



Indiana-Kentucky Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

911 E. 86th Street, Suite 200, Indianapolis, IN 46240 + 317-253-3522 + www.iksynod.org

Pastoral Message to the People and Communities of the Indiana-Kentucky Synod, ELCA
Bishop Bill Gafkjen + March 2021

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.
Hebrews 12:1-3, NRSV

Dear People of God,

As we wind our way through Lent toward Easter, we also appear to be getting closer to the far side of the coronavirus wilderness. The daily number of new COVID-19 cases has been decreasing. More and more people are receiving their vaccinations. Fewer counties across the synod territory are in the red zone. We give thanks to God for this and for the many people in various vocations who have given so much of themselves to make this possible, as well as the millions of citizens who have contributed by wearing masks and diligently observing other health protocols in order to slow the spread.

But we are not out of the wilderness yet. People are still catching this dread virus, and many are still dying from it or suffering long term effects from it. More contagious strains continue to spread as scientists seek answers about immunity from them. Large parts of the population have yet to receive their vaccinations.

It is crucial that we continue to run with perseverance the race that is set before us. Part of our Lenten discipline is to continue being careful, cautious, and patiently committed to the wellbeing of every neighbor. I encourage all of us to heed the advice of medical and public health experts who tell us to continue making the sacrifices necessary to bring this pandemic to an end: wearing our masks, observing distancing, washing our hands, avoiding crowds, getting vaccinated, and the like. In that vein, the suspension of synod staff travel will continue at least through the month of April.

Perseverance also calls us to be cautious and wise about whether, when, and in what forms to gather together in-person for worship and other practices of Christian community. I share the longing for worshipping in-person together. The thought of the possibility of another Easter celebrated at a distance breaks my heart. Yet, the best way forward may well be to keep on doing what we've been doing for the foreseeable future. For the sake of the joy that is set before us on the other side of this wilderness, we can look to Jesus, lay aside what we must, carry the cross a bit further, and linger a little longer on Holy Saturday. We can do this because when we look to Jesus, we know that we can trust that the new, abundant, and lasting life that burst from the tomb that first Easter morning will spring forth from our own tomb-time to render resurrection for us and for our waiting world.

Please be patient, slow and careful in returning to in-person gatherings. Be collaborative and kind, forbearing and forgiving, patient and disciplined with yourselves and with one another as you prayerfully discern how to be the body of Christ in coming weeks and months. Vaccinated and

unvaccinated alike can walk together faithfully by walking the way of the cross, making sacrifices for the sake of others, not insisting on our own way (as Paul put it to the Corinthians), tending to the most vulnerable, and being patient and persistent in loving and serving our neighbor.

I commend to you an excellent resource for Holy Week and Easter planning from The Ecumenical Consultation on Protocols for Worship, Fellowship, and Sacraments. This guide, which focuses on the core principles and practices of worship, can be helpful not only in planning worship during this pandemic, but also in discerning whether, when, and how to gather in person. The guide can be found at <https://bit.ly/3krYQMG>. This and other resources from the Consultation can also be found on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/worshipsafely/>.

Following the lead of the prophet Joel, in my sermon for Ash Wednesday, I said that having traced with ashes the baptismal mark on our brows,

...we embark on the next 40-day leg of our journey through the wilderness and the ancient prophet Joel calls us to lament and repent. The prophet calls us to remember that we are dust and will return to dust AND to remember that the God who is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,” the very God who created us from the dust, and walks with us through the dust, also offers mercy and grace, forgiveness and new life in the dust of our days, as it mingles with water from the wounded side of the crucified and risen Christ, becoming the dust of new life from which we are formed and made new.

We lament; we cry out to God; we weep with one another as we name and share the weight of the losses, the deaths, the diminished dreams imposed on us.

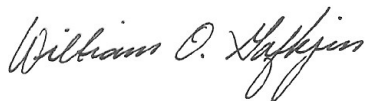
We repent; we confess to God; we own up to one another as we name and share the weight of the sins, the neglect of neighbors, the disrespect, dismissal, and demeaning of others that are of our own making.

We return again to the foot of the cross and the mouth of the empty tomb. We walk with and toward Jesus, crucified and risen for us, for the world.

Beloved people of God, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us in walking the way of faith through great loss and challenge toward unimaginable futures. They did so knowing little more than that God had called them, God accompanied them, and God would get them to a place of rich blessing and renewed joy. As they cheer us on, we, too, walk this way looking to and leaning on the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, Jesus, who endured hostility against himself, so that we may not grow weary or lose heart.

May the Spirit of the crucified and risen One fill you, surround you, and empower you, that you may find rest for your weariness and renewed purpose in your heart as you continue through these lingering Lenten days toward the approaching season of Easter joy.

Peace be with you,



The Rev. Dr. William O. Gafkjen, Bishop

(The video of my full Ash Wednesday sermon can be found here: <https://bit.ly/2O7RcuY>.)