

Devotions – July 19-25, 2020
By Pastor-Elect Kelly Ylitalo
First Lutheran Church, Gladstone, MI

Sunday, July 19, 2020

Text: *Ecclesiastes 3:1*

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven.

It is morning, just nearing ten, and already it is too hot and humid for my liking on this first day of July. Summer has arrived in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. I am thankful for the fan that circulates some air within the small confines of my stuffy home. It is ironic to ponder that in just a few more months, the cold weather will come and settle in once more as the Earth prepares for winter in the northern hemisphere where I dwell. All too soon, it will be too cold for my liking.

Like the story of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, “just right” feels somewhere in the mid-seventies with little humidity and a gentle breeze, still warm enough to step outside in shorts, tee shirt, and bare feet to enjoy the beauty of summer without it being too hot or too cold no matter the time of day. In terms of weather and seasons, those are the days I enjoy the most – “those lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer.”*

The Bible tells us that God has planned a season for everything, and everything has its season. There will be times for joy and laughter, and there will also be times for sorrow and lament. For peace and for strife. For silence and for speaking up and out. For death. And for living.

In the midst of a pandemic, we have experienced – and are continuing to experience – a myriad of times, emotions, and opinions. The spectrum is broad, and can be confusing, divisive, and wearisome. Who to believe? Who to trust? Where to turn? What to do? For a while now, my ongoing prayer has been, “Lord, have mercy.”

I do not confess to know precisely what God is doing in and through this present season, but I do know that God is moving, creating, abiding, loving. When all else fails, I trust that God has not and will not ever abandon us or any of God’s creation. I trust that God is making all things beautiful in God’s time, drawing them unto God’s self, ushering in the Kingdom. In this time and this knowledge, I find rest. I pray you may also.

Let us pray: *Creator and sustainer of all, our alpha and omega, the beginning and the end, you set all our days, seasons, and times into motion and tend to all that you have created. Grant us your grace for such a time as this and all our times yet to be. Amen.*

A song for your day: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BZ1TplygxvA>

*https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=71&v=7OZrNDtRltg&feature=emb_logo



Monday, July 20, 2020

Text: John 11:25-26

²⁵ *Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”*

I have been reading *A Witness: The Haiti Earthquake, a Song, Death, and Resurrection** by Renee Splichal Larson, a book I purchased a few years ago but only recently have found the time to consume as my days are no longer filled with having to read numerous textbooks and articles for seminary coursework. In this memoir, Renee tells the story of the devastating 7.0 magnitude earthquake that occurred on January 12, 2010 and its aftermath, including the loss of her beloved husband, Ben, who sang praises to God as he died.

I knew the story, recalled the news reports of the thousands of lives that perished, and the thousands more who struggled to keep living. I remember the word about Ben’s death travelling throughout the Lutheran community and beyond. I even met Renee and came to know her and Ben’s cousin, Jon, who is also a survivor of this tragedy. However, it wasn’t until I began reading this book that I would come to see and understand how closely all of our stories had been interwoven by God during a season of death.

Like the Haiti earthquake, the COVID-19 pandemic has devastated many lives, stealing hopes and shattering dreams as the world has been sheltered away and locked down. For me, it was things such as my graduation from seminary. A grand and festive ordination celebration with family, friends, and congregations across the Northern Great Lakes Synod (NGLS) with tons of singing, fellowship, and feasting. Summer vacations and trips around the country to visit loved ones. Relaxation and rejuvenation at Fortune Lake Lutheran Camp. The recent death of my beloved cat, Chloe. One loss – one death – after another. And all of it feeling small and insignificant – no matter how great my grief – in the face of everything else going on in our world.

Through Renee’s witness, I hear that it is okay to grieve, to express our anger and frustration, to be sad and even depressed, to feel lonely and to ache, to fear, and to wonder how we will ever move forward or want to sing again. I am astounded by her faith, the gift of grace that God grants to her – and to all – to endure even our greatest sorrow and anguish. To be raised to life again by the one who gives God’s life for all of creation upon the cross, suffering and dying just as we have suffered and have experienced death, to grant us life anew, a life that is abundant. I am even more amazed by God who loves us so much that God would dive into the depths of our suffering to express God’s undying love. I am grateful for the Holy Spirit who intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words to express. I am undone by Jesus who claims us as God’s own. Yes, Lord I believe.

Let us pray: *Gracious, merciful, and compassionate God, hear our cries when we call out to you in our suffering and grief. And when our voices grow too weak and we fall into exhaustion from the sorrows of this life, continue to sing over us and grant us a life that is abundant. Amen.*

A song for your day: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wr1cdY41wM8>

*https://www.amazon.com/Witness-Haiti-Earthquake-Death-Resurrection/dp/149822606X/ref=tmm_pap_swatch_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=



Tuesday, July 22, 2020

Text: *Psalm 40:1-3*

***¹ I waited patiently for the Lord;
he turned to me and heard my cry.
² He lifted me out of the slimy pit,
out of the mud and mire;
he set my feet on a rock
and gave me a firm place to stand.
³ He put a new song in my mouth,
a hymn of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear the Lord
and put their trust in him.***

I met Renee Splichal Larson in her hometown of Garrison, ND, where I also lived, played, and dwelled for a time. Her family worshipped at the church where I also worshipped. Her mother sat and sang beside me in the church choir. It was there that I learned Renee's story and those she would share of her life with Ben.

One morning, after a particularly difficult time in my life, I was praying, beseeching God for someone – anyone – to help me bear the burden of my story. Because during the incident which had driven me to my knees, my own voice had been silenced. I had been denied the right to advocate on my behalf and forbidden from sharing the details with others under threat of consequences that I could not, at the time, afford. I'll spare you the details because, now is neither the time nor place for sharing them. Needless to say, they are less significant than the story that follows here. I was hurting and in desperate need of someone to listen, to care.

Of course God was listening. Of course God cared, but I wanted – needed! – a flesh and blood human being to journey beside me. I needed to hear words of comfort, hope, and forgiveness spoken over and to me. I longed to be held in arms that wouldn't let go, abandon, shame, or judge.

I had scarcely finished praying and barely begun to rise to my feet when there came a sudden knock upon my door. Who could it be?

There on my doorstep stood Renee. I had forgotten that she was coming to spend the week at the Bible camp where I served as Program Director. As I invited her to come in, she shared that the Holy Spirit had nudged her to come and visit me as soon as she stepped out of her car. In the midst of dealing with the aftermath of her own tragedy and grief, God had sent Renee to answer my prayer.

In confidence, I poured out my story, sharing the gritty details that had brought me to this point. She offered no commentary, merely holding space for me as I cried and anguished, and when I was finished, she prayed with and for me. Together, we laid our burdens before God, trusting in our Lord and Savior to grant us the means to be sustained.

In Renee, God gifted me with the reminder that God is always with us and always wants to hear whatever is upon our minds and in our hearts. God stretched out God's arms to two broken women and drew them into God's embrace, gently nudging them upon the first steps of healing and wholeness that is only found in our Lord, a season of resurrection.

Let us pray: *Gentle and loving Healer, grant your peace and presence to all those who suffer this day. Restore unto them the joy of your salvation and renew a right spirit within them. Equip those of us who have voices to proclaim justice and freedom for all who have been oppressed and silenced and use us to announce the good news of your kingdom to all. Amen.*

A song for your day: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NzWBXsVaejY>



Wednesday, July 22, 2020

Text: *Matthew 6:25-27*

²⁵Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

February 2020 had come, and I was beginning my final semester as a seminary student at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa. Snow still covered the ground in Gladstone, Michigan, but it had already melted in Dubuque, where the weather had grown mild. Spring had sprung.

One morning, as I walked from my class in Fritschel Hall to the Loehe chapel, I stepped outside into the new day, and much to my delight heard my first birdsong of the year. Along the rooftops and among the hedges, little, brown birds flittered to and fro, merrily offering their songs of praise to the creator for all creation to hear. New life was abounding as the last of winter died away. The seasons were changing, and the earth was once more turning anew. And

if this new life was present among the birds, surely it was present among me and the rest of the Wartburg community too.

We had experienced significant changes and loss throughout the fall and winter months: the death of a beloved professor and colleague, the resignation of the seminary president, the terminal cancer diagnosis of a fellow student, and on the horizon, news of a deadly illness beginning to spread over the Earth.

But now the birds were singing, their bright tunes and melodies filling the air. In that moment, the sorrows of the previous months ebbed a little more, and new life found purchase, rooting itself in my heart and in the world around me. That, indeed, was something worth singing about. I entered the chapel a little lighter, ready to join the song.

Let us pray: *O God, beyond all praising, we worship you today and sing the love amazing that songs cannot repay; for we can only wonder at ev'ry gift you send, at blessings without number and mercies without end; we lift our hearts before you and wait upon your word, we honor and adore you, our great and mighty Lord. Amen.*

(ELW #880, text: Michael Perry, Music: Gustave Holst)

A song for your day: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WLaddeDJVS4>



Thursday, July 23, 2020

Text: *1 Corinthians 15:54-57*

⁵⁴***When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”***

⁵⁵***“Where, O death, is your victory?***

Where, O death, is your sting?”

⁵⁶***The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.*** ⁵⁷***But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.***

In my first year of seminary, Systematic Theologian Anna Madsen was invited to speak at the NGLS Spring Theological Conference held at Fortune Lake. Her message: Death is real, but life is realer still. It is a message that had profound effect upon me. I even used it for my final paper in System Theology that same spring.

I tell you about it today, because tomorrow (as I write this) dear friends of mine will be laying their beloved husband, father, stepfather, and grandfather to rest. For them, and for those of us who knew and loved Rob, it will be a time of mourning even as we celebrate a life lived and a tremendous love shared. It is in moments like this that God’s promise of an abundant and eternal life are needed more than ever.

Death came for Rob one evening last spring. Ironically, only hours before, Rob's wife experienced a heart attack and had to be whisked away by ambulance to Green Bay to have emergency surgery. Rob had to remain at home due to the pandemic. How hard that must have been! Waiting and wondering. Hoping and praying. Death is real. Rob died as he sat in his living room chair, news on the television, faithful dog at his feet, devotional book at his side.

We cannot know when our time will come to an end, and often it comes all too soon and sudden. Rob's death was a bitter pill to swallow. I had gathered with Rob and his family only a few nights prior. We had shared a simple meal, games, and sauna. An evening of fellowship and laughter as we sat, cozy, at the kitchen counter, talking and laughing. How could we have known it would be the last evening we would all share together?

Yes, death is real, and on the night of Friday, March 27, 2020, death came for Rob.

But as Anna shared, death, in all of its realness – all its anguish, sorrow, and pain – does not have the final say over us. Death indeed is real, but the life we have received in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is realer still. Rob knew this.

We will weep as Rob's earthly body is at last laid to rest, but we will also give thanks to God as we take hold of the promise granted to us in Jesus Christ, the Lord of Life, and the God of the living, in whom we have our victory. The promise that nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. We will look forward to the day when we will stand with Rob before God and know in full the promise of the life God alone offers. Now is the time for mourning, but God will also grant unto us who believe the time of rejoicing and life everlasting. Life is realer! Hallelujah!

Let us pray: God of Life, you alone have the ability to overcome death and the grave, and this you have accomplished in Jesus Christ. You are the God who comes down and dwells among your people, who has known suffering, pain, and death of the realist kind, and you are the God who in love freely gifts your children with eternal life, ushering in the kingdom that is realer still. To you, we give all glory, honor, and praise. Amen.

A song for your day: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nfiwDotHMJs>



Friday, July 24, 2020

Text: *Genesis 3:8a*

⁸Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day

Depending upon your opinion, we have either been blessed with an exceedingly warm summer or perhaps cursed to melt like snowmen, withering away in the heat and humidity. In my humble opinion, I feel much like the later and thus have been keeping to the cooler atmosphere of the indoors where the fans constantly circulate and provide some relief. I save my outdoor adventures for the cooler temperatures of the late evening, particularly those that arrive after dark.

Several summers ago, I spent a week at Stoney Lake, an ELCA camp in New Era, MI. I was the Director of Youth and Family Ministries at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Manistee, and I was accompanying several youth from the congregation, especially those attending Confirmation Camp.

One particularly lovely summer's eve, I signed myself out of camp and went for a long walk to reflect upon the day and the current season of my life. It was my first time at Stoney Lake, and I had no idea where the road beyond its gates would lead. I simply decided to follow the unknown path before me and began walking under a canopy of starry skies.

My feet soon carried me around one end of the lake and past another summer camp before winding down a country lane and eventually coming to a small town. The night was so beautiful and refreshing from the heat of the day, that I walked for a solid hour and a half in one direction before turning around and heading back to camp.

Like my journey down that road, we don't always get to know where the roads and seasons of life will take us. At times the stroll is smooth and leisurely, and at others there are bumps, storms, and even roadblocks that hinder our path, making the journey fraught with difficulty. I find hope in knowing that whatever the circumstances, God goes with us, journeying beside us at all times, even when it may seem that God is very far away.

God comes to us in the cool of the evening and in the sweltering heat of the day. God comes to us in the joy and in the suffering. God comes to us in the celebration and the struggle. God comes and journeys with us all of our days.

Let us pray: *God who watches over all our journeys with a love that passes all understanding and accompanies us along the way, grant us endurance for what still lies ahead, and when the "evenings" come, grant us rest in you. Amen.*

A song for your day: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djvIWpj_zXc



Saturday, July 25, 2020

Text: *Nehemiah 8:10b*
...the joy of the Lord is your strength.

“Joy is not the same as happiness. We can be unhappy about many things, but joy can still be there because it comes from the knowledge of God’s love for us...Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day. It is a choice based on the knowledge that we belong to God and have found in God our refuge and our safety and that nothing, not even death, can take God away from us.”

~Henri J. Nouwen from “*You are the Beloved: Daily Meditations for Spiritual Living*”

One day, while I was in the church kitchen preparing my lunch, a member of the congregation came up to me and inquired, “How can you be so joyful all of the time? Whenever I see you, you are always smiling.”

My answer was quite simple: “I choose to be so.”

Every day, a myriad of encounters and experiences will unfold before us, some of which we can control and others we cannot. These moments also possess the ability to impact us emotionally if we allow them, and one of the emotional responses we may choose is joy.

There is far too much in the world that would like to keep us down in the dumps and the depths of despair. Hatred, fear, violence, war, crime, disease, poverty, racism, and more items that I have time or desire to list within this text. All we have to do is turn on the radio, television, cellphone, or tablet and tune in to the latest news feed, and there will be no shortage of those things which attempt to steal away the abundant life promised to us in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As a result, it would be far too easy to get bogged and burdened down by that which is anything less than joyful.

Choosing joy doesn’t mean that we ignore the hurt and suffering in the world. We are still called by God to be attentive to these matters and to act in love for the sake of our neighbors. However, choosing joy means we also *get to* go forth in the hope and knowledge that God goes before and with us, and nothing can take away the love and grace we have received from our Lord. God has chosen us and declared us as God’s own, and that’s something about which we can be joyful.

As one of my favorite adages from Fortune Lake goes, “We don’t have to; *we get to.*”

Today, I get to choose joy. And I do.

Let us pray: *Lord of all creation, fill us with your joy that it may be the strength we need to serve and love you. Amen.*

A song for your day: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-r7ogDaaEQ>

