

Finding God's Grace in the Wilderness – 3

Rev 1:10, 17-19: 2:2-3, 6, 7, 8-11, 12-13, 17, 18-19, 24-29; 3:4-6, 7-13, 21-22, in the sermon.

John 20:19-23 Pentecost Sunday

This is the third sermon in a series with this same sermon title. And I encourage you to take in the sermon titled, Wilderness Covid to better understand the background & focus of these sermons.

Why are we spending this much time on our church history, linking it to the theme of wilderness? Well, we are experiencing something none of us have with the coronavirus. It's a kind of wilderness experience. And reminding ourselves of our rich history, through troubled times, but persevering, and being faithful, can be helpful as we will be needing to focus on what comes next for us after this pandemic. And I hope we are reminded of the Almighty's faithfulness to us over these years.

Included in this sermon are the compliments offered to the 7 churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3 that were given to the Apostle John.

“On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the 7 churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.” (1:10)

“When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades. “Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later.” (1:17-19)

“I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. (2:2-3)

“But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans which I also hate. (6)

“Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.” (2:7)

Historical Trivia number 11, the decade of **1977 to 1986**, begins with these words: “It is not difficult to come to a conclusion when casually observing the ministry of North Star in this community, that not much changes. Generally things have been and are somewhat static.”

But then Jake Driediger goes on to write, “I was amazed at the constant evolving of visions and dreams blended with the reality of the moment, put into programs and action. I sensed a real desire to do the will of God for this time in the life of the church, this community and the larger community.”

So how does “not much changes, things are somewhat static,” go with “constant evolving visions and dreams blended with the reality of the moment?” Maybe some of you know, or can guess, what he was trying to communicate. Was it a sense that we conquered, came through many difficult issues fairly intact as a congregation, but we lost some of our spark? Did Jake mean he was disappointed that we had too many heated disagreements but we also ended up making mostly good decisions? Did he intend to communicate that we were left with some frayed relationships?

Jake goes on and lists 13 specific areas of church life that took time and attention and discernment. “Plus many other innovations and general church keeping activities.” I wonder what you all recall from those years – 1977 to 1986?

Why would North Star be described as static and not changing on the one hand yet on the other hand, carried out this busy list of decisions as the church desired to do the will of God?

Please note these areas that took a lot of thought, prayer, time and energy. Pastoral leadership. Youth worker / pastor. Refugee settlement. Sex education for our youth. The question of marriage, divorce and remarriage. The question of leadership and accountability. The question of lay ministry in the church. The question of how to deal in a Christ-like manner with one who has failed society and the church. The study of renovation and / or enlarging the church structure. The question on community survey and evangelism. The involvement and establishment of the Gift and Thrift Store. The establishment of a deacon fund – for people emergency needs. The 75th Anniversary and projects related to it.

From the little I know about North American Mennonite church life back then – this sounds like the common issues of many churches in those years! Maybe all these weighty, even emotional issues, in such a short time period, despite the more exciting ones – tired people out!

“These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the victor’s crown of life. (2:8-10)

“Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.” (11)

The Historical Trivia number 11 spent over half of its extended space and focus on pastoral leadership and its transitions – so I suspect this was a major sensitive and passionate issue. “Something needs to be said about the many meetings to finally conclude with an installation service. First of all, there was much prayer in the congregation for God’s will to be done.

Secondly, there was much love, unity of spirit and much tolerance. Thirdly, there was much interest and concern. The attendance and interest at these meetings was always high.”

This sounds very normal in congregational life. Some pastorates and times of building facilities and implementing programs, just seem to bring out the best in people – even with their different ideas. Then too often it feels like congregational life falls flat. These concrete external visible focuses often perk up a congregation’s morale and attention. But then as a congregation gets into a good groove, the focus becomes keeping things going as they are. This always over time brings in the doldrums – and boredom. Goals have been accomplished. It’s hard to sustain excitement for a long time especially after so many heavy emotional issues.

Then about one fourth of the Trivia space, describe the plans for the 75 anniversary celebration of the church, where 486 people signed the guest register. The brochure for this event has a number of important details of church history, providing some different details than are in the Trivia inserts. Some are: No Drake Mennonite served in the armed forces during WW! In WWII many young men served in Conscientious Objector camps and a few joined the armed forces of which three lost their lives in action. In 1951 it was decided to pay the pastor instead of drawing from a “ministers fund.” In December 1964, church bulletins were first printed on a weekly basis. In 1969 deacons no longer served for life, but just five years.

“These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.” (2:12-13)

“Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white

stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.” (2:17)

The decade **1987-1996**, is the last decade of the recorded history of North Star Mennonite Church. Obviously there is other written information as well as collective memory. But this coincides with the 90 year anniversary celebration.

Highlights would include: The last German Sunday School class was dissolved and the transition to English was complete. In October 1988 a celebration was held to commemorate that two local persons, Ferd Ediger and Abe Neufeld had been ordained into the pastoral ministry.

The LIFE program, Living in Faithful Evangelism was adapted. I don't know what if any results came out of that program. Then it was decided to have a 90 year celebration because as one member put it, “I won't be here to celebrate the 100th anniversary but I plan to be here for the 90th.”

In 1965 an education wing study committee was appointed because the facilities were over crowded. At that time 70% of the young people were leaving the community for employment as farms were becoming bigger. But then came opportunities for employment: the potash mines, manufacturing in Drake and Lanigan, meat processing expansion, feedlot and hog operations, hospitals, nursing homes and so on.

Plus older farmers were retiring and young people were returning or staying home because there was a future. In 1988 the education wing became a reality. But we are now in the same position as in the late 1960's when we can't fully utilize the space because of lack of students – both adult and children. However, it's great to have that space that is used for a variety of activities, plus we can use it more when needed.

Another comment that caught my eye is: During this decade, 1987 to 1996, a new blessing has evolved in the ministry of North Star

congregation. We have an increasing number of brothers and sisters in Christ who work with us in the program and witness of the church who are not formally members of this congregation. We are grateful to God for this togetherness in Christ in being the North Star congregation. This continues today but probably on a lesser scale except for Vacation Bible School.

“These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first. (2:18-19)

“Now I say to the rest of you...to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets, ‘I will not impose any other burden on you, except to hold on to what you have until I come.’ (2:24-25)

“To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations—that one ‘will rule them with an iron scepter and will dash them to pieces like pottery’—just as I have received authority from my Father. I will also give that one the morning star. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” (2:26-29)

It's important to remind ourselves that in 1988 the congregation felt it was important enough to acknowledge and confess that the foundation of our faith belief is in Jesus. At various times the broader church since it's founding has felt the need to clarify with written acknowledgement and confession, its doctrinal beliefs. This is an important habit. Congregations need to intentionally remind themselves of who they are and who they belong to. Furthermore we said and agreed that since we believed this that we then needed to also act on this belief. This led to the following seven fold purpose statement.

1. “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid which is Jesus Christ.” This comes from I Corinthians chapter 3, verse

11. This Pennsylvania Dutch fracture, from another church I pastored, displays this verse.

2. We must build each other up in the faith.

3. We much proclaim Jesus Christ through the ministry in our home, the church and the community, so that our children and others we come in contact with will be encouraged to trust in God and receive Jesus Christ as their Savior.

4. We said we must assist one another in Christian worship, nurture and witness. That we must help each other to understand what it means to live in faith regardless of the cost.

5. As a congregation we said that we must practice Christian unity as we relate to other churches and other denominations who also confess Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.

6. We must teach and practice New Testament principles such as believers baptism, the witness of peace, discipleship, missions, the ethics and practice of Jesus' kind of love, mutual caring, not only in the church, but also in the larger community.

7. We must acknowledge the Holy Spirit and the scriptures as the source for council and direction in discerning the mind of Christ in being a part of His church in this community.

“Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (3:4-6)

One thing this congregation has been clear on. At the founding meeting of this church, 114 years ago, this passage was read from I John 4:15-16. “If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in

God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.”

Then going back to Revelations. “These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth. (3:7-10)

“I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on them my new name. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (3:11-13)

“Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with them, and they with me.” (3:19-20)

“To the one who is victorious, who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” (3:21-22)

Finding God's Grace in the wilderness was necessary in the early church as much as it has

been for Israel throughout history. The same is true for us today, with the issues we face now and in the future. But the keys to living out faith, are the same. Our history gives us some traits, habits, and ideas to carry us forward.

Further Questions:

So what were the joys and challenges and griefs of the next decade, **1997 to 2006**?

And what would you list as God's faithfulness to North Star in the decade of **2006 to 2017**, along with those areas the church would like a do over?

What habits and traits should we emulate or try to recover from our forbearers as we face more wilderness times?

If you would write a Historical trivia for these two decades and the last 3, 4 years, what would you highlight in a bulletin insert? What spiritual highlights were there?

I continue to need your stories, information and opinions about the years 1997 to present.

And what would your prayer be for empowerment by the Holy Spirit in the days ahead?