

THE MESSENGER OF HOPE



The Newsletter of Hope Lutheran Church
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**Fifth Sunday after Epiphany to
the Transfiguration of our Lord**

February 2006



WORDS OF HOPE

by Pastor Curtis Aguirre

(This month, some thoughts about death and grief, based on a sermon I preached at a recent memorial service.)

Think for a moment about the way death is treated in our society today. Our pop culture either pretends that there is no death by obsessing on perpetual youth and by sanitizing death and keeping it hidden away from public view. Or it uses death, and in particular, the act of killing, as a drawing card for sales of video and computer games, movies, and much else.

On the one hand, children grow up in cities, well removed and insulated from the life and death of the chickens and cows and turkeys they eat in their fast food meals or at home. And yet, at the same time they play at warrior and assassin, killing hundreds and thousands of imaginary people before heading off to bed and dreams of power and prowess.

It seems to me that our society has developed a particularly unhealthy relationship to death. In a notable parallel to this, we have also lost the natural instincts around grief and grieving. While in many traditional societies, people are accustomed to wail and cry and allow room for each other to weep publicly, we become acutely uncomfortable at such displays and try all we can to stop people from unnerving us in this way.

And finally in what I see as a most unfortunate evolution in our relationship to death, we have become a society that prefers to forget its ancestors. Many people, after having disposed of the remains of their loved ones never bother to return to that place or any place to pay tribute and remember, intentionally, their deceased mother or father or grandparent. This has created, especially here on

the west coast, a society almost completely unhinged from its past, floating, with people groping around for something to belong to.

All this is simply to say: our relationship with death, grief, and the departed has taken an unfortunate turn toward what I would consider the unhealthy and certainly the unnatural and inorganic.

If you study the many spiritual traditions of the world, you will notice that they all deal in some positive, proactive way, with the natural human anxiety around death and dying. I am currently working my way through the "Tibetan Book of the Dead," and am finding interesting how elaborate and intentional are the many practices and rituals which are recommended to prepare a person for death, to prepare those in attendance with the dying person, and to put into place a theoretical framework for the assumed existence which lies beyond the point of death.

In his introduction to this translation of the "Tibetan Book of the Dead", His Holiness the Dalai Lama writes that for the student of Buddhism, all of life is a preparation for death. What I find fascinating about this is that Christianity used to make the same assertion, but somehow the message got jumbled, the church got caught up in the social trends of western society (the trends which I mentioned at the beginning of this reflection) so that what we are left with is a very watered down message of comfort which we pull out when someone dies, but which is otherwise overlooked or ignored.

For those of you who grew up in pious homes or attended church in your youth, you may remember hearing the message that we should always be prepared for the moment of death, to have our lives in order, our relationships sorted out, and so on. It was put forward as a sort of insurance against being caught off guard and then going to hell. I think it was that last little bit, the going to hell bit, that in some

ways wrecked what was otherwise a very important and wise teaching.

The Christian thinkers of the first 600 years of Christianity did not think about life and death as a choice between heaven and hell. Rather they saw, that in the ongoing work of Christ to bring together the divine with the human, the spiritual with the physical, a person is making a choice about working toward that reconciliation now or leaving it for later. What the western Christian church (the "Medieval Church") would later systematize into the three-fold structure of heaven-purgatory-hell, the early Christian thinkers thought of more fluidly, and certainly more graciously and optimistically.

As we live, we make choices every day about how we treat each other, how we treat God's creatures, and how we treat planet earth. Every choice has consequences. Every choice has an impact on someone or something. The more we make negative choices, the more negativity, destruction, and suffering we bring into the world. The more we make positive choices, the more good, constructive, life giving energy we bring into the world. The real hell is the hell we make for each other, not just in our little circles, but also on the large scale of nations, regions, and the globe as well.

Personal choices made by some people in one part of the world can bring great suffering to people in another part of the world. But by the same token, personal choices made by people in one part of the world can also bring help, opportunity, and hope to people in another part of the world.

Someone who says, "Well, I'll just do whatever I want now, and work it off after I die," has condemned those around them, and perhaps the children and grandchildren of their own and of others, to have to suffer the consequences of this egotistic course of action. The early Christian thinkers imagined that there was certainly some sort of consequence in the beyond for such behaviour. They imagined that coming before the judgment throne of God was the experience of seeing for the first time clearly every choice and action one had taken, and its impact on other people, both positive and negative. If you've ever had a moment of self-recognition, when you realized

what a jerk you had really been, you might imagine magnifying that experience a thousand fold. But just as importantly, there are terrible consequences for so many right here right now. Death is really the end of our opportunities to make the world a better place for people, for God's creatures, and for life on the planet in general.

All of life is indeed a preparation for death, or perhaps, to put it a different way; life is the opportunity to participate in God's mending of a broken world before death brings that opportunity to an end. You could say that death is the deadline to get the task of life done.

I think every time a loved one passes away, every time the wheel of the generations makes another turn, it is a good time to reflect on life, the purpose of life, and especially one's own place in the family, the circle of friends, the community, the nation, and the world. Your time on planet earth will come to an end, perhaps sooner, perhaps a little later, but the time will come. When you reach that place, will you be able to leave behind friends and family with a good conscience? Will you have fulfilled your purpose here? Will you have worked with God's plan to bring love into the world?

Do not flee death, but do not diminish or trivialize it either. First, allow yourself to grieve. Do not hold back. If others are uncomfortable with your grief, that is something they will have to come to terms with in themselves. You have had the loss. You are in grief.

Second, after the initial grief subsides, use this as a time for thoughtful reflection. Reflect now on life and death, so that when the time comes, you will be ready to make the transition from this life to the next, and Jesus' words to his disciples (cf. John 14:1-7 "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.." etc.) will ring as more than merely a religious nicety, but as a welcome invitation to move from the existence of this physical life to a life of pure spirit, a life of reunion with all whom you have known and loved, and probably not only those. (Be prepared?)

And finally, do not forget those who have gone before. Cherish their memories, preserve their stories, and pass them on to the generations ahead. It is your heritage from them to you and your descendants. /*

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING - OFFICIAL ANNOUNCEMENT

The Annual General Meeting of Hope Lutheran Church, Nanaimo, will take place on Sunday, February 26, 2006, beginning at 1:00 p.m. The meeting is open to all, but only members of Hope Lutheran Church are entitled to vote.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

The second Global Film Festival Nanaimo will be held at Malaspina University/College on Feb 17th, 18th and 19th. Thanks to World Community Development Education Society. The coalitions' motto : A Better World Is Possible.

A Bazaar table with Fair Trade Guidelines will be set up on Sat & Sun. A catered dinner will be held on Sat – to reserve Phone – 751-0497

F M I _ Web site: www.nanaimofilmfest.org

The Jan 13th/06 Red Willow Coffee House crowd was entertained by local performer Ken Ham. Ken was the main feature of the evening while other excellent artists shared the open stage invitation as well.

Proceeds of the event went to the local Mental Health Fund.

Jan Nilsson announced his intention, along with Gerry Owen and Charlie Fox that they plan to bicycle across Canada. Jan said this is something he has wanted to do for quite some time, now; aside from doing it for the fun of it - he has a cause. That cause is to bring more public and positive awareness to those who suffer from various mental illnesses. We look forward to hearing more about this as plans unfold. Starting date is May 1st /06, the beginning of Mental Health Week.

Thanks to all who participated in the Coffee House evening. Their talents, attendance, and donations of food, support and energy made it a great success.

CHARITY OF THE MONTH - FEBRUARY 2006

Three brave and visionary individuals from our congregation will bicycle across Canada this year May through July in something they are calling "Ride Into Light." The goal is to raise the awareness of, and help to reduce the stigma around mental illness (see the Chairperson's article in this edition for more information). Moneys raised along the route will go toward established Canadian Mental Health Association projects, but there are still the costs to the riders and their support drivers to consider. If you would like to help defer some of the cost of the trip, please indicate so on the line on your envelopes for "Charity of the Month."

WORKSHOPS

February 2006 Sacred Balance programs:

Understanding Your Gifts and Your Motivations: an Enneagram introduction:

January 11 and 18 classes have been postponed to Feb 17, Friday evening and Saturday Feb 18. Cost remains the same at \$90.00

To register by phone: 250-248-3114, by email sacredbalance@shaw.ca or contact Peggy McManus.

FOUNDATIONS OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

Due to scheduling complications, the class for potential new members and other interested individuals taught by Pastor Curtis will have to be postponed until after Easter.

At this point the dates of the class are tentatively set for the four consecutive Wednesdays of April 19 & 26, and May 3 & 10 running from 7:00 p.m. till 9:00 p.m. Please be watching for more details and a sign-up sheet closer to the time.

REPORT FROM THE CHAIR

by Jan Nilsson

Ride into Light Canadian bicycle tour May 1 to July 31.

So it takes about 8 hrs to cover 104 km on a bicycle including a couple of stops a long the way. Our tour crossing Canada will on average be 100 km per day with the longest distance being 146.5 km on the prairie. My o my can we do it? It sounds so far. But every journey starts with the first step or in our case the first pedal?

Gerry, Charlie and I have been riding from Nanaimo to Chimanus and back almost every Thursday since last fall. Some Thursdays, if it rains too much, we use our stationary bikes. Some of you may wonder why we don't bike in the rain, as we surely will have to come May when we are on our tour. All I can say is that we have a choice now but on the tour we don't. Plain and simple.

My route to day was from my place on Rutherford Ridge through Cedar where I met up with Charlie. We then continued around the Yellow point road toward Ladysmith. By the way it was a glorious day and a glorious bicycle ride. You should have been there. We strained our muscles up the hills and felt the cold air against our faces racing down hill. Riding a bicycle allows you to feel every bump in the road, smell the air (and the farms), hear the birds and see the plants. There is no life like it. Hmmm I seem to recall that saying is already taken, oh never mind.

We stopped at Ladysmith at about 11:30 am for the obligatory Tim Horton coffee break and knowing the value of a dollar I had brought my own sandwich this time. We continued to upper Ladysmith. Ladysmith is hilly don't you know. We ventured onto a trail, along Holland creek, that eventually disappeared but not before we biked through the most beautiful Arbutus forest. It was magnificent. I have never seen so many Arbutus trees in my life in any one place. But eventually we got back on the road and continued back to Nanaimo. Charlie kept me

company part way before he turned back for Ladysmith and I continued home. So now I'm just relaxing at home feeling my legs stiffening up a bit but not too bad. It really feels good.

We have named our cross Canada bicycle tour "Ride into light". We feel the name describes the goal of the ride to raise awareness of the stigma attached to mental illness. Our ride will be a struggle in it self, paralleling the struggle those afflicted with mental illness have. Success then is for us to complete our ride in St. John's and through all those who supported us along the way maybe we succeeded in raising awareness and some funds for mental illness.

AGM

Don't forget February 26 is AGM Sunday.

God's blessing - Jan

FINANCIAL REPORT TO CONGREGATION - YEAR END 2005

This is a short version of the year 2005 in review that will be presented at the Hope AGM February 26.

In one sentence, Hope Lutheran Church accomplished a lot this year. This was a year of disasters around the world, starting with the Indian Ocean tsunami at the end of 2004, the hurricanes hitting New Orleans (twice), the large earthquake in Pakistan towards the end of the year, as well as continuing problems elsewhere in the world. The Hope community gave with great generosity – over \$6000 to these causes alone. We also repaved the driveway in the spring, and completed an emergency roof repair late in November. We tied up our support to the Ingria Mission – Our Saviour Lutheran in Richmond will be continuing this ministry. We had our long-time church secretary retire in the summer, and many members stepped forward to volunteer in this time of need. We finished paying back the loan to one of our members.

With this long list of accomplishments, we started and ended the year borrowing no money from the bank! Attendance remained the same as the previous year, yet total offerings increased

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THE CONUNDRUM OF CUBA - PART 1

Some excerpts from a recent letter of reflections and observations by Rev. Brain Rude, our ELCIC's missionary to El Salvador -- he works as a prison chaplain in a youth detention centre

It is well-nigh impossible for anyone to write or speak objectively about Cuba, Cuba having become as much symbol as reality. For some it is a symbol of evil, for others a symbol of hope. It would be presumptuous to suppose that a three-week visit would qualify me to determine which of the two convictions is closer to the truth. Of course I went with a bias from the start--a bias sometimes confirmed, sometimes challenged. Sensations ranged from being in paradise to being in prison.

Unfortunately, my welcome to Cuba felt more like the latter. It seemed like a regular day at work, entering a prison, with a new and unfamiliar guard on duty. All the contents of my pockets were checked, including my snot-rags. I was ushered through a metal detector, as though I were boarding a plane. From the exit end of the detector, I was asked about an article in my small backpack, and ushered away by a security guard. I wondered if I was being arrested. They were concerned about a DVD device, one which I was delivering for a Salvadoran friend who travels regularly to Cuba, and who hadn't conceived of this item causing any trouble... I was charged US\$40 for a used device purchased in El Salvador for US\$25, the first time in my life I've ever paid customs duty. Welcome to Cuba!

My host was late in picking me up, due to a flat tire, I learned. From then on, he never let me down, treating me like a VIP throughout my 16 days in Havana, assisted by his girlfriend. They served not only as hosts, but as chefs, chauffeurs, tour guides, tutors, even laundry personnel, practically full-time. His years of experience as an engineer and hers as a physician broadened their range of care. His sisters and the rest of his family treated me equally well during the few days I spent in Santiago de Cuba,

at the eastern end of the island. Considering that it was illegal for them to host me and drive me around, without special permission from the government--not likely to be granted except for a longer-term, heavily-taxed tourist enterprise--I was especially grateful to them for their consistent care. I trust they will have suffered no unwelcome consequences...

Experiencing Cuba through their eyes and lives, and through those of many of their family, friends, neighbours and colleagues, not only made my trip much more economical than if I'd travelled as a tourist--in a country where there is no backpack-class tourism, with hostels and guest houses, but only pricey hotels--but also much more profound and realistic. They felt freer to share their impressions with me than they could with many of their compatriots.

In Havana, I had much time and opportunity to wander around, sometimes with my guide(s), more often alone... I have never been propositioned by so many prostitutes, pimps, sellers of contraband such as rum and cigars and occasionally drugs, anywhere in the world, including infamous Bangkok. I could not even walk slowly, let alone sit down, without being propositioned by someone. I guess it was low tourist season, so their range of potential clients was reduced. I did develop my own litany of creative responses, to transform such recurring nuisances into entertainment. While the investment in the state tourist industry has led to the renovation and construction of many classy hotels, fascinating museums, inspiring galleries, lovely parks and historical monuments, this downside of the tourist trade I found rather distressing... [To be continued...]

The deadline for the March Messenger is Friday, February 24. Please send your submissions to the office at hopeluth@nanaimo.ark.com or (250)758-1232. You can also speak to Olena directly or email at mind-body@telus.net.

FAITHLIFE BRINGS BENEFITS TO YOU AND YOUR CHURCH

Everyone knows by now that this is the “RRSP season”. This is also a good time to remind you that it is the easiest time to become a FaithLife Financial (FLF) Member. Then you, and your Church, can start receiving our new, enhanced Fraternal Benefits. A booklet on these is available in Church, or you can visit our Web Site www.faithlifefinancial.ca.

To become a FLF Member, open an FLF RRSP account with the money you would otherwise take to your Financial Services Provider as a “last minute top-up for 2005”, prior to the 1 March 2006 deadline. FLF RRSP’s can include either fixed income ESA’s (GIC) or Fortress seg funds.

RRSP’s are an excellent tax-saving and personal financial planning program, and should be a key part of everyone’s financial plan. They allow tax-free compounding and defer income tax until you are in a lower tax bracket. A “Spousal RRSP” is also a great tax saving device in later years.

There are a few additional points you might also want to think about with your family’s RRSP’s.

Most importantly, people with spouses must ensure their spouse is beneficiary to get the benefit of tax-free rollover on their premature death. Your kids (or anyone else) would pay tax on any inherited RRSP money, unless they are both disabled and financially dependent on you.

Suppose your spouse dies with you in a common accident? Then tax WILL be paid by your estate, likely at 35-43% since your Executor must take it into your final year’s income – in full!

The ONLY way this tax can be avoided is to give it to your Church and/or favourite charity(ies), since charitable deductions up to 100% of income are allowed (only) in your final tax returns.

How is this done? Simply make the church/charity a “Contingent Beneficiary”, which means they only benefit if your spouse also dies within 30 days. Your will should be updated to clarify your intent, but the key signature is on the Beneficiary Form with your RRSP financial institution.

People without spouses can do the same, simply by naming the church/charity the beneficiary.

What about your family, and their inheritance expectations? If you haven’t already, try asking them what they expect. In many cases they may NOT be expecting this “windfall”, since it’s your nest-egg for retirement. They may not be as unhappy as you might think, if it all goes to charity.

Finally, there may be a way to preserve the entire value of the RRSP (or RRIF) for your family. Use inexpensive joint-last-to-die life insurance to pay the tax, if you can both buy life insurance. It’s cheaper of course to do this when you are young (and healthy).

For more information on this, and how to become an FLF Member and enjoy the FLF Fraternal Benefits, please call/e-mail me at any time.

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(cont. Financial Report)

while expenses went down.

Yet, offerings were still about 4% below the expenses. I have included the detailed breakdown of offerings and expenses, as well as the budget for the coming year. Highlights of the budget include: no paid secretary for the coming year, a youth worker, increased benevolence to the BC Synod, and a budget decrease of about 5%.

Please review these documents in preparation for the AGM. If there are any questions, please see me before then. Otherwise, see you February 26th.

Arnold Gill, Treasurer
Hope Lutheran Church