



Pittsburgh Lutheran United Ministries

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Living Christ's Light of Hope in Our Communities

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Dear Partners in Ministry,

Could Zoom be Considered a Form of Manna?

At this point of our journey, I think it is important to review part of our Biblical history where God sent 10 plagues to convince Pharaoh and the Egyptians to let his people go free from bondage. Most of us remember the stories of the plagues and the first Passover where the first born of all Egyptians who did not have a lamb's blood on their door post were killed by the Angel of death. As Egypt buried their dead, the Hebrew slaves left the country a free people at last. Pharaoh, in his stubbornness, made one last attempt to bring them back, but the people escaped when God miraculously parted the waters of the Red Sea. However, once on the other side, the Israelites soon became dissatisfied and complained bitterly to God, Moses, and Aaron about their journey towards freedom through the wilderness.

It is my guess that it was God's initial plan to do the 30-day trip from Goshen, near Cairo, Egypt, to the Promised Land in a timely fashion. However, the peoples' forgetfulness of all the great things that God had done caused them to lose their focus from the original goal, which was to be God's people. They got more distressed by their current daily routine, forgot their past as slaves, and refused to realize the importance of being freed not from slavery but to serve, care for, and love one another and all of God's people. As a result of their disgruntledness, the journey lasted 40 years as they wondered about the wilderness. If you Google this distance today, it would be like a hiker taking a journey from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia and back to Pittsburgh or 21 8-hour days. And to further put this into perspective, in the 18th and most of the 19th century, settlers in the United States migrating West to the Pacific in wagon trains traveled three to four times this distance over the course of a summer. Most of the people walked. As the Israelites proceeded on their journey, Moses always advocated for his people's needs, and God always provided – even in the desert. They were given clean water and manna from heaven to sustain them. Certainly not what they might have been accustomed to, but God remained faithful as their provider.

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I place this on the table today because I believe it is where we all find ourselves as we deal with the pandemic that has so changed our worlds and our lives from the old norms in which we found so much comfort. We want to be in church like we always have been and yet we, like the Israelites in the wilderness, may have lost sight that we are called to something different, such as being the church in a strange new environment. When I listen to the stories of China, the presumptive birthplace of the COVID-19 virus, I am amazed that they are almost fully functioning with most schools and businesses open and even permitting some small social gatherings after what to most would have appeared to be a brutal, government-mandated collective shutdown. It is extremely rare that they have a death attributed to the virus or even a positive Covid result. At the same time, we Americans, in one of the most developed nations in the world, are leading the world in per capita infection rates and deaths, not to mention long-term hospitalizations and rehabilitation. And apparently, the Chinese have done it with the wearing of facemasks and social distancing, as they do not have widespread vaccines available yet. We know it works because it worked here in the USA last summer when we brought the infection and death rates down.

It is for these reasons of care and love for our neighbors and each other that we are following our Bishop Kurt Kusserow's recommendation to continue the suspension of our in-person worship until our state/county Covid-19 infection/death rates are, for several weeks, below what they were when we suspended worship mid-November 2020. The sobering image for me is we have lost more than 400,000 family, friends, neighbors, and fellow Americans to this virus in the last 10 months, which is more than we lost in the nearly 4 years of American involvement in World War II. And even more concerning is the death toll in the USA currently is soaring and predictions are by March we will have lost another 100,000 people.

Even though we cannot worship together as we have in the past, God has not deserted us. He has given us a manna of sorts – that being zoom. Technology, and I realize it is not the same as meeting in person with the ability to see each other in our own nucleus of friends and hug each other, has empowered us to worship together. Just like the Israelites, some have chosen not to participate and have added agendas to their lives which pull them away from worshipping and giving thanks to God. Then there are those who have been faithful; and furthermore, there are those who are in situations whereby they cannot leave their surroundings and have been afforded the blessing of worshipping virtually, which they have never had before.

To this end, your pastoral team continues to learn and offer this God-given “manna” by putting in place an expanded Lenten, Holy Week, and Easter experience for our PLUM congregations. (Details will be available soon on the PLUM website and in a special Lenten mailing.) Some are even considering very seriously doing Sunday school via zoom for our young people. Should you be having difficulty getting connected, the PLUM team are more than willing to help you on this end. Together, with God's help and use of those many God-given talents, we are moving forward and hopefully will not be wandering about the wilderness for forty years. Let us remain faithful to our Creator – not lost but focused with thankfulness on the one who has given us all that we need.

Praying for you and your health and God's clear direction in our lives.

In His service,

Pastor John J. Gropp

On behalf of the PLUM Pastoral Team