

FROM THE *Pastor's Desk*

February 2026

Dear friends in Christ,

Lent begins this month. Lutherans have traditionally joined together for midweek worship services during Lent. We take extra time in worship to prepare for the beauty and glory of Easter. We think that the deeper our repentance and struggle against sin, the more joy we will experience in the celebration of the Resurrection of Easter.

Worship is not something we do to earn points with God or to make ourselves holier. Worship is something we do to deepen our desire for God and for God's grace. We gather around God's Word in the name of Jesus to taste the goodness of God's grace so that we will have a deeper thirst for God's presence in our daily lives.

There are only 3 reasons Lutherans gather for worship. 1. God is worth our effort. If we never give up anything to worship God, then we lose our sense of honor and respect for God. 2. God's Word works. We may not remember much of the sermon, but the truth is that without the regular hearing of God's Word, our faith will wither and die. 3. We gather as the family of faith to encourage and support one another. Your presence in worship does encourage other people. There is really only one reason that Christians skip gathering for worship (besides ill health) and that is that there is something more important in their heart than hunger and thirst for God.

At a recent LCMC gathering, a retired pastor got up to complain that he was having trouble finding a place to worship. He was only looking for 3 things. 1. Regular confession of sin and the proclamation of God's forgiveness. It is a reminder that we gather not as people who have it all together but as broken people who need God's grace. 2. Regular confessing of our faith in one of the historic creeds (Apostles and Nicene). It is a way to remind ourselves of what matters. 3. The use of a regular schedule of readings that exposes us to large parts of the Old Testament, the New Testament, and especially the gospels. He claimed that he couldn't even find those 3 things in most LCMC churches. He obviously doesn't live in Western Iowa.

The Lutheran movement began because Martin Luther wanted to improve the preaching of the Church. What he heard was a lot of helpful advice about how to be a better person, how to get oneself closer to heaven. But it all left him feeling cold and guilty and hopeless. He already knew how to be a better person. He just didn't seem to make any progress.

But then Luther discovered the Gospel, the good news of God's gift in Jesus. And the good news of Jesus is what gave him hope and strength to live in gratitude and joy. Lutherans believe we don't need practical sermons of practical advice. What we need is good news that goes to the heart of our problems and offers us faith, hope, and forgiveness. We need good news that goes to the heart to give us courage, confidence, and peace. That is what Lutheran preachers try to do. We don't always succeed. But even when we don't succeed, there is the promise of Holy Communion to clearly say that Jesus is God's gift for you. Thanks be to God.

I look forward to seeing you at worship.

Yours in Christ, Phil Nielsen