

March 13, 2020

Dear Friends in Christ,

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ (Matthew 22:36-39)

As people of faith, we strive to follow these commandments. This particular moment in history challenges us to do so in the midst of rapid spread of the virus COVID-19. This pandemic requires that we think carefully and compassionately about how we love and protect our neighbors.

On Thursday, March 12, Public Health authorities in Monroe County asked community organizations to consider suspending gatherings of more than 50 people in order to prevent the spread of this virus and to slow the rate of infection in our community. We take seriously the guidance of our public officials as well as our Christian responsibility to care for the most vulnerable in our midst.

While information about COVID-19 is still emerging, we know that this virus is particularly dangerous for those who are over age 60 or who have compromised immune systems. We know that includes many people in our congregation. And we know that the best defense the most vulnerable have against this virus is to have the community-at-large take steps to mitigate its spread to ensure that our health system has the resources to respond.

We are committed to doing everything we can to love our neighbors well – especially those who are most vulnerable – by choosing to act out of an abundance of caution in order to protect one another. **After careful discernment and with the unanimous support of BLC’s council, we have made the decision to suspend worship gatherings (including both Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings) at Bethlehem through the end of March.** During this time, we will continue to monitor events and communicate as decisions are made about the future.

This disruption provides us with the opportunity to connect and engage one another in different ways. We are committed to providing for and strengthening those connections during this time. **This Sunday morning, March 15, your co-Pastors will lead a time of worship in the sanctuary that will be streamed through Facebook Live at 8:30am and 11:00am.** If you wish to join, go to Bethlehem’s Facebook page at the appointed hour. We will share devotion and prayer together as well as provide information about the ways that we will continue to support, encourage, and care for one another during this time. In the coming days, we will provide additional guidance for small groups within the Bethlehem community as well as information about how we will continue to support the spiritual health and wellbeing of this community. In the meantime, we encourage you to consider limiting contact and use virtual means of connecting whenever possible.

Be assured that your co-Pastors and staff will continue to work and we will be leading efforts to care for one another and remain connected across this faith community. The church office will continue to be open during established office hours (M-F, 9 – Noon) and our co-Pastors are available according to their published schedules.



We are grateful to serve among engaged and committed disciples of Jesus. We suspect you might be asking, “How can I help?” Here are some suggestions:

- Follow CDC guidelines for mitigating the spread of illness during this time. (Wash your hands thoroughly; practice social distancing by standing a few feet apart from others; stay home when you are sick)
- Follow Bethlehem Lutheran Church on Facebook to participate in virtual worship
- Contact the co-Pastors if you are able to make phone calls or otherwise help support those who are more physically isolated
- Contact the co-Pastors if you are in need – of food, conversation, or other resources. Your faith community is here for you!
- Be patient as we try new technology and methods to stay connected to God and one another – it’s likely not to go smoothly on the first try but we will persist!
- Check your email as we share new developments as they arise
- As you are able, please maintain your financial commitment to Bethlehem even as we carry out our ministry during these uncertain times.
- Reach out to the church office if you have questions or concerns so that we can address them directly – and share the answers with others who are likely asking the same questions!

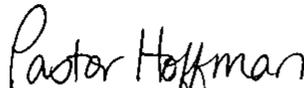
“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” Psalm 46:1 These words have been prayed by people of faith for millennia. They were a source of strength to Martin Luther and serve as the basis for his hymn, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*. Our prayer today is that you know the refuge and strength of our Creator who holds us close and calls us each by name.

If you have any questions, please contact your co-Pastors or any member of Bethlehem’s executive leadership (listed below).

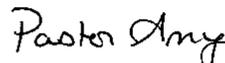
In Christ,



Rick Walker
Council President



The Rev. Abigail Zang Hoffman
Co-Pastor



The Rev. Amy Walter-Peterson
Co-Pastor

On behalf of BLC Officers

Margie Gaul
Lisa Meetz
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