



MOUNT OLIVE LUTHERAN CHURCH

Musical, Liturgical, Welcoming

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Dear family of God at Mount Olive,

As we continue to live under stay-at-home orders and are likely facing an extended time with physical distancing even after stay-at-home is lifted, your called staff and your Worship Committee want to share our thoughts and reasoning behind the pattern of worship we are now doing. If restrictions lift in the months ahead, and groups of larger size are told they can gather safely, we will revisit these decisions as it is appropriate for what we are asked to do as members of this society. But in this period, which could last some time, here is our best wisdom about our worship life together. We have prayed about this, talked about this, listened as best we can to the Spirit's guidance on this, and now we share it with you.

The first thing we must name is that we are in a time of exile and suffering, as a community and as a world. Vicar Reading helpfully articulated this in the April 29 *Olive Branch*. It is a time of shock, pain, enormous grief, of terrible loss of life, a time of injustice where those already on the edges of survival economically and those who are already struggling with the oppression of a racist system are the ones most harmed by this disease. The toll of human suffering will take some time for humanity to process, let alone count. As we have been worshipping apart from each other, we must name our grief and sadness at that, along with all the other pain that so many are suffering from.

However, this is not the first time the people of God have been in exile, separated from each other. There is much we can do without gathering as a community, much we are called to do for the world and our neighbor, even though we still cannot safely gather to sing, pray, eat and drink together.

Many, maybe most of us, in positions of privilege – economically, racially, and so on – aren't comfortable being uncomfortable. We aren't good at sitting with discomfort, distress or pain. We see those as problems to be solved and we typically hope for a quick fix. But times of discomfort, distress and pain can be periods of rich spiritual growth and insight. "How long, O Lord?" and "From where does my hope come?" may take on new weight or significance for us. So we encourage the Mount Olive community to pay attention to this difficult, liminal time. We can learn to appreciate the gifts we are being given in the meantime, and to hear the still, small voice of God speaking to us, to the world, out of this pandemic.

Whatever "normal" looks like for Mount Olive, or for our world, in the future, our community will work through our longing and grief and, with God's help, will strengthen one another until we gather again. And we know the time will return when we can come together again.

Our plan is to continue to worship as we have been until we believe it is safe to gather in our worship space again.

We will continue to record worship materials in homes and post it each Sunday to invite all to share in worship in whatever space they are. We are working on connecting all the worship materials into one video to make it easier to get into the flow of worship, rather than stopping and starting all the time. We join many other communities of faith who are recording from homes and sharing their materials online (and in our case, we're also sending audio and print versions to those off line.) However, some other communities have had small groups gathering in their worship spaces for live-streaming, and some have even attempted what they're calling "virtual" communion. We have not chosen to do these things, and we feel it important to explain this.

During this time, we will create videos in our homes and not live stream from the chancel, nave, or balcony. (With the exception of recordings Cantor Cherwien will make from the balcony to access the organ.)

Liturgy is a holy action of the people to praise and thank God. It is a communal action in which we have the possibility of encountering the Holy through the presence of Christ. Liturgy is not a religious experience performed by others for us to sit back and watch, such as a program on Netflix or other platforms, to be consumed. Liturgy is rather our thoughtful and conscious participation in a holy drama, the drama of becoming.

The challenge before us in this time of isolation is to participate in worship actively and thoughtfully, even though we can't physically be in the same space, our beautiful church building. We have a part to play, preparations to make, attentiveness to cultivate. What we are sending out each week is not a program to be watched, but an invitation to each who are in their own place to participate and pray in the way that they best can.

It is important that we maintain our discipline of weekly refreshing our encounter with God, and we are encouraging observing the Lord's Day and other Holy Days in our homes, apart from each other. God can be praised, God's word can be broken open, and we can pray for strength. In community with Mount Olive members all over the area, we create our own space for worship at home. Instead of the sound of the no. 5 bus at the corner, or stereos in cars waiting at the stoplight, now the sound that enters our silence in worship is the sound of traffic on a different street, and perhaps one's dog barking, and the sound of ice in the ice maker. Knowing that others are creating their own spaces amidst this challenge is comforting.

We share the grief many have expressed of not being able to see our worship space, even via video. All of us who help Mount Olive by leading its worship life long for that space, the time together.

So why aren't we filming from there? We recognize that there are other valid ways to understand this, but here is what we believe:

In this sad and strange time of quarantine, we are worshipping in a way that focuses our hearts and minds and bodies on the same readings, the same stories, the same hymns, the same actions, without pretending that we are actually together, which is not true. There is a sense among all of us that filming the leaders and having an empty nave isn't comforting but falsely pretending to be something it is not, suggesting that everything is continuing on as normal, when it isn't.

For now, streaming would say "liturgy can carry on at Mount Olive," yet without the assembly, it is not who we are. Our voices in song cannot be replaced by just a few and the organ. The organ by itself does not serve its purpose of drawing people into song when there is no response possible. A very important value to Mount Olive is our hymnody, and when we sing together there is a unique

vibrancy that amplifies the hymn and its meaning. To that end, we are providing recordings of previous years, so that this expression may be heard (and perhaps joined) in its best form, sung by the assembly – this assembly even if in the past – in all its spontaneity and vibrancy and unique abilities.

Recording worship leaders in the chancel at Mount Olive with an empty nave wouldn't be bad or wrong. But neither would it be true to our situation of exile. Seeing our worship leaders recorded in their homes as they lead us in the liturgy is an honest acknowledgement of our exile. In this time of isolation, our hope is to provide tools for this observance – for that which we *can* do. We can praise, hear the Word of God (and be changed/comforted/challenged by it) in our historic context, and pray for the world and healing together.

We also will honor our bishops and other teachers and continue our fast from the Eucharist.

Bishop Ann Svennungsen of the Minneapolis Area Synod and ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton have strongly urged us to refrain from trying to share the Lord's Supper remotely. In this, they are supported by the Lutheran Confessions, *The Use of the Means of Grace* (the ELCA's statement on sacramental practices), and many thoughtful, faithful Lutheran theologians, including representatives of the Lutheran World Federation.

We are not refraining from doing this simply because our leaders have said so, though that is important. We're not piling authorities against other teachers who say otherwise. There are theologians, Lutherans among them, who have argued that we are learning a new way of being the "gathered" Body of Christ "together," even though we aren't physically present with each other. It may be that the Spirit is leading the Church to this new understanding of gathering, but at present your leaders at Mount Olive do not see that.

The meal of the Eucharist is celebrated when we gather – and is a shared act with the community, with real materials of the earth that are broken, poured and shared. Holy Communion is just that – communion, a sharing, related to the word "common". This is a communal sharing in the becoming of Christ's Body through Christ's bread and wine.

In the 11th chapter of Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth, starting at verse 17, in speaking about the Lord's Supper, Paul four times uses the words "when you come together". "When you come together," do this. Not, when you are each alone in your homes, do this. Then Paul provides us with the earliest recounting of Christ's words at the Last Supper, from about 55 CE, earlier than any of the Gospel accounts. And the words "for you" in Greek there are "for yourselves", "for you all", plural. For all of us. Holy Communion calls for a plural number. It calls for Christ's people gathered, Christ's body coming together. When you come together, Paul writes, do this. We cannot come together in our bodies right now. And so we will wait for Holy Communion until we can come together and be a true holy communion.

This fasting is deeply painful for all of us, your leaders included. But it seems to us the most faithful response to this crisis. When we can't gather together, we can't commune, and for the time being we must fast from communion and wait.

What will happen next?

We can't know when we believe groups will be able to gather safely. It may be a very long time. We will most certainly be deliberating in these next weeks and months in preparation for that. Once an assembly is allowed to be present in its fullness, even with a limit to the number of participants (such as limited group size) it may be helpful to stream for those who are unable to come due to risk

or number limitations. If so, and when Eucharist is celebrated, the bread and wine will need to be brought to those unable to be there by communion assistants.

We have some technological needs we'll have to solve to stream things, so we're going to make use of this time apart to research and look into those issues, so when we can gather – even if it's limited in size of group at first – we are ready for what we believe to be good and right and appropriate to do.

Thank you for being Christ's Body and walking this path with us as Christ. We know how hard this is for all of our community, because it is likewise hard for all of us. Your cantor and pastor, and all of us, long for when we can be together.

But in this liminal time, this threshold between what was and what will be, we know that we are always in the love of the Triune God for all people and all things. There is, as Paul so beautifully shouts in Romans 8, nothing that can separate us, separate you, from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. We are joined together intimately in ways we cannot even express, and that transcend any physical separation.

We conclude by offering you this blessing Paul shared with his beloved Philippians when they were separated by suffering and trial, due to Paul's imprisonment: "Christ will transform our humble bodies that they may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. Therefore, [our] brothers and sisters, whom [we] love and long for, [our] joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, [our] beloved." (*Philippians 3:21 – 4:1*)

Your servants in Christ,

Joseph Crippen, *pastor* David Cherwien, *cantor* Rob Ruff, *chair, Worship Committee*
Members of the committee: Matt McCuen, Margaret Gohman, Susan Palo Cherwien, Dan Hellerich