

Pastor Ponders

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SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2010

LOST AND FOUND The written directions had confused us. No one had brought their GPS (global positioning system) along. We had been driving for 45 minutes, occasionally passing landmarks a second time. Four adults and 15 youth — lost in West Virginia. Perhaps my best contribution on the trip (after being the first of three adults trying to find our way from the airport) was stopping to seek (and purchase) four West Virginia road maps! Being lost is bad enough when I am alone. That sinking feeling that I missed a turn somewhere or took the wrong exit. Stopping to call on my cell; admitting I am late because I am lost. Seeking new directions. Being lost is even worse when I am out of town, and worse still when I am driving CLC youth through the roads of West Virginia! Little did I know, my feeling of “lost-ness” was just beginning. Our home for a week was the firehouse in West Hamlin, PA. We ate at parish-hall type tables. Three rows, 5-6 tables deep. We showered across the street at the community school. Each time I walked into a new space, I felt lost. Then came the sleep area! A (narthex-size?) room with 43 Army cots, most of which were spoken for. I could feel my heart rate increase immediately. “Really?” I thought. “This room? And I am so private? No way!” Yes way. I chose a cot by the door, near a fan, under a mural of Pegasus. Our first day at Kids Camp, (think VBS) we had a plan. I was given a driving route to pick up local children and set off, following chaperone Rob, from Ohio. We ended up with almost as many volunteers as kids. I felt lost. Was I really needed? Did I have a role? But there were also moments when I knew I was found, or at least had found a comfort level. Writing locker letters to our youth. Daily devotions and worship, with no expectation to lead. Chopping green peppers for 70 people. Sharing youth memories of my ARP church camp with leaders from the ARP church in Statesville, NC. A local youth sharing of her aunt’s death, and asking for a hug. Picking up and dropping off those on my route at home by week’s end. Being pulled back in the raft on the New River after falling out in the rapids. Jesus tells more than one parable in Luke 15 with a lost and found theme. The shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to look for the one that is lost. The woman who sweeps the entire house until she finds the lost coin. The son who realizes his recklessness and returns home, to the embrace and celebration of his father. In each case the creature or the thing that was lost was found — the sheep and coin did nothing but be lost — they were found without trying harder or planning better. The son did not need to compensate or repay or live out back. He realized his lost-ness, turned around and went home. God is looking. God is always looking, for the one who is lost, alone, out of sorts; looking for you. God finds you in your times of lost-ness, pulls you close, carries you home and reclaims you; God even celebrates your homecoming. What a wonderful image! Thanks be to God for finding and claiming me. And may God bless all the folks of Hamlin and West Hamlin, West Virginia, my brothers and sisters in Christ, who ministered to me, even as I traveled to minister to them. Grace and peace,

JULY/AUGUST 2010

THE MISSING If I were to write a modern-day parable, I’d probably title it, “The Parable of the Missing.” In the last few months, I have been captivated by Jesus’ parables of the lost, The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin. I always knew, but never completely understood, the motivation to leave the whole flock behind and look for ONE lost sheep. To drop all other activities and look for ONE lost coin. But since the last LINK, Tom and I have spent much time together in emergency rooms, doctor’s offices, and home. The end of his school year went missing. His health and balance and smile went missing. Portions of my days, my energy, my focus, went missing. In the midst of it all, my favorite fish in the pond out back went missing for five days. I think I understand the parables a bit better now. Five days, Crusty (named for the clown in The Simpsons show) was missing. Long enough that I was convinced he had died, never to be seen again. A small thing really; fish can easily be replaced. But it did not feel like a small thing. Our pond is my refuge and retreat, a place to just breathe and recoup and listen to the waterfall and the birds, to watch the fish, playfully zoom or casually swim without a care in the world. Every day for four days I would go to the pond — with flashlights and sunglasses — checking under rocks and in the skimmer. Every day, Crusty was missing. So I gave up. I quit looking, resigning myself to that minor loss. The day after I stopped looking, I saw a flash of color — Crusty was back! Moving slower, but there — in all his multi-colored, spotted, clownish splendor. I’m not sure where he went or why. He can’t say. But the glimmer of joy in the midst of life’s burdens and stress was amazing. I’m not sure why he showed up again right when I quit looking, but I experienced it as a small gift of grace. The scary, painful weeks of Tom’s recovery are behind us. As he returns to baseball, I see glimmers of the joyful Tom again. As we move closer to summer, I find myself by the pond more and more, hoping and praying that as Crusty showed up again, so will normalcy and peace. Like Crusty, Tom and I can’t quite say what the missing weeks and events were like, but I felt your prayers, your grace. And I rejoice — Tom’s health was missing, and is back. His smile was missing, and has returned. And for Mother’s Day, Tom gave me a fish to match Crusty, I call him

Smoky – his colors are more muted than Crusty’s. God’s grace. Seen and experienced in my children, reflected in my pond. Grace and peace,

MAY/JUNE 2010 It’s a word that has been crossing my mind a lot lately – miracle. The dictionary defines miracle as “an event that seems impossible to explain by natural laws and so is regarded as supernatural in origin or as an act of God.”¹ My Bible dictionary defines it this way, “Special interventions by God on behalf of his people. Miracles are closely associated with the creative and salvific deeds of God throughout Old Testament tradition. These powerful, mighty or miraculous deeds of salvation and creation take place through the action of God’s Spirit and power.”² Biblically, the word miracle reminds me of the Israelites who follow a cloud by day and fire by night, and who safely cross the Red Sea; Jesus feeding thousands with a few loaves and fish; Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead; the resurrection, etc. So are miracles limited, then, to biblical times? Certainly conception and birth can be explained. But we refer to birth as the “miracle of life.” Is a safe birth not also an act of God? To push even further, might there be miracles all around us – acts of God, things or events that point us to God? Perhaps we dismiss some of them as coincidence or luck? Or maybe because we can see what causes it, it does not seem to be a miracle? Are the following, from my real-life list, miracles? The paper white, planted in advent, that lay dormant for months, grew like wildfire right before Easter. (Stop by my office for before and after pictures.) A weed illuminated in a spotlight by our pond casts a beautiful cross-shaped shadow, only on Good Friday. (Ask me to see the picture on my cell phone.) A good Samaritan with a fire extinguisher happens upon a flipped burning car and pulls a synod candidate for ministry to safety. A tree falls away from a house, sparing all occupants. A mother, without seeing or hearing anything, pushes her child out of the way of a speeding car. A woman dies within seconds of the pastor saying, “It is okay. Do not be afraid.” A friend goes in for surgery to remove a tumor and the surgeon finds nothing. With extra work and tutoring, a failing grade comes up. The first crocus lifts my spirits after a torrential rain does NOT flood my basement! Easter worship may be only for a day, and yet we celebrate the resurrection all year. May God continue to remind us, through minor and major miracles alike, that we are loved and God is present. Grace and peace, 1 Webster’s II New Riverside University Dictionary, 1984. 2 Harper’s Bible Dictionary, 1985.

MARCH/APRIL 2010 “Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.” Recent images of peace from my visit with parents: Coaches and players slapping hands after a Duke basketball game. My twin niece and nephew together on my mom’s lap as Mom brokers the end of an argument. Service men and women eating lunch and telling jokes at the Atlanta airport. Late flight attendants, who delayed a departure: “Hope your day gets better,” I say. “If you have no complaint, it already is,” they reply. A ride home, lunch included. Do you stop and recognize the signs of peace around you? Or do you miss them in the rush of your daily routine? The child’s “I love you,” the spouse’s cooked meal, the message, e-mail, or note from a long-time friend. After much prayer and thought, I suspended the passing of the peace during flu and cold season. On Palm Sunday, as we journey through Holy Week, it will be reintroduced. I wonder, as we bring the liturgical moment back, if we might dare to pause and embrace what it really is, and savor the moment together. Passing the peace is a moment of prayer and reconciliation. The early church leaders saw it as a way for folks to reconcile with one another before sharing the sacrament. In Hebrew, the word for peace, “shalom,” means so much more. It is a prayer for well-being, mind, body, and soul. It means wholeness. The wish for shalom is much deeper than a simple greeting or cursory ritual. It goes beyond whatever is happening on the surface and reaches deeper, to wish and pray for the other person that no matter what is happening in their heart or life, you pray wholeness for them, you pray mental, emotional, spiritual well-being for them. In the 1990s, the African country of Rwanda was home to one of the worst genocides in history. There is, in their language, the word, “amahoro,” which means peace. The custom of greeting someone in or with amahoro is this: you take their hand, gaze into their eyes, and say the word again and again until you sense that peace is truly flowing between you. Rwandans have taught me that even though we have awful capacity for evil, that deep in the human heart there is a core - that everybody has - of truth, of dignity, of love, and the ability to reach out and create a bridge with even our worst enemies." (John Steward, contributing author, *After Genocide: Transitional Justice, Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Reconciliation in Rwanda and Beyond*) As we share the peace again in worship, may we pray “shalom,” and may we experience “amahoro,” that is, reconciliation, a prayer for well-being, a flow of peace between us that is tangible and makes a difference beyond a passing moment. Grace and amahoro,

FEBRUARY 2010 Back in December, I had a hard time picturing an ugly bulb in a cup of pebbles as a symbol of hope. I completely understood the metaphor; but the Paper White Narcissus bulb just looked so, well, so hopeless. Four of us came home with similar looking metaphors. Sure enough, on Epiphany, two had sprouted, grown and were beginning to bloom! The other two were still looking a bit sad. So I rearranged the pebbles, repositioned the bulbs and waited. A third is sprouting and growing, to bloom probably by mid-month. But not much is happening with the fourth plant, which sports

about a half-an inch of green and has not improved since December. Against the backdrop of a barren garden, I appreciate the pretty white blossoms of the two thriving flowers. But I can't help but wonder about the other two. Why was one so slow? Will the fourth grow at all? Is there any chance for a bloom? The bulbs, which entered my house as a metaphor for hope, now represent a larger metaphor in my life — the opportunity, challenge and uncertainty of a new year. This is going to be a challenging year for us at CLC. We are coming off our first deficit-budget year. Cuts were made in proposing a new budget, and then additional cuts were made. (Still more adjustments will be made if things are not turning around by Easter.) As we move through the year, some things will change and look different. We are going without flowers in Lent, appropriate in a season of sacrifice and change. The LINK will be published every other month beginning in March. Reports and schedules that were once mailed will now largely be e-mailed. You will likely get more info via CLC News. Additional volunteer teams will be formed for various tasks for which we have been paying. These and other challenges will give us all a chance to look at things from different angles and perhaps think of new, creative approaches. Our year together will be much like the Paper Whites. Some things that we try, some things that we reprise, will grow and blossom. Others might get a slower start. Other ideas may not get off the ground. Whatever happens, all ideas and all attempts are a reflection of God's diverse and surprising creation, reflected in the diversity of faces, talents and approaches. The bleak mid-winter will pass. Before I know it, spring will return and I will rediscover the beauty of my garden. So too with our lives together at CLC. Seasons of challenge will give way to times of hope which will grow into beautiful new ideas and ministries. May we dig in and plant the seeds, trusting God to grow our faith. I am looking forward to 2010 with you! Grace and peace,

JANUARY 2010 When's the last time you felt like a child standing on tiptoe, stretching as far as you could to see the incredible, mysterious surprise that's just beyond your sight-line? Maybe you were stretching and reaching for the magical ornament on the tree. Maybe you were stretching and reaching to see over the fence. Or maybe you were just mentally stretching and reaching, excited to see what would come next in life. That is the best way I can describe 2009, even as I stand on tiptoe wondering about 2010. 2009 was a year of firsts for me; a year of new beginnings. A new home and address. A new school year, as my youngest began high school. A new family experience, bringing my oldest back into the house. A new call, as your senior pastor, which brings with it a new church family, new sermons, new classes, new hospitals to visit, new folks to work with, new baptisms, new members, and new routines. At a recent "Around Town" visit, I commented that come March 1, when I mark a year at CLC, I will probably breathe a bit easier. The year of firsts will be over and some things will begin to seem familiar. But, in the meantime, I am still experiencing firsts. But I wonder, over time, how much do things change and how much do they remain the same? In 1943, the CLC newsletter was called "News Sheet." Rev. Huston was pastor and the two-page publication had a somewhat scolding tone. Evidently, church envelopes were not being used and attendance was down. The newsletter read, "Every time you absent yourself from the services of God's house, you deprive your soul of much-needed food." Might someone, all these years later, read those words and venture back to feed their souls? In January 1960, a mere 50 years ago, paraments were brand-new to the church, a weekday church school for grades 4 and up was running, and the drama club was struggling. A couples club was being formed for those "in a rut." Members were being scolded because visitors had to serve as ushers. And Pastor Zimmerman's comments ended with, "I have a wish that comes from the bottom of my heart. That is, that every member will take seriously his Christian responsibility to Almighty God and to His church. Let us show a united witness of our faith and belief in a God who loves us and gave Himself for us." All these years later, a woman is senior pastor, there is no drama club, and attendance is down slightly again. Wonderful Wednesdays are open to all (not just couples) and the newsletter runs many more pages, giving testimony to our activities and outreach. Even more noticeable, our newsletter is full of references to service and outreach opportunities. Some things stay the same, other things change. So what now lies on the other side of the fence? What might we be standing on tiptoe, trying to reach or begin in 2010? The ultimate answers will be determined by your votes, by council, committees, teachers, volunteers, and staff. But the possibilities are endless. What new perspectives, ideas, and outreach projects might our new council members spark? What new families will come to us through the nursery school? Which agencies will we help through Service Saturdays or offerings? Will someone have adequate food, water, or support because of us? Who could be served if we expand our end-of-life ministry and build a columbarium? Maybe there are even others who, like me, have other end-of-life arrangements but believe it is a valid ministry that could touch lives. What lives will be touched, which visitors might return because of anthems sung, scriptures, and messages shared? What needs will we meet for the people in Oreland and nearby communities? You have the answer. I look forward to standing on tiptoe with you, reaching and stretching for what is to come. I wish you and yours a blessed New Year. Grace and Peace,

DECEMBER 2009

The Challenge of Waiting The longest day of the year? If you ask a child, it is Christmas Eve. Waiting is tough, and actually, it can be tough for any age. Are you waiting for an answer about a job? Waiting to see if you qualify for the loan, or are accepted into school or passed the recent exam? Waiting for the birth of a child, for medical test results, for a loved one to recover, or to die? I dare say that if you ask a member of a liturgical church, many will admit that Advent feels like the longest season of the church year. I mean really, if your favorite stores have had Christmas merchandise

out since November 1st, how can you wait? Who wants to hear John the Baptist calling folks broods of vipers in church when Frosty the Snowman is playing on sound systems at the mall? There is challenge in waiting. There is also value in waiting. There is a reason for Advent, a meaning in the season. The dictionary definition of advent is, "the arrival of something momentous."¹ For Christians, we do await the arrival of something momentous — or actually a momentous someone — Jesus Christ. But for which momentous arrival do we wait? His first coming, the nativity? His second coming, to reign over all? His regularly-scheduled coming; that is, His coming again and again in the word and supper?² Throughout all of scripture there is a sense of things already occurred, and things that have not yet been fulfilled. So too in Advent. Jesus has already come, is already with us. Born of human flesh, Immanuel, "God with us." But Jesus has not yet returned, to reign, to claim and gather us as his own. Jesus has already come, already given us his supper, Holy Communion, yet he comes again and again, each time we receive his body and blood. And still we wait for the heavenly banquet feast, not yet fulfilled. Meanwhile, we feast around holiday tables, and as we feast, we notice the empty chair. We feel the loss of loved ones as an empty place in our heart. How can we enjoy the waiting, the celebration in the midst of grief that bubbles up during this season? The difference, for a faithful Christian, is Jesus. For we do not "grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died." (1 Thess. 4:13-14) So we wait. We grieve and celebrate all at the same time, but we do not grieve as those with no hope. In Advent, it is a joyful hopeful waiting; and while we wait, we celebrate. We celebrate Christ's resurrection every week. We celebrate Christ's saving power in the Eucharist on a regular basis. We celebrate, with hopeful anticipation that Christ will return, defeating evil and drawing us to himself. May there be joy and hope in your waiting. Grace and Peace,

NOVEMBER 2009 Upheaval and Uplift Dear Members and Friends, It has been a time of upheaval. In nature, we have witnessed earthquakes, mudslides, and Tsunamis, claiming many lives. In society, unemployment is nearing 10%, the economy is still sluggish, and our household budgets are being stretched. In our national church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, individuals and congregations are adjusting, if not reeling, from recent actions (outlined in a recent issue of The Link). In a study of family systems, we learn that there are many possible reactions during tough times. Among them: withdraw from the family, react in anger, become defensive, and act as peacemaker. But the variety of responses during natural disasters or church decisions does not make us any less of a family in Christ. In a recent worship service, we read Psalm 8, and were reminded that humanity was created a "little lower than the divine," or, in another translation, a "little lower than the angels." The psalm also praises the diversity of creation — fish, birds, creeping things. In the midst of chaotic creation, we praise. In the midst of upheaval, may worship and song be your uplift. Creation is unified by the Creator who breathed life into us. But unity does not mean uniformity. Just look up and down the pews. We are young and old. We are blond and brunette and bald and gray. We are married and single and divorced and straight and gay. Our families include other denominations, atheists, other races, and every political leaning imaginable. As pastor, it is not my place to change anyone's mind or convictions (any more than I would try to change your family). The issues debated rest not in Biblical wording but in Biblical interpretation. Instead, it is my call to love, care for, and support you, no matter your opinion or politics. I am praying. For our denomination, for our synod, and for our congregation. My primary prayer is that we can live together in love, despite differences. Our country takes actions we strongly object to, but would we ever leave the country and become a citizen elsewhere? In the same spirit, I pray we can remain a strong family in Christ where all are welcome, where we are free to disagree, and where all voices are heard. "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation." I Cor. 5:17-18 I pray for reconciliation and uplift in the midst of upheaval. I pray for each of you. Grace and Peace,

OCTOBER 2009

Dear Members and Friends of Christ's Lutheran Church, **JESUS, JUSTICE, JAZZ** By now you should know that the title of this article was also the theme of the June 2009 ELCA Youth Gathering in New Orleans. CLC sent a great group of teens and adults who spent the week worshipping, sharing, being inspired and working on several houses devastated by Hurricane Katrina. I'm sure there are many reasons for the chosen theme, some obvious. But it got me thinking, Jesus, Justice, Jazz would be a great theme for life in general. As Christians, it is Jesus who brings us together, and makes us one family, one community or body. It is Jesus who saves us from sin and from ourselves. It is Jesus who inspires us, models for us how to live and how to love one another. It is Jesus who commands us to love our neighbor. Which brings us to justice. There is a sense, through the parables, that love of neighbor is not a feeling or even an option, but rather it is grounded in action. The neighbors who bring the paralyzed man to Jesus for healing, lowering him through the ceiling. They put their love in action. (Luke 5:17-25) The Samaritan who stopped and tended to the wounds of an enemy neighbor, and provided financially for future expenses. He put his love in action. (Luke 10:25-37) Joseph of Arimathea donated an unused tomb, and he himself wrapped Jesus' body in linen and laid Jesus in the tomb. Joseph put his love in action. (Luke 23:50-53) The dictionary defines justice as the ideal of moral rightness. Further explanation includes fair treatment or punishment in accord with laws or standards; the quality of being fair or impartial. (Webster's II New Riverside University Dictionary, 1984) took the idea of justice and turned it upside down (or

as Pastor Hy might say, right side up!) Jesus let the woman caught in adultery go free when the law called for stoning, because everyone with a stone in their hand had also sinned. Jesus healed lepers when the law said he could not touch them. Jesus welcomed children when the law did not recognize children as people of worth. Thus, if Jesus is our guide, our sense of justice should be similar - to go to the downtrodden, the poor, the cast-offs and outsiders. To go and touch and restore and show love in action. And jazz? Where does that come in? I believe that each and every time we gather for worship, each time we gather for Word and sacrament, we celebrate. We celebrate a risen Lord. We celebrate our inclusion in God's family. We celebrate our Lord's meal, a meal that offers forgiveness and strength and unity. That's something to be jazzed about; That is worth celebrating! Hope to see you at a celebration soon! Grace and Peace,