

*The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. Isaiah 40:8*

Dear friends,

Once again, the leaves are changing. The season of fall is upon us, and whether you dread or welcome it, winter is not too far around the corner. Even for winter-loving folks (I really do like winter) this year there's a sense of foreboding, because our beautiful fall, while heavy with Covid stress and worry, has also been a gift. It has been a gift to be outside talking to neighbors, sitting with friends, walking with a colleague, all in the fresh air with easy physical distancing. Winter feels ominous because it will bring less of those options, but likely no less of the imperative to minimize indoor in person contact.

I am feeling the burden of responsibility to care for you and our community by refraining from in person gatherings (i.e. worship), while also feeling the burden of need we have to feel and experience our connection. To worship, together.

Pastor Sarah, Michael and I, *your friendly virtual worship team*, have been doing our best to bring meaningful worship into your homes these past 6 months. I really hope you are finding ways to schedule worship viewing parties with your family, maybe with some close friends or neighbors whom you consider to be in your safe bubble, or maybe as a watch party with someone you can't physically meet up with. I really encourage you to find ways to experience and participate in our recorded worship services in order to help embody that sense of connection we all need.

There are some small groups currently meeting in our church facility and outside in our parking lot (for the time being at least), but the recommendations we continue to receive advise us, even more emphatically right now, to refrain from in person worship. Recommendations from the WI Council of Churches, our synod, our bishop, the Dunn County Health Department, and our local medical professionals, all advise and implore us to refrain from in person worship. And so, out of care for one another, this continues to be our sacrifice.

Which, honestly, breaks my heart. But, a heart broken open, out of love, compassion, and care, it is not a weak muscle. It is the very opposite. And if your heart is feeling a little broken too, may you remember *why*, and specifically, *who* you are caring for and loving, every time you don a mask, step 6 feet back, and turn on your computer for worship. Your heart, too, is being broken open, out of love, compassion, and care.

I find myself and my broken-open heart encouraged by the words of the prophets, like those from Isaiah: *the grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever*. I am encouraged, knowing the challenges prophets like the writers of Isaiah endured: they faced exile, imprisonment and hearts broken open, and they found their strength in the promises of God. Their hearts were bolstered by the promise of God's persistence to save, to forgive, to love fiercely, to redeem and to bring new life out of every little death.

As the grass withers, as the trees lose their colorful leaves and the flowers fade, God remains persistently present and at work in us and through us. God's spirit continues to connect us together, through our prayers, our generosity and service, AND our virtual worship. Whether we're dressed up as if sitting in the pew or wearing our pajamas, God is connecting us together.

So hold on to the promise that we are bound together, and when your heart feels broken, may you know the strength of that muscle, broken open in love, compassion and care. Let me know if you have found some creative ways to worship and foster a sense of connection. I'd love to pass them on.

Peace to you, in the name of Christ,  
Pastor Heather

