

PASTOR'S REPORT 2020

Dear good people of Mt. Zion,

Well, by the grace of God and love of Jesus, we made it to 2021. Praise the Lord! It has been quite the year for many of us. I recall the beautiful saying from Psalm 118: "Today is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it!". It's certainly easier to rejoice and be glad in certain seasons more than others, but I assure you that there certainly has been plenty to rejoice and be glad about in this wonderful congregation throughout 2020.

Perhaps the most memorable part of 2020 was Mt. Zion's shift to online-only worship and ministry on March 15, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We held worship online every Sunday throughout the pandemic and have grown significantly in our online worship capabilities. What started as a 20-minute moment of prayers and a message of reassurance on Facebook Live from my pastor's office has blossomed into a tech-savvy, fully captioned, beautifully-edited, musical, flexible, and creative worship experience, thanks to the hard work and prayers of many. I'd like to particularly thank Craig Gustafson, Deb Tonsager, Robin Arneson, and Anna Peterson for all your hard work and support of these worship services. From Craig's weekly videographer role to Robin's creativity with milestones and everywhere in between, working with this excellent team has made a challenging situation so much better, and even kind of fun sometimes. For all of you who have recorded readings, special music, prayers, announcements, or other liturgy throughout this process, thank you for your adaptability and diligence in helping worship come to life every week. Your gifts and skills are an absolute gift to both me and the larger Mt. Zion community. I also want to thank our freelance video editor, David Starry, who edits our video, sound, and captions every week remotely from Colorado, using our videos uploaded to Dropbox. It's a gift to have such skill provided to continue our ministry of worship and praise.

In addition to the weekly (and sometimes twice-weekly!) worship services, we also held a handful of outdoor worship opportunities, complete with bring-your-own-communion, advanced music and tech set-up, a trailer, and spray painted lawn chair spots through the warmer months (though, admittedly, that pet blessing service got a little chilly!). Thank you to everyone who made those services possible, with logistics, musical gifts, adaptation to inclement weather, and Facebook Live troubleshooting. I sincerely hope we can resurrect the outdoor services once it's warm enough to do so again.

I also began the "Wednesday Word" devotion series in April 2020, where I provide a short devotion on a different topic every Wednesday at noon, posted to the Mt. Zion Facebook page. It's been a delight to explore new topics, and dwell in Scripture and pray with you all, even from a physical distance. I plan to continue the Wednesday Word while we still have a majority of our ministry opportunities provided online.

A hat I never thought I'd need to wear but have donned often this year, is that of Zoom meeting administrator. While we've been physically distanced, I have organized, invited, administered, and provided support for a multitude of Zoom meetings over the course of 2020. We have held council meetings, committee meetings, small group ministries, and Confirmation classes over Zoom, and I am so grateful for your engagement in this new but now familiar way of connecting. We will continue to use Zoom for a variety of ministry opportunities while we are physically distanced during the pandemic.

New committees formed throughout the course of this year, to address the current pandemic situation,

as well as projects and ministries for the future of Mt. Zion. The Wilderness Committee formed to formalize our building policies during the pandemic, informed by the WI Council of Churches, the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin, and the St. Croix County Public Health Department guidelines. As the numbers of COVID-19 cases and deaths decline, and numbers of vaccinated folks begin to rise, this committee will regroup to form adapted policies as needed. The Technology Committee, after many years of planning and discussion (and a constitutional bylaw addition), formed towards the end of 2020 - I look forward to continuing that holy and exciting work of technology in the church. The 3-Year Planning Committee formed in 2020 as well. I am grateful for all these gifts of ministry shared, and the joy and hope these future directions will provide.

Though many parts of our lives at Mt. Zion changed drastically over the course of this year, some wonderful ministries have continued on the same, including ministry with youth and families. I am delighted to teach Confirmation to students in grades 4-12. I had the joy of baptizing 5 beloved children over the course of the year, 3 in adapted services for pandemic safety. I also had the privilege of officiating two weddings in 2020.

Before the pandemic hit, I completed many home, assisted living, and hospital visits to Mt. Zion members and beloved people of our larger community. Once the pandemic began, those visits became mostly phone or email-based. I miss being in person with folks in need of care, but continue to be grateful for all the creative ways we can connect.

Over the course of 2020, I officiated funeral or committal services for 5 departed saints - Lucy Larson, George Pavel, John Flavin, Harley Saathoff, and Margie Bungum. There are many ways we grieved in 2020, and our continued grief at the loss of these beloved saints continues even now. I pray that the peace of Christ, which surpasses all understanding, may fill you and guide you in your journeys forward.

As we move into 2021, dear friends, I pray that we will be reminded of the hope Jesus brings to us all - that even when all seemed lost, and Jesus died upon the cross, His death was not the end of the story. New life rose from that season of death, and new life will certainly rise for us too as we move through and past this grief-filled season of pandemic. There are beautiful and wonderful ministries continuing here at Mt. Zion, for our church family and in our greater community. I sincerely hope you enjoy this annual report, reading about these ministries you continue to support in your prayers and gifts of all kinds.

I am certainly looking forward with hope for 2021, and with God's blessings, I pray you will find those moments of hope and joy as well.

In peace,

Pr. Carolyn Staats