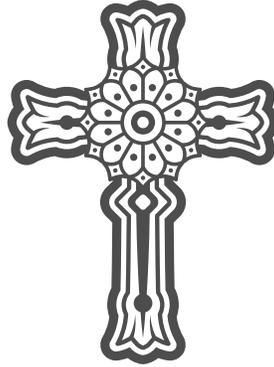


# A COLLECTION OF WRITINGS

*Authored by Rev. Myrna Bethke  
Gateway South District Superintendent*





*She is clothed with strength and dignity, and she laughs without fear of the future.  
When she speaks, her words are wise, and she gives instructions with kindness.  
- Proverbs 31:25-26*

# BARN SWALLOW

*June 18, 2020*



My office window looks out over the front yard of our home. Since, I've been spending a lot more time there, I get to see all the bird activity. Several weeks ago it became apparent that barn swallows were trying to nest on the wall under our front porch. They would swoop in and out all day long with bits of grass and twigs. But it didn't seem like anything was happening, and we wondered if their efforts were futile. Then all of the sudden a line of mud appeared and progress was made each time we looked. I marveled at their resiliency and perseverance in getting their nest going. In spite of the inconvenience, we decided to let the nest get built and read up on barn swallows to see how long it would take for the eggs to hatch. We learned that barn swallows are very protective of their nests and wouldn't hesitate to go after us if we got too close!

There is a lot we to learn from those birds. For the first week or so, I wondered why they kept on trying to build the nest when nothing seemed to be happening. It seemed as if they were living out that oft repeated maxim—doing the thing over and over, expecting different results. Have you ever wondered about some of what you do, or watch others doing...are we making a difference, is there a point to what we do as the church? This question then turned to marveling at the resiliency and perseverance of the birds.

When I think of people that are resilient and willing to persevere, I often think of Mother Pollard who was a church elder at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, AL. Mother Pollard was 72 when she joined the Montgomery Bus Boycott and for weeks walked back and forth to her various destinations. Her pastor, Martin Luther King, Jr observed the toll this was taking on her and suggested that because of her health, she might consider taking the bus. She responded to his suggestion: "My feet's is tired, but my soul is rested."

In these challenging, anxious times where is God calling us to persevere... to make a difference when it doesn't seem to be getting you anywhere? Today my charge to each of you reading this is to listen to God's call to make a difference, to be willing to live out the trust that God has placed in us as the very presence of his son Jesus Christ in this world.

Mother Pollard has words for us as we take up this challenge. Martin Luther King, Jr writes: I have been tortured without and tormented within by the raging fires of tribulation ... I have been forced to muster what strength and courage I have to withstand howling winds of pain and jostling storms of adversity. But as the years have unfolded the eloquently simple words of Mother Pollard have come back again and again to give light and peace and guidance to my troubled soul, "God's gonna take care of you."

Go forth knowing that truth!

Deep peace,  
Myrna

P.S. All of the sudden the barn swallow activity ceased; no more swooping at our front porch all day. From what we can tell, they found better accommodations in the house across the street! Wonder what lesson there is in that!



# TEAR JAR

June 11, 2020



This morning in my weekly clergy gathering our scripture was Psalm 56. It is a Psalm of lament as the writer is besieged by many all around. Yet, the writer still knows in the midst of it all that God is greater. One of the lines that stands out for me is verse 8: *“You yourself have kept track of my misery. Put my tears into your bottle—aren’t they on your scroll already?”*

When I was in Jordan, there were women at some of the places we visited selling tear jars.(pictured above) For them it was the cry of lament they raised against the violence they were experiencing from so many places. The women were connecting back to the promise of the Psalm that God knows our tears and will receive them and keep them. The tears that were shed in their pain are kept sacred by God.

While remembering the tear jars, I came across a blog by Patricia M. Robertson who describes that she blogs for: *“Writing words of hope to those who have given up on their dreams or misplaced them...Patricia writes for ordinary people, living extraordinary lives.”* In her blog on Psalm 56 she writes, *“What a wonderful image of God collecting all*

*of our tears in a bottle where they may be safely preserved. Our God is not uncaring, watching people from afar, but actively involved in people’s lives. God know our sorrow and pain, our anger and frustration...how precious in the eyes of the Lord are the tears of God’s people. God catches everyone!”*

In these confounding wilderness days that we find ourselves in, I am deeply comforted knowing God keeps all our tears sacred. When we grieve the many losses from COVID-19, God holds our tears. When we cry in anger over the sins of racism, God holds our tears. Knowing this, our tears become calls to action. As God receives them, we are given comfort, but also given a way to follow God’s mandate to us—go out to the world to be the presence of Jesus Christ.

And so we go in the shedding tears that compel us to action. Knowing the assurance found at the close of Psalm 56: *“God: whose word I praise. The Lord: whose word I praise. I trust in God; I won’t be afraid. What can anyone do to me? I will fulfill my promises to you, God. I will present thanksgiving offerings to you because you have saved my life from death, saved my feet from stumbling so that I can walk before God in the light of life.”*

God is with us!

Peace,  
Myrna



# THE RAINBOW

June 11, 2020



This morning I got up early. My son texted me a picture of the morning sky. In the center of the storm clouds that were building was the rainbow picture above.

Rainbows have always been a sign of hope and promise for us. Genesis 9:12-13 lays the foundation for the symbol: *“God said, “This is the symbol of the covenant that I am drawing up between me and you and every living thing with you, on behalf of every future generation. I have placed my bow in the clouds; it will be the symbol of the covenant between me and the earth.”*

This morning’s rainbow reminded me that rainbows are not just a sign of hope and promise after the storm. This rainbow was right in the midst of the storm clouds. Rainbows are signs of defiant hope, a reminder that God is with us as the storms of life rage, and not just when all is said and done. We are in the midst of devastating storms right now—a pandemic of disease, a pandemic of racism. God isn’t waiting for us at the other end of the storms. God is right with us in the midst of the storms. God’s love is defiantly reminding us that there is nothing that can separate us from God’s love, and there is nothing stronger than God’s love.

This is our foundation in such times. It is from this foundation that we are called to bring hope and promise as we live out our call as the presence of Jesus Christ in the world. Grounded in this love we are the defiant signs of God’s hope in the midst of COVID-19; we are the ones who continue to work on the front lines, make masks, give food, offer ways to connect when we are physically separated. We are the ones who speak out against the sin of racism, stand in protest, call our elected officials, and find ways to dismantle systemic racism.

Next time you see a rainbow in the sky, remember it is not just for the end of the storm but a sign of God’s hope and promise in the midst of it all. And may it be a call to action for each of us to bring defiant hope and promise in all that we do.

Deep peace,  
Myrna



# SIGHS TOO DEEP FOR WORDS

May 28, 2020

It was very difficult to find words to write today and the text Romans 8:26 bubbled up: *“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”*

Sighs too deep for words...in the past few days I have found myself in this place as racism looms large. My anger grows as armed white protestors can confront police who simply stand in place as they are confronted, yet unarmed black protestors are tear gassed when protesting the death of George Floyd.

We do not seem to have come far from my experiences of shopping with my friend Sherry who is black—this was in the early 90’s. When we shopped together, she was always asked for an additional identification when using her credit card, when I was not. (And her credit was way better than mine!)

Sighs too deep for words...I am angry and saddened to know that the Director of Worship for our Annual Conference, Lan Wilson needs to post this prayer on his Facebook page:

*For the time my friend and I were followed for 2 miles questioned at gunpoint by a police officer for failing to use a turn signal then followed home and made it home safely...*

*For the time my brother was pulled over and interrogated about the ownership of his own car...*

*For all the times my brothers, cousins, friends, and black men everywhere were mishandled, misjudged, mistreated by those whose jobs is to keep us safe but didn’t and You, oh God, protected us... thank You.*

*But God we need this to stop. Open blind eyes. Soften hard hearts. Constrain wicked minds. And please, please, help your children.*

Sighs too deep for words... the constitution of The United Methodist Church calls us to action:

*The United Methodist Church proclaims the value of each person as a unique child of God and commits itself to the healing and wholeness of all persons. The United Methodist Church recognizes that the sin of racism has been destructive to its unity throughout its history. Racism continues to cause painful division and marginalization. The United Methodist Church shall confront and seek to eliminate racism, whether in organizations or in individuals, in every facet of its life and in society at large. The United Methodist Church shall work collaboratively with others to address concerns that threaten the cause of racial justice at all times and in all places. (Article 5)*

Sighs too deep for words...I find deep hope in this text. It is a reminder that our words are not enough and on our own we cannot accomplish God's call and claim upon us. It is God's Spirit that works in us, stirs us up, and intercedes with sighs that propel us to go beyond words and give courage to be active in confronting racism as is our call both as the people of God and as United Methodists.

I invite you to commit yourselves to action in this time knowing that God's spirit is stirring each of us!  
What are you being called to do?

Deep peace,  
Myrna



# LAUGHING AND CRYING

May 21, 2020



*Rebuilding in Kabul, Afghanistan*

As some of you know, I follow an early morning routine that includes a daily Bible reading. Each year for the past five years I have committed to reading the Bible through using a daily schedule. And each year there are texts that surprise me anew. One year it was Titus 3:9: “Avoid stupid controversies.” Last year it was the beautiful description of the church in Acts 9:31: “God strengthened the church, and its life was marked by reverence for the Lord.” There are also texts that I look forward to reading, and today’s text is one of them. The book of Ezra is written after Persian King Cyrus issues a decree that releases the Israelites from captivity and allows them to return to Jerusalem and begin rebuilding. Chapter 3 ends with these words:

*“All of the people shouted with praise to the Lord because the foundation of the Lord’s house had been laid. But many of the older priests and Levites and heads of families, who had seen the first house, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this house, although many others shouted loudly with joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of people’s weeping, because the people rejoiced very loudly. The sound was heard at a great distance.”*

From a distance they could not tell if the people were laughing or crying... what an appropriate text for our current reality. As the COVID-19 curve continues to flatten, there is much talk of slowly reopening. There is rejoicing in that! We look forward to being able to move about more freely and get back to “normal.” Yet, at the same time we know the reopening will not bring us back to the normal. Just as the Israelites grieved because the new temple was not the same as the old, we will know grief. We grieve the lives lost, as friends and family members who have died will not be with us as we emerge from quarantine. When we are able to gather together to worship in our churches, things will continue to be different.

Laughing and crying. As we continue in this time, I invite you to find ways to both grieve and celebrate. In many ways this is already happening. For example, my neighborhood like many others, celebrates birthdays very differently these days—we organize car parades. Each time this happens it is a mix of sorrow and joy for me. Sorrow because family and friends can’t gather together for a meal and cake and presents. Joy because the neighborhood comes together to make noise and throw cards at the birthday person. Joy because families have found a way to celebrate in the midst of it all.

As the people of God, let us find ways to grieve together for what we have lost, and left behind. And let us find ways to celebrate what we are bringing forward, what we have learned, and how we have continued to be Good News in the world.

From a distance they could not tell if the people were laughing or crying...through our tears and laughter, may we be the presence of Jesus Christ in all that we do!

Deep peace and prayers,  
Myrna



# WHAT IS YOUR MOST IRRATIONAL FEAR?

May 14, 2020



On the first Sunday of each month, a group of youth from our district gather together from various churches in our district. For the last two months we have continued gathering on Zoom. At our last meeting we talked about being afraid; and our icebreaker question was: “What is your most irrational fear”? Mine is garbage disposals. I have no idea why; I’ve never been hurt by one nor known anyone who has. Nonetheless, I cringe every time I need to run the garbage disposal. This fear came full circle a few days ago. My husband started looking for a tool he has that helps grasp items. I asked him what he wanted it for, but at first, he just said he needed to find the tool. It turns out a small straw had dropped into the disposal. Well, guess what—my hand is small enough to reach all the way down the disposal!! It was up to me to get the straw and face my strange

fear of the garbage disposal! My suspicion is that most of us have these kinds of nonsensical fears!

These kind of fears for the most part don’t get in the way of our living. We laugh at them and keep on going. There are other fears that are much more serious, they get in the way of our ability to live fully. They are the fears that wake us in the night and fill our dreams. They are the fears that stop us in our tracks. They tempt us to forget whose we are and who we are.

It goes without saying that we live in a time that threatens to paralyze us with fear. There are so many voices that lure us with “information” some of which is true, some not. We need to do the right things in this time—social distance, wear masks, limit exposure to those most vulnerable, and all the actions that will help flatten the curve. We need to pray for those sick with COVID-19; grieve with those who have died, and support our healthcare workers.

Yet, even as we do those things, we also need to ask what will keep our fears from defining us. What will keep us from setting aside the call and claim God has given us to be the presence of Jesus Christ in the world? How will we find ways to bring the Good News to all we encounter? I find the words of Paul to the Philippians a good starting place:

*Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad! Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near. Don’t be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:4-7*

What would it look like if we committed to reading this text first thing every morning so that it begins to permeate our life? It won’t make COVID-19 magically disappear. But what it will do is call us to ground our living defined by the peace of God and act from that place. Will you join me in this commitment so that even now the world will know God’s love because of our witness? Please share with me the impact this commitment has on you!

Deep peace,  
Myrna



# THE SEED

May 7, 2020



This picture was taken near Ground Zero on September 11th several years ago. I was struck by the audacity of this seed sprouting out of the asphalt. Why bother trying in such a hostile environment?

Today this picture gives me hope, and a challenge. Hope because we are called to be signs of life in the midst of the most hostile environments when the world says nothing is possible in this place.

The challenge is what is the hope we are being called to in this time. When I took the picture of this seed, it was in the midst of the annual remembrance of 9/11 and my thoughts were on continuing to bring hope in the midst of the tragedy that day brought.

Today as I write, the challenge is different, but equally as critical. Where are we being called to plant seeds of hope in places that are as desolate as where this seed decided to grow?

All through the Gateway South I am seeing you take on this hope and challenge. Our congregations are attracting new members because you have taken worship online. At least two of our congregations have attracted worshipers on different continents. You have grown your small groups, continued youth and children ministries, and found ways to reach people even when confined to your homes.

You are bringing hope in the midst of the desolation brought on by COVID-19. Hope and Challenge—may you all have the audacity of this seed!

Deep peace,  
Myrna



# STANDING AT THE PROMISED LAND, LOOKING BACK TO EGYPT

*April 30, 2020*



Each Monday, I receive an email from a colleague that contains a picture and a caption. This week the caption read: “We are breaking through what has been and must be open to what is emerging and what is possible.”

We hear a lot of questions these days about when we will be able to go back...back to school, back to church, back to the store...back to the way things used to be. My colleague’s statement has me asking the question, what do we really want to go back to?

When the people of Israel were at the end of their 40-year journey they stood paralyzed at the edge of the promised land. They had just heard an ominous and untrue report about the promised land. And so, in the book of Numbers we read: “The entire community said to Moses and Aaron, If only we had died in the land of Egypt or if only we had died in this desert! Why is the Lord bringing us to this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken by force. Wouldn’t it be better for us to return to Egypt?” The fear of what they might be facing was so great, it overpowered the promises God had given them. So great was that fear they thought it better to go back to Egypt where things were terrible, but at least they knew what the terrors were.

What do we really want to go back to? Yes, I want to see my grandchildren again. Yes, I want to feel safe when out in public, and yes, I want to be together in worship again. But if you think about it, there is a lot we can learn in this time about what it means to move forward. You may have seen the pictures from around the world as pollution levels are reduced and scenes not possible before are being revealed.

Driving northbound on Route 45 this morning, I was able to see the clear outlines of the Philadelphia skyline in ways not visible before. How will we continue to deeply care for the environment in the “promised land?”

We have witnessed how nimble the church really can be as all of the sudden we adapted to virtual worship.

While, we want to be and will be in our sanctuaries, how will we continue to put in place what we have learned. As many have reported, there are people, many who are young adults, joining us in worship now because we are connecting online. If we go back to the way we were, we will lose them.

As we stand at the promised land that is before us, may we resist the temptation to go back to the safety of what we knew. I invite you to join me in visioning what God is calling us to as we enter into the promise and possibility of the world God is shaping even now.

Deep peace,  
Myrna



# FINDING YOUR VOICE

April 23, 2020

*"Alongside Babylon's streams, there we sat down, crying because we remembered Zion. We hung our lyres up in the trees there because that's where our captors asked us to sing; our tormentors requested songs of joy: Sing us a song about Zion, they said. But how could we possibly sing the Lord's song on foreign soil?"* When the Israelites wrote this Psalm they had no way of knowing if they would ever be able to go home, worship, or as the Psalm says: Sing the Lord's songs. For it is written during the time of the exile; around 537 BCE.

Their temple, the center of worship had been destroyed, many of their friends and family gone, and a remnant had been dragged into captivity in Babylon—there they were forbidden to practice the tenets of their religion. Their voice was lost. It gave rise to this Psalm, full of lament and anger at what was no more. The lament is heard in the beginning words. The anger comes in full in the last lines. They curse the Babylonians so much that they will bless anyone who kills the Babylonian's babies by bashing their heads on a rock. Words we don't usually hear in church!

Have you ever lost your voice, or felt as if you no longer were allowed to use it? Felt like you were in exile, far from home....the familiar gone?

We're six weeks into such a time. The things we took for granted aren't there. In my neighborhood, birthday parties have become a line of cars driving past the birthday house, honking our horns. The grocery stores are out of weird things. Our hair is growing long. We're not able to mourn our loved ones with a proper send off. Worship online just isn't the same. Our familiar landscape is so different! So, what do we do? We lament...We give God our anger...We place our trust in God

And then we figure out what it means to find our voice again. Not an easy task in this time. But here's my thoughts on that: First we remember who we are and whose we are. The big picture. The Israelites lamented their exile in Babylon through the Psalm we read this morning. Just the fact of writing this lament means they hadn't forgotten entirely the God who had led them through so much. The lament is a sign of hope no matter how small. For if you truly have no hope in trust in God, you're not going to bother crying out. To lament is to have hope.

Second is our remembering we reclaim God's call upon our lives. At some point in your life journey you heard the Good News....and today, no matter where you are on your faith journey you are here to find more of that Good News....otherwise we wouldn't be learning the ins and outs of new technologies. How do you remember?

Finally, remember God has called us so that the voice of God's love for humanity can be heard above all the voices of the world. Be there...be there for each other, to lament, to remember, and to speak out. Be there...for those who have no hope, who have lost their way. Be there....to speak out against injustice. Be there...to voice God's way to the world. In our remembering the great love of God in Jesus we find our voice.

Peace,  
Myrna



# THE ANSWERS DIDN'T FIT WITH THE QUESTIONS

*April 16, 2020*

In an episode of the George Burns show, their family is celebrating the college graduation of their son Ronnie's friend after only nine years. The friend's father is calling all of his contacts to share how proud he is of his son. One problem: The friend shares with Gracie that he isn't graduating after all. When Gracie asks what happened, he says: "I studied hard and got all the answers, the only problem was the answers didn't fit with the questions."

The answers didn't fit with the questions. I don't know about you, but that line fits right in with our current realities. The questions we now ask are very different than those we had answers to: "How do I set up zoom for worship? How do I connect with the unconnected? How do I encourage online giving? How do I apply for the PPP funds...while we're at it who is the owner of my church?" Expand the new questions beyond the church realm and you have another set of new realities addressing social distancing, poverty, joblessness, and loneliness to name just a few.

As I ponder this new reality with its new questions, I am drawn to the Emmaus story in Luke's gospel. The disciples didn't recognize Jesus at first...perhaps they were wrestling with answers that no longer fit their questions. The questions about Jesus' death; the strange stories they were hearing from the women who visited the tomb and so many others. They didn't recognize Jesus until something familiar broke into their consciousness. Familiar words, familiar gestures...and then gasps of wonder and joy. New questions, new answers...that brought joy and hope where there was despair.

In this time, may that be the truth that keeps you—that the love of God in Jesus Christ brings new questions and answers. Life giving questions and answers beyond what we can grasp. While our old answers might not fit in this time, God is even now shaping us and calling us to be in connection with each other and the world so that we can continue our call—to go out and make disciples; to bring the transforming love of God to all who long for God's light in the midst of the darkness! We can do this!! Amen.

I am thankful for all the great ministry that is happening in the Gateway South congregations. Rev. Ayn Masker shared this with me: "We have quite a few people who sew in our congregation. We have partnered up with Inspira Health System and United Methodist Communities to supply much needed masks. To date, we have donated over 150 masks and still going strong!" Thank you Fellowship UMC!

Rev. John Randall shares: "This Easter the Children's Ministry had the toddlers recite their Easter Recitations on the Zoom Platform during worship. It was fantastic!" Thank you Mt. Zion-Wesley UMC! Rev. Diane Arthur writes: Prior to the stay-at-home procedures, bible study materials were given to congregants without internet service. Everyone is connected to bible study lessons by email or phone call, depending on connectivity capabilities. Our church members have pledged to continue giving by mail to their churches monthly.

Although small in size, both churches have been interacting together on group calls. The congregations gathered for their first Sunday of April communion together by way of three group calls.

On Palm Sunday during the group call, everyone gave their praises unto the Lord! Additionally, for Easter Sunday, the pastors were able to connect with parishioners who don't have internet and heard the sermon via audio recording. Those with emails were sent the audio sermon recording on Sunday morning. Thank you New Sharon UMC and Rhoades Temple UMC!

Peace,  
Myrna



## THE FIRST EASTER

*April 9, 2020*



On Palm Sunday, our cluster youth group met on Zoom to share dinner, fun, and devotions. We had a scavenger hunt, and then told the Palm Sunday story using the items that the youth had gathered. One parent shared with us it was good to hear her daughters giggling again.

I continue to be amazed at how our churches have so quickly moved to providing online worship. Over the last two weeks I have visited at least 40 of your services. Each time there is inspiring preaching, deeply moving music, and strong connections made. Many of you are reporting a higher than usual attendance at worship, reminding us that people are truly seeking a way to be connected in this time. Thank you! Chris Heckert shares this report from the food collection ministry at Haddonfield UMC:

“The total count of food items that have been delivered is over 1,000 items!!!! Wow!!! It is such a blessing seeing people helping people!!”

The first Easter was hard. It was full of confusion, sadness, disappoint, anger and so many other emotions. Even though Jesus had shared with his followers that his death was not the end, they didn't know what that meant as he was crucified and laid in the tomb.

The women who went to the tomb early on that Easter morning did so out of the duty they had to anoint a body. They ran back to report the tomb was empty—rather than this being good news it frightened them all the more. The disciples dismissed the reports they heard from the women. The followers of Jesus huddled behind closed doors, fearful that they were next.

The joy of Easter unfolded slowly over the next several days and even weeks. The disciples recognized Jesus as they walked with him on the Emmaus road. Jesus was recognized in familiar actions as in the breaking of the bread and sharing of the cup. It was a while before the joy of the resurrection cast out the fear, the doubt and the confusion.

This year I find comfort in remembering the first Easter. We are used to Easter as the big event—going all out to decorate the church, singing our finest music, looking to that moment of singing “Christ the Lord is Risen Today.”

This year we will be worshiping in our homes, huddled much like those first disciples. This year our music will be more low key. This year the scent of lilies will not be surrounding us. Maybe then since this year Easter will unfold for us slowly, we will see it in glimpses. The Good News will penetrate our fears and bring us true joy!

Rest assured, Easter will happen this year! I know that to be true as I witness the many ways in which our churches are finding ways to make sure the Easter message is proclaimed.

More than ever before, I pray that you find the Easter joy that has us proclaim: Christ is Risen, He is Risen Indeed! And in that joy may you reach out to proclaim to others that truth is just the way they are yearning for. May your Easter be blessed in new ways this year as we seek the Good News of the Resurrection!

Deep peace,  
Myrna



# GOD'S LOVE IS BIGGER

*April 1, 2020*



A few days ago, we were out playing catch with my 4-year-old grandson. One of the tosses went awry and the ball rolled across the street. He is well versed in not going into the road! Fallon stood at the curb crying, but also wouldn't let me help him cross the street. He said, "No I have to figure this out!" The next thing we knew he was running on the sidewalk and around the cul-de-sac which got him to the ball. He was proud of himself....and so were we at his creative solution! We offered to help him cross the street to get back, but he was so excited at his solution. All we could do was cheer him as he ran around the cul-de-sac again.

As I ponder on Fallon's actions, I find some lessons for us as we figure our way through this time of anxiety and uncertainty. First, it's ok to stomp our feet and cry how unfair it is! Yet, even as we stomp our feet and cry, we don't have to be paralyzed. Fallon figured something out and ran with it! We have all been thrust into a period where we are going to have to figure out new ways of being the church and spreading the good news of Jesus Christ to the world. And we need each other—sometimes to help figure out the solutions and sometimes to cheer another on as we run with something new.

This time of pandemic is huge...but God's love is bigger. Resting in that truth is what makes it possible to run through our tears and continue to bring God's word to our churches and communities. Together let us continue to spread God's love in Jesus Christ even now. God is with us!!!

As I meet with clergy and laity across the district, I am deeply grateful for the ways in which you have figured out how to do ministry in new ways to ensure the work God has charged us with continues. Using the motto #flattenthefear, Haddonfield UMC continues to find ways to collect needed food for the Cherry Hill Food Pantry, even while keeping to the protocols designed to flatten the curve.

The lead pastor, Rev. Chris Heckert says: "In response to the growing number of people living with food insecurity and the decreased number donations at food banks, members of the Haddonfield UMC have stepped up to share love and hope during a difficult time.

Starting with a video distributed to the greater Haddonfield community, the church invited people to drop off nonperishable food items in a large wooden box placed outside the parking lot to help supply the Cherry Hill Food Pantry. So far, people have donated over 500 items, which have delivered to the CHFP, with new deliveries being made each week."

Please continue to share your good ministries so we can learn best practices from each other, and even now continue to reach out to our churches and communities with the love of Jesus Christ.

Deep peace and prayers,  
Myrna

# THE PRESENCE OF JESUS CHRIST IN THE WORLD

*February 6, 2020*

Last Sunday, I worshiped at Trinity UMC in Gloucester City. When it came time for communion, the Rev. Ed Rusk removed the cover from the tray holding the tiny cups of juice. I happened to be looking directly at the tray and when the cover was removed, it appeared that the tray was surrounded by tiny red LED lights designed to turn on when the tray was lifted. It seemed a bit odd, and I was trying to get my head wrapped around the image! On closer look, I realized that what I was seeing was the light from the Christ candle, shining through each cup of juice and illuminating them. The oddness of what I thought I was seeing disappeared and the beauty of the scene became apparent.

What a fitting image for how God works in our lives. The candle represented the light of Christ; the communion juice a reminder of how the light shines through the ordinary to bring about the extraordinary. It was a beautiful picture. Unfortunately, the picture I took didn't come out, so you will need to use your imagination!

This image has carried me and challenged me this week. As the church, God has trusted us to be the presence of Jesus Christ in the world—to be the ones who let that light shine through us, just as it shined through those communion cups. In receiving the sacraments, we receive the deep grace and mercy of this love in order that the love of God will shine through us as we go out into the world.

As you go through your week, I invite you to keep that image before you and explore the ways you are called to let the love of God shine through you as you live out the trust of being the presence of God's Son.

Peace,  
Myrna



# THE HALLMARK HOUSE

*December 5, 2019*



The ornament pictured above is the 36th in a series of Hallmark houses. For 35 of those years, my mother made sure that she purchased the annual house for me. It was one of the last things that she did before she died. Hallmark releases its new ornaments for the season in July. So, last July right before she died, my mother sent my brother out to purchase the 2018 ornament to be sure that I was up to date. This year, I put off purchasing the ornament until just a few days ago...to buy my own was an acknowledgment that tradition had changed...but, I didn't want it to end at year 35!

That experience got me to thinking a lot about this season we are in the midst of...a season that is filled with all kinds of hope and expectations. We want everything to be perfect and right...only it is not...we still experience change, loss and grief. Traditions change. If our hope is anchored in everything being made right, it's not going to happen, and we will be disappointed.

While we know differently...that our hope is not anchored in worldly perfection, it can be hard to remember when watching the ads and TV shows and frenzy of this season. Somehow the things that aren't right get magnified as we watch the world around us. In the weeks leading up to the celebration of God's love born anew I invite you to remember what truly anchors our hope. I invite you to reach out to those who are going through a season of grief. Reach out to those who are alone. Share with them the good news of Christ's birth. In doing so, we will experience hope and love reborn.

I find the writings of Anne Lamott to ring true in this. In her book, *Stitches, a Handbook on Meaning, Hope, and Repair* she writes: "Every time we choose the good action or response, the descent, the valuable, it builds, incrementally, to renewal, resurrection, the place of newness, freedom, justice. The equation is: life, death, resurrection, hope. The horror is real, and so you make casseroles for your neighbor, organize an overseas clothing drive, and do your laundry. You can also offer to do other people's laundry, if they have recently had any random babies or surgeries." This is hope! We don't try to make sense of all the things that aren't quite right, but we can find meaning in how we live in response to God's good news!

I invite you in this time of waiting and preparation to reach out and bring hope and meaning to a world that waits to hear the Good News of God's love born anew!

Deep peace,  
Myrna



# A NIGHT SCENE

October 24, 2019

*I give thanks to you that I was marvelously set apart. Your works are wonderful—I know that very well.  
Psalm 139:14 (CEB)*

In September, the Rocking Southern Region sponsored a clergy retreat. While there was some teaching and learning components, there was also time for fun and relaxation. One of the fun parts was learning to paint a night scene under the direction of Charlie Kinch. As I watched the eager painters hear Charlie's instructions and pick up their paint brushes, I was struck by how different each canvas was. How could that be, we were all given the same directions at the same time??!!

Musing on that question sent me to one of my favorite Psalms 139. (Ok, there are parts I'm not so happy about—like that killing all the wicked!) The Psalmist writes beautifully about how God creates each one of us, knitting us together wondrously and marvelously. Each one of us is a unique creation, deeply loved by God. We all perceive God's love differently and find different ways to express our gratitude for God's love.

We laughed about how differently our pictures were turning out in spite of the fact we were all given the same materials to work with and the same set of directions to follow. But I came away reminded of the awesomeness of God's creation of human beings truly is—each one of us created in the image of God, but each one of us so unique.

I invite you to take that reminder out into the world with you. First, remember that you are a unique child of God, awesome and marvelous. Then, what does it look like to bring that mindset towards every person you encounter during the day. How would your viewpoint change if you saw not just those like you through this view, but all people—especially those least like you. Again, they too are wondrously and marvelously made in the image of God.

Go out into the world with that challenge. Paint the beautiful canvas God guides you to paint...and see the beauty of the canvas that others are painting!

Deep peace,  
Myrna



# GLIMMER GLASS BRIDGE

September 11, 2019



Growing up we vacationed in Manasquan, NJ with my extended family. That meant six adults and nine kids in a three-bedroom bungalow with one bathroom!

I understand better now why my grandfather spent hours sitting on the beach fishing! Driving into the town, we always hoped for one two events to occur: the Glimmer Glass bridge opening for a boat to pass under, or the train bridge in a down position so we could watch the train go by.

This year we spent the last week of our vacation in Manasquan. As I drove into town, the Glimmer Glass bridge

was up with a long line of traffic, waiting for the boat to travel past. I found myself irritated by the delay, anxious to get to town and start this part of our vacation. Then I remembered the excitement this once brought, turned off the car and looked around for the boat that had caused the bridge opening. It was a time to breathe in the salt air, look for birds and enjoy the view.

I am writing this while listening to the reading of the names of those who died on 9/11. Eighteen years later the impact and loss of that day are still deep. The Glimmer Glass bridge opening is a challenge for me and I hope for you to cherish the fullness of life. It is a reminder to not be so focused on what needs to be accomplished that you miss the excitement of the moment you are in.

Yes, we need to get places and we need to accomplish our tasks. Yet, even in the midst of everything, do not miss the wonders that remind us of the goodness of all God's love for us.

What wonders in your midst are God calling for you to notice and be touched with excitement? Pay attention!

Deep Peace,  
Myrna



# BUMPS IN THE ROAD

*August 1, 2019*

Remember the picture of our road with the 18 ft. deep hole?! Well our road now looks like the picture above. The potholes are all smoothed out and the manhole covers are even with the road. It's smooth sailing.....

But guess what? Many of us in the neighborhood still find ourselves swerving to avoid the bumps and holes in the road, even though they no longer exist. Just yesterday, I found myself turning wide to miss the manhole cover even though the road has been paved for the last month.

This action made me think of how often we do that in our own lives. We continue to hold on to the things that once were necessary long after they are actually needed. Or, we let bad habits continue to weigh us down, keeping us from making any progress.

The writer of Hebrews states: "So then, with endurance, let's also run the race that is laid out in front of us, since we have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us. Let's throw off any extra baggage, get rid of the sin that trips us up, and fix our eyes on Jesus, faith's pioneer and perfecter".

I challenge you to spend some time thinking about what you need to throw off—both personally and as a congregation. What are the things that keep you from focusing your whole attention on God's call?

It is an awesome and fearful truth that God has trusted us to be the very presence of his son Jesus in the world. Let's take to heart the words in Hebrews—throw off the baggage and the sin that trips us, so that we can be God's presence in this world!

I look forward to hearing about the changes.

Peace,  
Myrna



# UNDER CONSTRUCTION

*June 20, 2019*



Since moving to the Gateway South district five years ago, we have battled ongoing road issues: our manhole covers are too high and potholes develop frequently because the roads are only temporary. Lately the situation has become worse, with orange cones on the manhole covers, which all need to be lowered before any permanent paving can be done. A few weeks ago there was a deep hole in the middle of the road, causing drivers to use a neighbor's front lawn to get past the area. Getting in and out of the development is an obstacle course and a challenge, and sometimes means a flat tire!

The under construction image is a great reminder of what it means to be the church. We are living in a time when things are a bit messy and there are a lot of obstacles to navigate—a culture that isn't knocking down our doors, deep theological differences, aging buildings, just to name a few. Sometimes in the midst of this we forget that God is still working on us and with us, because the mess and obstacles are all we see. Our calling to be the Body of Christ in the world is just as valid and compels us to figure out our way through. Just as the people of Israel were guided through the wilderness, God will guide us.

It is tempting to stay in our driveway because of all the road hazards...but that is not practical! We figure our way around the obstacles and our travels continue. The same is true for the church; it is tempting to sit safely in our buildings and do nothing because the challenges are overwhelming. Doing nothing is not an option because God has claimed us for such a time as this and we are called to be faithful knowing that God will see us through!

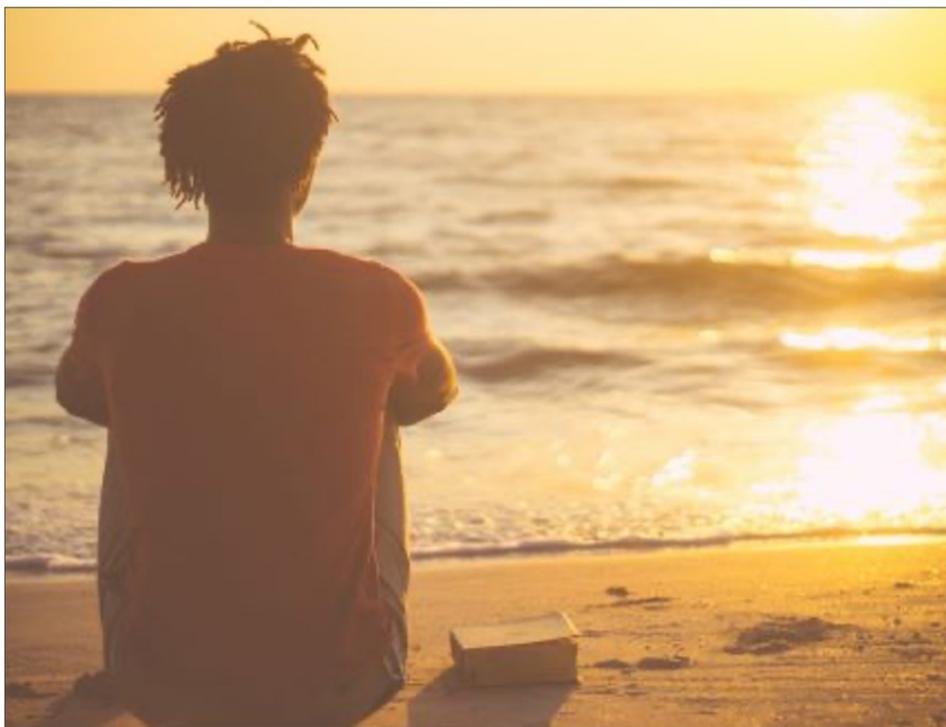
Remember that God is bigger than any challenge the world puts in our way. Even under construction, the church must be the very presence of Jesus Christ in the world. May we be faithful!

Peace,  
Myrna



# GOD HAS THE LAST WORD

May 9, 2019



My imagination was stirred when the Sicklerville UMC sent out an email titled “Correction—He is Risen.” This was simply an update with changes from an prior email titled “He is Risen.” However, it caused me to think about the news headlines posted during holy week into Easter. On Thursday, “Jesus of Nazareth Arrested”; Friday, “Jesus Tried and Convicted” and Saturday, “Jesus Died by Crucifixion”.

All seemed lost on that Saturday. Imagine the emotions of the early disciples: Betrayal, pain, grief, and fear, what do they do?

They were marked as trouble makers, viewed as suspects by the government. They had placed their hope in Jesus’ teachings and life, and yet, all was lost. I see those disciples begin to fall away from each other as they contemplated what was next for each of them.

Then came the headlines on Easter Sunday: “Correction—He is Risen”. The powers that wanted to tear down all that Jesus had done thought they had succeeded on Saturday when his death was announced. Yet Sunday came and they discovered they hadn’t won at all, because God has the last word. God always has the last word!

We live in a time full of Saturday headlines. Many are feeling deeply harmed by the recent General Conference. It is an anxious and painfilled time to be a United Methodist as we struggle to know what is next for the denomination. Many are experiencing deep, personal loss. The world seems out of control on many levels. Many are behaving as if these Saturday events define them.

Friends, our challenge in these times is to decide which headline we will live into. Will the Saturday headline define our behavior, or the Sunday headline—He is Risen! I invite you to have conversations about this challenge in your small groups, in your worship, in your leadership meetings and wherever the opportunity allows. Discuss how you would like others to experience God in their interactions with you. How will others know, as the old song states: They will know we are Christians by our love?

God always has the last word!

Myrna



# IT IS RIGHT TO GIVE OUR THANKS AND PRAISE

*March 14, 2019*

As far back in my church life as I can remember, potluck dinners have been a part of the fabric of my church experience. No matter the reason or the ritual, the basics are pretty much the same: some group is in charge of set up, another group the beverages and so on. After that it's open—everyone brings a dish to feed 6 to 8 people. There have been attempts, with limited success, to plan the dinner, but usually attempts to regulate go unnoticed, and happy chaos prevails.

I think Jesus would have liked pot luck dinners. Jesus was probably familiar with the Middle Eastern proverb: “I saw them eating and I knew who they were.” That doesn't make much sense to us, but anyone living in the time of Jesus would have immediately got its meaning. In his day you could look over a group of dinners and know their status and wealth simply by seeing who was eating which dish and where they were seated. The people who had power and status and place, wanted to keep it that way. Never mind about the people who had no place.

Jesus offended many by his eating behavior. He ate with anyone, didn't follow the ritual cleanliness laws, ate with people who were unclean, outcasts...and worse, said they should have seats of honor. Jesus had no patience for the rigid behavior meal times called for, so I'm sure Jesus would have liked pot luck dinners a lot...with their happy-go-lucky-no-structure attitude. He likely would have resisted all our efforts to tame them into something a bit more predictable.

While we don't really understand the offense that people took at Jesus' challenge to table etiquette, we can understand what it feels like to have our place, our sense of belonging challenged.



Face it...we all want to know we belong, that we are important, that someone notices us...that we have a place. We know how much it hurts when we are excluded. The people who had a place in Jesus' day worried that they would no longer have one if they let Jesus take over running things. How would they know who they were, where they belonged if just anyone could sit down together and share a meal? It's a question that we continue to ask to this day. The problem is the assumption gets made that if we let others in, there won't be room for us. We forget Jesus offers us a place at the table for all. We need to continue to trust that the love of God in Jesus Christ is all-encompassing, big enough to surround all of us and is given for us and for many.

You are loved...claimed and named by the love of Jesus and that is more than enough of a place of honor than anyone can hope for. In response to our place at the table of God's love, our task is to make room at a table for all, knowing that the love of God in Jesus Christ is big enough to hold everyone. Go and make a place for someone who is waiting for the Good News you can bring!

Myrna



*I am leaving you with a gift - peace of mind and heart.  
And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid.  
- John 14:27*



