenched, clearly quite drunk.

And throughout the game he was becoming more and more aggressive, and as the game went on you could see and feel something happening . . . everyone else was becoming more and more aggressive too. We could feel the tension rising on the ice. We could see it in how people were playing. I could feel myself becoming angrier and edgier. The whole atmosphere had shifted. Why?

We'd got caught up in the spirit that guy was putting out there.

There was this other time I had this doctor's appointment I was very anxious about. As I sat waiting for the doctor to come in, I could feel myself getting more agitated and worried and fearful, self-diagnosing myself and googling my symptoms, becoming more convinced I was about to die. I started going into a pretty dark place and the doctor hadn't even come into the room yet. But once she came in and sat down, something happened . . . it was as if the air was rearranged. Suddenly there was some room to relax. Suddenly I could breathe. Why?

I was feeding off of the energy that doctor brought into the room.

Anyone know what we're talking about?

Maybe you've had your own experiences about getting caught up in the spirit of things or feeding off someone's energy.

And that's what we're talking about when we talk about spirituality. That something bigger than ourselves, something outside ourselves, whatever it is, that's alive, that moves, that ebbs and flows around us, that connects us all. Like breath and energy, it animates and empowers, it motivates and sustains, it causes cohesion or disruption, and it causes movement.

This is why we say we are spiritual beings in a spiritual world. We are all connected by these things that move in and around us.

Scientists would talk about this by talking about what they call 'quantum holism.' It gets at the idea that we are each a part of a whole — that we don't and can't live in isolation from each other no matter how hard we try.

This is what's happening when you see birds murmuring — flying in huge coordinated groups together, almost as if they are one gigantic living organism. There's no leader, there's no meeting at the beginning to choreograph the thing, they are just doing it.

They are caught up in the same energy, the same breath, there's something bigger than themselves helping them move in a certain direction.

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And if we are those who look to our tradition to learn how to be spiritual, to be people who are connected, people who breathe and move together, well, there are all kinds of stories.

Two of them come to mind.

The first is this one story in the Bible, this ancient story that's been passed down for thousands of years, this story — this myth, really — about how humanity, after that great flood, began to rebuild the world.

And one of the great leaders behind this massive rebuilding project, he had what just might be the best name in the entire Bible:

Nimrod.

Nimrod, we're told, had an idea to build not just a city, but the greatest city ever built. And soon everyone was talking about this. People became consumed with this idea of being the greatest city ever, of being the most powerful city ever, of the most beautiful city ever — a city greater, more powerful, and more beautiful than God herself. And in the middle of it all would be this tower that would stretch right up into the heavens. This tower that would symbolize just how great, powerful, and beautiful they were.

(Clearly some men were behind this.)

And interestingly enough, as this story got passed down, there's this one tidbit of information that keeps being included in the story, this seemingly trivial piece of information: we're told what this tower was made out of:

Bricks.

An interesting tidbit of information to be passed down over the years, isn't it? Now why would that be included?

Well, who makes bricks?

Slaves.

And what do you call a world built on the backs of others?

An empire.

And what's an empire?

A world caught up in the spirit of greed, ego, pride, power, violence, oppression, and division.

The other story I'm thinking about happens thousands of years after that one. It's the one we celebrate today — the story of Pentecost.

Pentecost was a Jewish festival that took place 50 days after Passover and was meant to celebrate both the spring harvest and to commemorate when Moses received the Ten Commandments from God. It was a pretty important religious festival. People from all around the known world would come to attend it and all people would be encouraged to attend: men, women, children, and even slaves and servants. All people, regardless of class and rank, would take part.

And we're told how some of Jesus' followers had gathered in this house to celebrate Pentecost and how all of a sudden there was what sounded like wind blowing in and around the house, and everyone who was out attending the festival heard it and were drawn to it, and soon all these people from all over the known world were gathering together around this house and getting caught up in this wind, people of all different shapes, sizes, languages, ethnicities, classes, statuses, and religions. And yet somehow, despite all those differences and barriers that existed between them, these people began to talk to each other, they began to understand each other, they began to see each other, they began to listen to each other, and they began to exist together despite these differences.

And what do you call a world of unity within diversity?

Jesus called it the Kingdom of God. A world caught up in the Spirit of unity, peace, compassion, empathy, justice, and inclusion.

These two stories are connected. They are meant to be read together. They are trying to tell us something about what it means to be spiritual beings living in a spiritual world.

Can you see it?

Each of these stories is a story of getting caught up in something bigger than ourselves and participating in this spiritual world as spiritual creatures.

Babel, a cautionary tale of what happens when we get caught up in the wrong kind of spirit.

Pentecost, a celebratory tale of what happens when we get caught up in the right kind of spirit.

They are both stories about paying attention to what spirit we're breathing and getting caught up in.

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One of the things we see Jesus teach again and again and again is that it's not enough to just be spiritual.

And here's why being 'spiritual but not religious' can be problematic. As spiritual beings we need guidance and structure to help us tap into the right kind of spirit, to ensure we're being taken in the right direction, and not simply being open to whatever it is that happens to be blowing around us.

If we want to be truly human and fully alive, Jesus taught, there's only one kind of Spirit we should be breathing and caught up in:

that Spirit we call Holy.

That Spirit of God that has, since the very beginning of time, been pulling humanity towards greater and greater inclusion and understanding, that has been pulling us into new bigger and more expansive ideas of what this world is to be like, that has been pulling us deeper and deeper into God, animating us, energizing us, pulling us into life as it was always meant to be, into life as it should be, into life as it is going to be.

It's only in this Spirit, he taught, that we can truly be connected to God, each other, and ourselves. It's only in this Spirit, he taught, that we can truly be the Church — people who are breathing with God.

Which really is what the church is, isn't it?

It's the people who breathe with God.

So let's end with a question for us to rumble with:

In the story of Pentecost, people were drawn to the house filled with Christians because of what sounded like wind blowing around them.

They were attracted to the sound of God's Spirit moving in and around them.

Is the noise we and our church are making holy?

Amen.

RETHINKING HUMANITY

A SERMON ABOUT WHAT THE PANDEMIC HAS FORCED US TO RETHINK (REV. NICK)

I've been thinking a lot about how over the past 15 months or so we've been experiencing this "great un-doing."

Because of everything we've been through over the past year — the pandemic, the civil rights movement, the challenge to democracy, and so much more — things that were once fixed, routine, and established, that were unquestionable, sacred, and trusted, things that really, in a lot of ways, held our lives and world together and gave it all gravity, that helped it all make sense and have meaning, have become undone — they've been questioned, criticized, and challenged and we've been forced to rethink them — to rumble with whether or not we can hold them the same way as before or even if we can hold them at all.

Anyone know what I'm talking about?

We're talking about things like how being stuck inside our homes together or being apart from one another has forced us to rethink our relationships . . .

we're talking about how the politics of the pandemic has made us rethink the roles and responsibilities of our governments and leaders . . .

we're talking about how the civil rights movement has made us rethink systemic racism, how we're a part of that, and what it actually means to be anti-racist . . .

we're talking about things deeply personal, these deep-seated beliefs and values that can't be reconciled with what we've experienced and felt over the past year.

And I think we've all had a great undoing.

This is something we've all experienced.

And as a church that takes our lived experiences seriously, that knows they matter, that knows our experience should inform our theology, this is something we need to talk about. We need to ask the really tough but really hard question: **How do we reconcile our experience with what we once thought, felt, and held as true, good, and sacred?**

Now the goal here isn't so much to answer that question as it is to engage in the question. It's to ask it and live in the tension of it, trusting that if we are going to get somewhere new, we get to start getting there. And if we do want to discover how the pandemic and everything else has forced us to rethink things like God, humanity, justice, and community, we need to start getting there. We need to ask the question.

So, my friends, today we rethink humanity and ask: "Isn't humanity supposed to be good??"

And let's start by asking, "Anyone else feeling this?"

I sure am. A lot of people I've spoken to have asked it in one way or another. It's definitely NOT something I was thinking about two years ago, at least not in this way. I mean I knew people did awful, horrific, terrible, evil things, I knew and even had experienced some of that, I had even done some of that . . . but I could always write it off as just one person or explain it away as being the result of this or that underlying issue. But how I viewed and understood humanity as a whole? How I understood our nature? How I saw our core? That was never ever challenged.

See, for me . . . and I think most of us here would be down with this . . . humanity was good.

Like ontologically good. Like created good. And I'm not just talking 'good' as in our worth and value, but 'good' as in our intent, our disposition, our nature. As in humanity is, fundamentally, designed, wired, and created good.

That's how my theology informed my anthropology. That's how I read those creation texts. I saw in those ancient stories some wisdom speaking to this really sacred idea that humanity was wired to be good, that our predisposition was to be loving, generous, and just. That's what the whole created-in-God's image was getting at. That's what Jesus came to remind us of. That's the truth I held on to:

that our nature is to be a source of light, life, and love in the world.

Now of course, within that, there are all kinds of factors to consider and name:

how does how we were raised affect that . . .

what about socio-economic conditions . . .

what about neurological factors . . .

how does trauma shape our behaviour . . .

and those things are all important, but nevertheless, the argument would go, that innate goodness remained to be true.

Now some could call it naive, but I called it faith. It flowed out of that truth I saw within our tradition. It was a gravity that held a lot of things in place for me and it pushed back against some really bad theology that talked about original sin and how we're all inherently bad and terrible; it also offered me hope for our collective future; and it offered a trust in people, a trust that said most people are good, just as God intended.

Yeah, it was a big value of mine. Do you know what I'm talking about? Do you hold that truth and view of humanity too?

I think that's a pretty common thing we all hold on. It's a belief and value that shapes a lot of how we see ourselves and one another.

But the thing is . . . and this is my own experience talking here . . . over the past year there's A LOT that's happened which has made me question that.

the riot on the Capitol happened.
the anti-mask and anti-vaccination protests happened.
the white supremacy movements happened.
the politics of it all happened.
more gun violence happened.
more environmental damage happened.

Right?!

I could go on and on.

Now we could chalk it all up to a blip. We could explain it all away as the result of fear, stress, disillusionment, and socio-economic factors. We certainly could do that. But here's where we remember something important:

what we experience matters.

our experiences matter.

We need to pay attention to what we experience because what we experience is how we learn truths about the universe. It's what informs how we understand things like God, love, pain, hope, and community. It's what shapes how we understand the universe around us. Our experiences matter.

Now again, there's a lot of other things to consider within that but if we are to take our experiences seriously, and if they do help us understand what is true, and if our experiences in the past year have made this idea about humanity no longer tenable or at the very least have made us question it . . .

we've got a question to ask.

How else do we hold humanity? What other way can we hold it that isn't: Oh, humanity is just straight up terrible? What's another way that honours our tradition AND our experiences?

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Now this is the place where I'd love to give you an amazing one-liner of an answer but the truth is: I'm not sure.

I'm still sitting with this. I'm still rumbling with some grief and resentment around this whole thing.

But . . . here's where I'm at with it. Here's where this rethinking of humanity has taken me:

When it comes to humanity . . . when it comes to our nature . . . maybe a way to view and hold it is that while our value and worth is inherently good, our nature, our disposition, our wiring, maybe it's more neutral.

Maybe a way to view us all is that we have both the capacity for great goodness AND great evil . . . that we can choose to be a source of light, life, and love OR we can choose to be a source of pain, division, and death.

We can be makers of peace and makers of chaos. We can make love and make fear. We can create community and we can tear community apart. We can nourish the earth and we can destroy it. We can choose to lift people up and tear them down. We can choose to honour the image of God within us and we can choose to ignore it . . . and sometimes we can do all of that in the same day.

Right?

I wonder if that's a far more honest way to view humanity. It's one that can still honour our inherent worth and value and one that can still see us having a divine role within the universe, but one that also honours our experiences.

But it also opens up a whole boat load of questions, doesn't it?

Not least of which is: 'How do we make sure we choose great good? How do we make sure we choose to honour that divine image? How do we choose peace and life and love together? How do we move beyond where we're at together?'

THAT'S the question, isn't it? In such a polemicised, fearful, ugly, and seemingly impossible world . . .

How do we make sure we choose the good? How do we activate THAT part of our humanity? And how do we do it together?

It's a question we'll have to rumble with together as we come out of all of this, but here are some thoughts:

So in our tradition whenever it comes to how to be human and alive in the world, whenever we look to navigate life with purpose and intention, we look to Jesus. We see in him this blueprint, model and rhythm of how to live into the best parts of our humanity. And if we look to him, I wonder if we can find two things to help us begin — *just begin* — to find out how to choose the good:

The thing about Jesus, and this is just so beautiful and so very frustrating, was that he wasn't really ever too concerned with answers. Out of the 300 some questions he's asked in the Bible, he only ever gives a straight answer three times. That math is telling: he knew there was something about asking the questions and rumbling with the answers. It's like he didn't seem to want people to figure it out before doing the work. Instead of answering, what he did, time and time again, was invite people to just walk — to figure it out as they go, to, to paraphrase Richard Rohr, live our way into the answers.

And I love that because it reminds us that we don't need to know the answer as we ask the question . . .

Our job, rather, is to just walk — to figure it out as we go, to try, to play, to rumble, to struggle, to do the work because the answer is the work and the work is the answer.

And as we do that, we remember that work begins and ends with grace.

Which we'll need, right? Cause the reality is if we are neutral, if we can, do, and will choose both, as we do the work we will choose poorly. We'll choose destruction and division. We will choose to hurt. We will choose evil. As we seek to do the good, we will sometimes choose the bad.

Which I gotta say is oddly hopeful because it reminds us that this, what we're seeing and experiencing? It doesn't need to be this way. We don't need to live like this. Grace allows us to choose different, to be different, to do different. All it takes is leaning into that grace and choosing to do the work of good.

Maybe that's the rhythm we lean into here: we walk towards the good and trust in grace.

So some questions to help us in that work:

how can you walk this week?

how can you make sure you choose the good?

how can you live into that part of your humanity?

and how can you trust in grace?

where do you need to give grace? where do you need to receive grace?

A SERMON ON THOMAS
BY REV. NICK'S FRIEND, THE WONDERFULLY AMAZING
REV. MELANIE KIRK-HALL

Scripture Reading: John 20:19-31 — Jesus Appears to the Disciples

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the authorities, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

In a time when fewer people have any ties with the Christian church, it is amazing how many of the general population still know "church stories." An article I read suggested that there are still three individuals that remain popular in the common cultural vocabulary.

The first is the Good Samaritan, Jesus' classic story of an unexpected compassion. The second is the Prodigal Son. Again, a tale of unlooked-for grace and unpredictable acceptance.

The third is Doubting Thomas, the story of the disciple who needed to see it before he could believe anyone's word. The skeptical Thomas seems to remain grounded in our collective memory. Because in a world of internet hoaxes, fake news, and conspiracy theories about "plan-demic", Q-Anon and more, the need to check our sources and see for our own eyes is at a premium. The modern world calls for answers to questions of validity, and veracity. And often the religious world is portrayed as seeming to suggest that this is forbidden. That faith demands that you be unquestioning and unwavering in your spiritual life. This week's Gospel reading implores us to reconsider this false narrative.

You may be interested to know that in the first three gospels we are told absolutely nothing at all about Thomas. It is only in John's Gospel that he emerges as a distinct personality, but even then, there are only 155 words about him. I feel bad for Thomas, forever hung with the title Doubting. We don't call him "the Twin: as John describes him. Nope. Instead, we focus on this one story, where he seems to be rebuked for wanting to see, to touch, to physically understand the reality of what is going on. And you can hardly blame the guy for being skeptical after watching Jesus go from celebrated to reviled and killed in one short week. Having to wrap his head around the death of his teacher, his leader. And the community of disciples, that seemed so solid, suddenly crumbling around him. With Jesus, into that tomb went their hope, their vision, their sense of direction and purpose in life. They were left only with an overwhelming sense of failure, loss, and shame, because they knew they had deserted Jesus in his hour of need.

Plus, the reports from the women of seeing Jesus risen. The men didn't believe Mary's words . . . perhaps too scared to risk opening their hearts again. So, they didn't open up the doors and rush back to the tomb. They stayed put and waited to see what would happen next. Suddenly, astonishingly, quietly, there he was, right there, in their midst, before their very eyes. Jesus was alive. He appeared to the disciples and they believed.

But Doubting Thomas wasn't there in the upper room with the other disciples that night. And we don't know why Thomas wasn't there when Jesus first appeared. John doesn't tell us.

Theologian David Lose (los) has an interesting thought; "My own guess was that he was out and about getting on with his life. Why do I think that? Because Thomas was a realist. Let's not forget: in Chapter 11, it's Thomas who recognizes that for Jesus to return to Judea is to face the threat of death, and it's Thomas who urges the other disciples to go with Jesus. So, while we don't know where Thomas was when Jesus first appeared, we do know where he wasn't — locked in the upper room for fear of the religious authorities." So, Thomas did not believe the others' reports . . . he wanted what the others had — a first-hand experience.

However, one week later, Thomas is with the disciples, who are once again hiding behind locked doors. Gail O'Day notes that it's more "most noteworthy . . . not that Thomas insists on his own firsthand experience, but that one week after the disciples have been visited by the risen Jesus and received Jesus' peace and the Holy Spirit, they have once again locked themselves away behind closed doors." The rest of the disciples, O'Day writes, even after seeing Jesus risen, "still do not live as an Easter people." But Thomas . . . well, his reaction is amazing. What does Thomas do when he is face-to-face with the Risen Christ, getting everything he wanted? He makes a confession that is actually climactic in John's Gospel. He declares Jesus is "My Lord and my God." Nowhere else in John's Gospel or any of the other Gospels — does anyone else so clearly name Jesus as divine. By doing that Thomas is inviting us to remember how John begins his Gospel . . . Say it with me if you remember: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Thomas "gets it" and by his faithfulness, helps others to "get it" too. As we heard in our scripture introduction, John's gospel offers a panoply of possible responses to Jesus, saving Thomas' bold confession for last. Saving the most amazing response to act as a model for all who read his Gospel.

I think the most important part of the story, for me, is that Thomas' doubt did not exclude him from discipleship. He was not cast out, forbidden from the gathering. Rather, Jesus came to him and invited him to touch the brokenness that Easter created on his body. To become drawn into the mystery of Easter more fully. To honour that doubt is not the enemy of faith, but simply part of faithful living.

I would argue that it is a part of having a mature faith. To be deeply connected to our faith and to live in the world we do means that there will be moments when we doubt, when unbelief creeps in. How could there not be when we hear of horrific hate crimes, crooked business practices and foolish politicians? When the ideal of the common good is being replaced with "me above all else." Those things can and should shake us to our core if we are feeling human beings. That is a natural human reaction.

But notice that Thomas and his doubt were not some sort of cancerous tumor that needed to be excised from this tiny shiny body of faith . . . The moment Thomas experiences for himself the presence of Jesus, he abandons his doubt. He does not cling to it stubbornly. Thomas wanted proof. And he wanted Jesus. And he got it, and suddenly his "requirements" for belief are no longer important. The Gospel story gives no report of Thomas following through with these gruesome actions in the quest for truth. But the personal encounter makes Jesus' resurrection real to this follower. His response is immediate and unprecedented, right to the heart of the matter. When Thomas gets it, he really gets it.

In my readings, I came across the writings of Frederick Buechner that focus on Thomas' other name, "the Twin." He confesses that "if you want to know who the other twin is, I can tell you. I am the other twin, and unless I miss my guess, so are you." I am sure we have all had moments when we like Thomas have felt doubt, and cried for more proof and evidence to help hold up our faith. We are Thomas' twin. And like Buechner, I think this is very good news.



Buechner reflects on the gift of believing more than what our eyes take in: "Our eyes tell us that our church building may need a new coat of paint and that the pews are rarely more than half filled on any given Sunday." Our eyes see "facts" while our hearts see "truth" — "the truth about this church is that it, for reasons known only to God, is a house of God, full of love and fellowship, full of holiness . . ." And that is far bigger than just the walls of this building. And Buechner suggests that, for Thomas, perhaps it was the first time that he saw not just "the fact of Jesus," but "the truth of Jesus and the truth of who Jesus was for him."

When we see Jesus "with our hearts," we experience exactly what Thomas did long ago, what followers throughout time have felt each time they experience Christ with them: "To know that in the long run his kind of life is the only life worth living. To see him with the heart is not only to believe in him but, little by little, to become bearers to each other of his healing life until we become finally healed and whole and alive within ourselves. To see him with the heart is to take heart, to grow true hearts, brave hearts, at last."

This is the gift of the one who we call Doubter. A deep reminder of our call to be Easter people, even with doubts and fears mingled in. In his experience of deep faith emerging from deep doubts, Thomas reminds us all that doubt is not the opposite of faith, but a step in the journey. That out of his doubt, Thomas found the resurrection made real in his life. May we too find the resurrection in our own lives.

Let us pray:

O God, we refer to "doubting Thomas" as if his doubt was a bad thing. Help us to let go of that way of thinking and embrace the true message of Thomas' experience: that moments of doubt do not exclude us from the Good News of your love. We pray that you would help us to be open to all the ways that you are present with us in our lives. Give us eyes to see You, not just in the unusual and amazing ways You make Yourself known, but also in the small and easily overlooked ways. We pray in your holy name. Amen



BONUS READ!

**THERE'S A NAME FOR THE BLAH YOU'RE FEELING:
IT'S CALLED LANGUISHING
BY ADAM GRANT (NEW YORK TIMES)**

At first, I didn't recognize the symptoms that we all had in common. Friends mentioned that they were having trouble concentrating. Colleagues reported that even with vaccines on the horizon, they weren't excited about 2021. A family member was staying up late to watch "National Treasure" again even though she knows the movie by heart. And instead of bouncing out of bed at 6 a.m., I was lying there until 7, playing Words with Friends.

It wasn't burnout — we still had energy. It wasn't depression — we didn't feel hopeless. We just felt somewhat joyless and aimless. It turns out there's a name for that: languishing.

Languishing is a sense of stagnation and emptiness. It feels as if you're muddling through your days, looking at your life through a foggy windshield. And it might be the dominant emotion of 2021.

As scientists and physicians work to treat and cure the physical symptoms of long-haul COVID, many people are struggling with the emotional long-haul of the pandemic. It hit some of us unprepared as the intense fear and grief of last year faded.

In the early, uncertain days of the pandemic, it's likely that your brain's threat detection system — called the amygdala — was on high alert for fight-or-flight. As you learned that masks helped protect us — but package-scrubbing didn't — you probably developed routines that eased your sense of dread. But the pandemic has dragged on, and the acute state of anguish has given way to a chronic condition of languish.

In psychology, we think about mental health on a spectrum from depression to flourishing. Flourishing is the peak of well-being: You have a strong sense of meaning, mastery and mattering to others. Depression is the valley of ill-being: You feel despondent, drained and worthless.

Languishing is the neglected middle child of mental health. It's the void between depression and flourishing — the absence of well-being. You don't have symptoms of mental illness, but you're not the picture of mental health either. You're not functioning at full capacity. Languishing dulls your motivation, disrupts your ability to focus, and triples the odds that you'll cut back on work. It appears to be more common than major depression — and in some ways it may be a bigger risk factor for mental illness.

The term was coined by a sociologist named Corey Keyes, who was struck that many people who weren't depressed also weren't thriving. His research suggests that the people most likely to experience major depression and anxiety disorders in the next decade aren't the ones with those symptoms today. They're the people who are languishing right now. And new evidence from pandemic health care workers in Italy shows that those who were languishing in the spring of 2020 were three times more likely than their peers to be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Part of the danger is that when you're languishing, you might not notice the dulling of delight or the dwindling of drive. You don't catch yourself slipping slowly into solitude; you're indifferent to your indifference. When you can't see your own suffering, you don't seek help or even do much to help yourself.

Even if you're not languishing, you probably know people who are. Understanding it better can help you help them.

A name for what you're feeling

Psychologists find that one of the best strategies for managing emotions is to name them. Last spring, during the acute anguish of the pandemic, the most viral post in the history of Harvard Business Review was an article describing our collective discomfort as grief. Along with the loss of loved ones, we were mourning the loss of normalcy. "Grief." It gave us a familiar vocabulary to understand what had felt like an unfamiliar experience. Although we hadn't faced a pandemic before, most of us had faced loss. It helped us crystallize lessons from our own past resilience — and gain confidence in our ability to face present adversity.

We still have a lot to learn about what causes languishing and how to cure it, but naming it might be a first step. It could help to defog our vision, giving us a clearer window into what had been a blurry experience. It could remind us that we aren't alone: languishing is common and shared.

And it could give us a socially acceptable response to, "How are you?"

Instead of saying "Great!" or "Fine," imagine if we answered, "Honestly, I'm languishing." It would be a refreshing foil for toxic positivity — that quintessentially American pressure to be upbeat at all times.

When you add languishing to your lexicon, you start to notice it all around you. It shows up when you feel let down by your short afternoon walk. It's in your kids' voices when you ask how online school went. It's in "The Simpsons" every time a character says, "Meh."

Last summer, the journalist Daphne K. Lee tweeted about a Chinese expression that translates to “revenge bedtime procrastination.” She described it as staying up late at night to reclaim the freedom we’ve missed during the day. I’ve started to wonder if it’s not so much retaliation against a loss of control as an act of quiet defiance against languishing. It’s a search for bliss in a bleak day, connection in a lonely week, or purpose in a perpetual pandemic.

An antidote to languishing

So what can we do about it? A concept called “flow” may be an antidote to languishing. Flow is that elusive state of absorption in a meaningful challenge or a momentary bond, where your sense of time, place and self melts away. During the early days of the pandemic, the best predictor of well-being wasn’t optimism or mindfulness — it was flow. People who became more immersed in their projects managed to avoid languishing and maintained their pre-pandemic happiness.

An early-morning word game catapults me into flow. A late-night Netflix binge sometimes does the trick too — it transports you into a story where you feel attached to the characters and concerned for their welfare.

While finding new challenges, enjoyable experiences and meaningful work are all possible remedies to languishing, it’s hard to find flow when you can’t focus. This was a problem long before the pandemic, when people were habitually checking email 74 times a day and switching tasks every 10 minutes. In the past year, many of us also have been struggling with interruptions from kids around the house, colleagues around the world, and bosses around the clock. Meh.

Fragmented attention is an enemy of engagement and excellence. In a group of 100 people, only two or three will even be capable of driving and memorizing information at the same time without their performance suffering on one or both tasks. Computers may be made for parallel processing, but humans are better off serial processing.

Give yourself some uninterrupted time

That means we need to set boundaries. Years ago, a Fortune 500 software company in India tested a simple policy: no interruptions Tuesday, Thursday and Friday before noon. When engineers managed the boundary themselves, 47 percent had above-average productivity. But when the company set quiet time as official policy, 65 percent achieved above-average productivity. Getting more done wasn't just good for performance at work: We now know that the most important factor in daily joy and motivation is a sense of progress.

I don't think there's anything magical about Tuesday, Thursday and Friday before noon. The lesson of this simple idea is to treat uninterrupted blocks of time as treasures to guard. It clears out constant distractions and gives us the freedom to focus. We can find solace in experiences that capture our full attention.

Focus on a small goal

The pandemic was a big loss. To transcend languishing, try starting with small wins, like the tiny triumph of figuring out a whodunit or the rush of playing a seven-letter word. One of the clearest paths to flow is a just-manageable difficulty: a challenge that stretches your skills and heightens your resolve. That means carving out daily time to focus on a challenge that matters to you — an interesting project, a worthwhile goal, a meaningful conversation. Sometimes it's a small step toward rediscovering some of the energy and enthusiasm that you've missed during all these months.

Languishing is not merely in our heads — it's in our circumstances. You can't heal a sick culture with personal bandages. We still live in a world that normalizes physical health challenges but stigmatizes mental health challenges. As we head into a new post-pandemic reality, it's time to rethink our understanding of mental health and well-being. "Not depressed" doesn't mean you're not struggling. "Not burned out" doesn't mean you're fired up. By acknowledging that so many of us are languishing, we can start giving voice to quiet despair and lighting a path out of the void.

SANSKRIT SALUTATION BY KALIDASA

Look to this day,
for it is life, the very breath of life.
In its brief course lie
all the realities of your existence;
the bliss of growth,
the glory of action,
the splendor of beauty.
For yesterday is only a dream,
and tomorrow is but a vision.
But today, well lived,
makes every yesterday a dream of happiness,
and every tomorrow
a vision of hope.
Look well, therefore, to this day.

This salutation reminds us that the past and the future dwell only in our minds,
and in truth, all that we ever experience is this present moment.

" Look well, therefore, to this day . . . "

Blessings of Presence
Love Ann Brown



HELLO AGAIN EVERYONE! IT'S SCUBA DAVE!

EPISODE 3: THE SECOND DIVE ON THE YONGALA

Our service interval, to allow the nitrogen that built up in our bodies while breathing compressed air on the first dive, was just under an hour. During the break we sat on the inflatable pontoons in the shade of the bridge and the covered rear deck sipping on water to stay hydrated. As I was visiting with my dive buddy Paul, I noticed two of the poisonous sea snakes at the surface taking a breath before diving back down to the wreck. I shouted out to everyone to have a quick look and one of the divemasters came over to me right away and gave me a pat on the back and said that it was very rare that they see the snakes at the surface breathing. He also told all the other divers how lucky they were to have witnessed the snakes at the surface.

After the hour-long surface interval, we geared up again and got back in the water. This time as we approached the 50-foot level we swam directly from the anchor line to the top of the wreck (the port side of the ship now lying on its starboard side). Because of the residual nitrogen in our bodies (we would have had to wait on the surface for two more hours to air off all of the nitrogen) we could not safely return to the 85-foot depth. That was not a problem for me because most of the interesting fish were congregating in and around the coral growing on the hull.



One of the more interesting fish that we saw was a guitar shark (which is actually a skate) that was patrolling the entire length of the wreck feeding on the small fish. The guitar shark is aptly named because as you can see in the photo it looks very much like a guitar from above.

It was amazing to me how many fish there were around this tiny spot in the ocean, at times they were so thick you could hardly see the other divers that were only 20 or 30 feet away. The variety of fish was also hard to fathom (yes that was a pun intended). The wreck has developed its own little ecosystem with fish fry as small as a pinhead in schools that looked like swarms of mosquitoes and the largest fish, we saw was a Napoléon Wrasse that was so big (the size of a 4 X 8 sheet of plywood) that the locals gave him a name “Oscar”!



Oscar spends the day circling the wreck at about a 50-foot distance searching for an easy meal. Some of the other fish that we saw were: Scissor-tail Sergeants (black and white vertical stripes), Bullethead Parrotfish, Titan Triggerfish, Yellow Boxfish, Black-spotted Puffer fish, Surgeonfish (they have razor sharp blades sticking out from just in front of their tail that they use to deter their predators when they are attacked). There were also lots of Butterflyfish and Angelfish, but the most talked about fish was the Moorish Idol. You will remember him from finding Nemo; his name was Gill and his voice was Willem Dafoe. When we returned to the surface everyone was asking, “Did you see Gill?”

We also continued searching the wreck and were able to see inside the wreck through some of the portholes. Unfortunately, most of the brass porthole frames and glass were taken by illegal salvagers before the Government set or enforced any of the rules. One of the more interesting items that we saw was an enamel claw foot bath tub; we didn’t know at the time but the Divemasters told us that it was the only bathtub and that it was in the Captain’s quarters.

Unfortunately, the dive came to an end after 45 minutes, not because we were getting low on air but because of the residual nitrogen from the first dive and the nitrogen that our body tissues absorbed during the second dive. I have to say that these two dives were right up there with the best dives I have ever done.

We followed the anchor line back up to the surface, stopping again at the 15-foot level for five minutes this time because of the depth and length of both dives. Shortly after everyone was out of the water and accounted for, we headed back to the beach. It was so hot topside it was a relief to get moving so the wind could cool us off. When we reached the beach, we all hopped off into the shallow water and walked to shore. As we started walking towards the 18-passenger van, all of a sudden we all realised how hot the sand was on our bare feet (it really hurt). We all broke into a run to get to the shade of the van. When we got to the van, we suddenly realized that there was less than a foot of shade beside the van because of the height of the sun. The crew came along about 10 minutes later after loading the boat back on the trailer and they had a “great good” laugh (their words) at us because we were all lined up along the one side of the van with our backs leaning against the van and our feet in the shade on the cooler sand.

That’s it for my dives on the SS Yongala. I have lots of great memories from them! Stay tuned for my next story, about my dives on the Rainbow Warrior, the Greenpeace Ship that was mined by the French Secret Service and sank in the Auckland Harbour. Lots of intrigue to tell you about!

Dave Churchill



Yongala divers and fish

THE BIG THINGS IN ALBERTA (MARCH 14, 2021)

By Joyce Duncan

Thanks Joyce for inviting us along on your big adventures this winter!

This is the third instalment of her staycation journals.

Irricana, Alberta is home to the famous horse sculpture, Old Smoky, thanks to old-time cowboy and Irricana resident Mel Brown. For many years Mel was a calf roper in the Calgary Stampede. He was often seen riding his real horse Old Smoky along the railroad tracks between Irricana and the area where Pioneer Acres Museum is now located. In 1991 Mel commissioned artist Kevan Leycraft to create a replica of his horse. Mel donated the sculpture to the village where it presently resides in front of the old Hotel, a place Mel enjoyed having a cold drink, and visiting with friends.



Beiseker, Alberta: While the skunk is certainly an animal you don't forget, there's not many a town who would want to be associated with one. Well, after a contest to find the perfect mascot to put their town on the map, the people of Beiseker chose Squirt the Skunk, holding a bouquet of flowers to show he's not that bad after all.



Rosedale, Alberta: While the town originally grew from a bustling coal mining industry, the mine closures in the 1970s led Rosedale to remain a humble hamlet. This statue was erected in the memory of fallen miners — 23 feet tall, with 23 names emblazoned on its placard to remember them.



Drumheller, Alberta: Built in 1960, Dini might be over 60 years old but he's still a terrifying presence. Of course, Drumheller is known for being a paleontological treasure mine filled with fossils and Dini the Tyrannosaurus Rex does his best to show visitors just how terrifying his ancestors were as they towered above the trees.



Torrington, Alberta: Torrington has put itself on the map by celebrating the farmer's most hated pest: the gopher. While Clem T Gofur the Gopher gives you a big howdy-doo on your way into town, there's a smaller-but-equally-warm reception waiting for you at the Gopher Hole Museum filled with taxidermied gophers in costumes.



birth announcement



Hi Red Deer Lake United Church community!

We are Sandia and Chris Thompson and we are so excited to share with you the wonderful news of the birth of our first child, Elijah!

He was born on March 14, 2021 at 3:51pm. He's been such a light in our lives, and although COVID has made it difficult to share him with the world, we have been blessed with some very special family time!

We have felt the love from our friends and community even through the distance. Elijah has started smiling and melting our hearts even more! He's such a precious baby and we are so excited to watch him grow!

A NOTE FROM YOUR HOSPITALITY TEAM

We are missing everyone and the chance to serve you coffee and treats on Sundays but are keeping busy with a couple of different projects.

Some members are making **meals for the Congregational Care Team's monthly care packages**. We're being extremely cautious in following the health guidelines but are still having fun, enjoying the chance to socialize, laughing as we do things by trial and error, and feeling great to be able to do something for others.

We have a challenge for all of you who receive food packages from us.

In order to provide meals for you in the most efficient and timesaving way, we are using containers which are recyclable. We want to issue a challenge – to change these containers from one-use to multipurpose!

Please think of creative ways to use your containers and send your ideas in an email to **info@reddeerlakeuc.com** with the subject line: "Don't Recycle, Reuse." In the next Church @ Home magazine, we will share all the great ideas you have come up with.

We'll start the list with this:



I used a soup container as a drip container for the nice plant I received.

Our second project is our **Virtual Coffee Time** before church each Sunday. We have a team of Church Greeters who are online to greet everyone, and we've been so glad to have the chance to talk to people we are missing. Our one-on-one chats work well if the group is large.

You can find the Zoom link in the email newsletters that are sent by the church every Thursday. Please drop in to Virtual Coffee Time some Sunday so we can "see" how you are doing. We'd love to have a chance to chat.

Take Care and Be Safe

Larry & Marj.



Hospitality Team members shopping for and preparing food and wrapping flowers for last month's care packages.



TIPS FOR REPURPOSING PLASTIC CONTAINERS

On Earth Day, many of you had conversations around reducing plastics and how we can become better stewards and reduce our footprint on this planet. Thanks for sending us your tips on how we can repurpose plastic containers.

Please keep your ideas coming so that we can all become more involved in this conversation and become more creative in reducing, recycling and repurposing.

- Karola Radler uses them to separate out cooking and baking ingredients.
- Heather Aasen uses them for her daughter's crafts, for mixing paints, separating items, etc.
- Joyce Duncan creates flower pots and plant bases out of them.
- Donna McIntyre repurposes them for storage of food and general items.
- Jen Hung uses them for hanging ornaments and making decorations.



SPRINGTIME PRAYER

For flowers that bloom about our feet,
For tender grass, so fresh and sweet,
For song of bird, and hum of bee,
For all things fair we hear and see,
Father in heaven, we thank Thee!

For blue of stream and blue of sky,
For pleasant shade of branches high,
For fragrant air and cooling breeze,
For beauty of the blooming trees,
Mother in heaven, we thank Thee!

Ralph Waldo Emerson (adapted)
submitted by Vi Sharpe



farewell



**COLLEEN MICKLETHWAITE, ADMINISTRATIVE COORDINATOR
THANK YOU FOR 14 YEARS OF FAITHFUL SERVICE**

When the Midlands and Red Deer Lake United Churches amalgamated, we were fortunate to welcome Colleen, who had been working for Midlands, to the RDLUC staff team.

Since then, she has been the backbone of our church, supporting the Minister, other staff, church leaders and volunteers in innumerable ways and with the highest level of professionalism. She will be greatly missed.

We wish Colleen all the very best in her retirement to the Kelowna area.

Enjoy the photos on the following pages that show how we honoured her, despite the restrictions of the pandemic.

Thank you to everyone who called and visited Colleen in the weeks before her departure, and to those who contributed tributes for a special book we made for her.



The current staff team enjoyed cake and coffee with Colleen during her last week with us. We presented her with her tribute book at that time.

l-r: Antonina Cox, Rev. Nick Coates, Colleen Micklethwaite, Katherine Matiko, Vi Sharpe, Bill Holman Missing: Mandi Stapleton



The church gave Colleen two beautiful customized blankets. This one features a sunset photo taken from the Midlands Link by Marj Den Hoed. The other blanket depicted a photo of Colleen and her family.



On May 11, the Hospitality Team took a break from their work making meals for care packages to wish Colleen well and present her with a cupcake cake (which the staff happily devoured!)



*The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs
in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame.
You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring
whose waters never fail.*

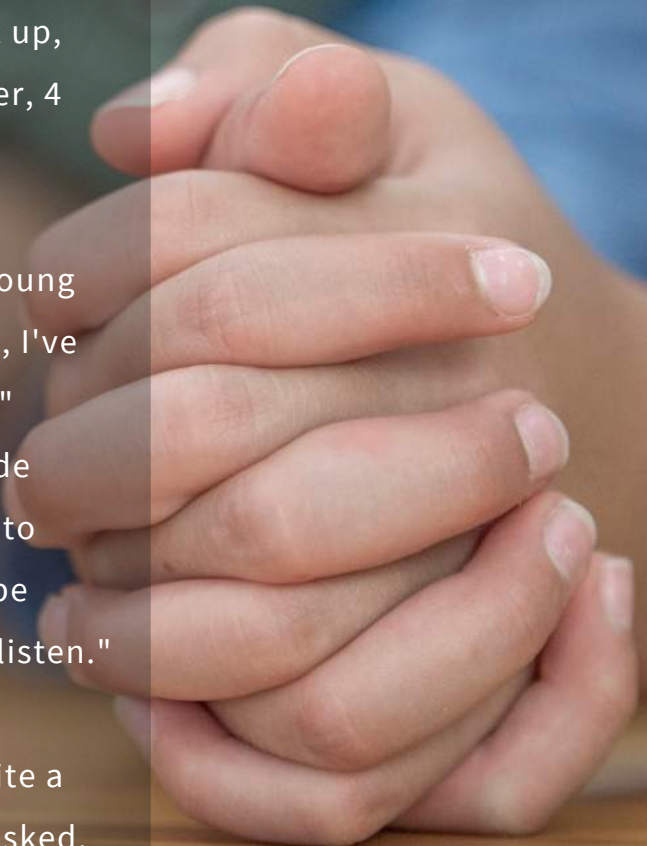
Isaiah 58:11

kids in church

A little boy was attending his first wedding. After the service, his cousin asked him, "How many times can a person get married?" "Sixteen," the boy responded. His cousin was amazed that he had an answer so quickly. "How do you know that?" "Easy," the little boy said. "All you have to do is add it up, like the Minister said, 4 better, 4 worse, 4 richer, 4 poorer."

After a church service on Sunday morning, a young boy suddenly announced to his mother, "Mom, I've decided to become a Minister when I grow up." "That's okay with us, but what made you decide that?" "Well," said the little boy, "I have to go to church on Sunday anyway, and I figure it will be more fun to stand up and yell, than to sit and listen."

A boy was watching his mother, a Minister, write a sermon. "How do you know what to say?" he asked. "Why, God tells me." "Oh, then why do you keep crossing things out?"





A little girl became restless as the Minister's sermon dragged on and on. Finally, she leaned over to her father and whispered, "Dad, if we give her the money now, will she let us go?"

A Sunday School teacher asked her class to draw pictures of their favorite Bible stories. She was puzzled by Kyle's picture, which showed four people on an airplane, so she asked him which story it was meant to represent.

"The Flight to Egypt," was his reply. Pointing at each figure, the teacher said, "That must be Mary, Joseph, and Baby Jesus. But who's the fourth person?" "Oh, that's Pontius - the pilot!"

A little girl was sitting on her grandfather's lap as he read her a bedtime story. From time to time, she would take her eyes off the book and reach up to touch his wrinkled cheek. She was alternately stroking her own cheek, then his again.

Finally she spoke up, "Grandpa, did God make you?" "Yes, sweetheart," he answered, "God made me a long time ago." "Oh," she paused, "Grandpa, did God make me too?" "Yes, indeed, honey," he said, "God made you just a little while ago." Feeling their respective faces again, she observed, "God's getting better at it, isn't he?"

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

DO YOU HAVE A STORY TO SHARE?

A memory? A poem?
A photograph? A pandemic story?
We would love to publish it
in the next issue of this magazine.

Please send your submission to info@reddeerlakeuc.com
or call us at (403) 256-3181.

The next submission deadline is June 1, 2021.

We are Red Deer Lake United Church

We are an inclusive and affirming
community of faith – people of all ages,
perspectives, and stories, who gather
to connect with God, each other, and
ourselves, and find in Jesus a new way
of being human and alive in the world.

you're welcome, wanted, and accepted.
join us on the journey.

our staff & ministry team:

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custodian


Bill Holman

CHURCH OFFICE HOURS:

Please note that office hours will vary
over the next few weeks. Staff will be
available by email or leave a voice mail
message and we will get back to you as
soon as possible.

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