

“The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth.” (Wisdom 8: 22-23)

The world has changed a lot since our days of growing up, hasn't it? Whether you were born closer to the 19th century or to the 21st, the world has changed since you were young. Centenarians reflect on the changes they have seen—the kind of changes that are in history books. A Great Falls man, Walter Breuning, at 113, is known as the world's oldest man. Every year on his birthday the Governor comes to see him for wisdom. And he gives it. But whether you are 113 or 13, life has changed.

9/11 changed many things about how we operated as a country, how we saw ourselves, how safe we felt, what our priorities were. After 9/11 we got concrete barriers around our state capitol building, passports to go to lunch in the next town over in Canada, a whole new list of do's and don't's for flying, and a general wariness about...people not like us, and a couple of wars that don't seem to be going away. 9/11 changed a whole lot. Life has changed. But God is faithful

The economic crisis of the last two years has had a similar effect on Americans. Whether it is high unemployment, slashed pensions, re-possessioned homes, cutbacks in schools and libraries and public services, almost nobody has gone unaffected by the last two years. No longer is the sky the limit. No longer is unlimited growth the expectation for ordinary people like us. The recession has changed a whole lot. Life has changed. But God is faithful.

Actions taken at our last churchwide assembly have set off a chain of reactions that have resulted in a great change across our church. The big change is not that there are a couple of same-gendered partnered pastors serving in a couple of our 10,000 plus churches. The big change is that some congregations and individuals no longer value the unity of the church over their own scruples.[The big change is that a number of individuals and congregations think that this is a deal-breaker, this is church-dividing.] And that is indeed a change. But God is faithful.

God is faithful amidst the change.

When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth.

God is faithful. And we are God's people.

Change is hard. Moses didn't want to lead the people out of Egypt—he didn't want to have anything to do with it. Miriam did not want to change—she did not want to have to find a new role for herself. Change is hard. But change is opportunity. And God is faithful.

*Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills I was brought forth—
When he had not yet made earth and fields, or the world's first bits of soil.*

People all over the Montana Synod are wrestling with change. For almost every change, some people rejoice while others grieve. A pastor moves on and the congregation has to decide what to do next. The community shrinks, and the congregation can no longer afford to go it alone. The synod office decides to “go green,” and suddenly you are printing it all out on your

home printer! Sunday school and confirmation are not the priority they used to be—nothing can compete with sports. People are looking at the Bible in new ways that challenge what we always thought and assumed. Change is hard. But change is opportunity. And God is faithful in the midst of change.

We do not have as many members as we used to. We do not have as many congregations as we used to. We do not have the captive audience of northern European immigrants and their descendents to fill our pews and support our ministries. So what are we going to do about it?

We have the great unchurched area of Northern Wyoming and Montana to share the good news and live out our calling as called, redeemed, forgiven children of God, marked by the cross of Christ forever, abundantly blessed, faithfully serving God and neighbor. These folks are God's beloved children, just as we are. Beet-pickers and oil wildcatters, students and radiation techs. Geneticists and day care operators, casino workers and farmers. Teachers and ranchers, office workers and food service. Snowbirds and prisoners, people serving on military bases, living on reservations, living in institutions. The homeless, the unemployed, the forgotten, the prominent. All are beloved by God. And God is faithful.

When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep,

Some of us spent some time before the Assembly started in “Holy Conversations.” What we discussed was what it means to be the church. And that is changing. It has changed. Some of the changes are welcome. Some of them are wrenching. And what is wrenching to some is welcome to others. We react to change in different ways. But like it or not, change is inevitable. One of my favorite hymns at times like this is “The Church of Christ in Every Age.” I love the first verse that goes:

“The church of Christ, in ev’ry age beset by change, but Spirit led,
Must claim and rest its heritage and keep on rising from the dead.” (ELW 729)

I love that challenge—to keep on rising from the dead. Because we are a resurrection people. We are a people who know that God is faithful, that God does not abandon us, that God gives us the strength and wisdom and wherewithal to face new challenges in a new age.

When he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master worker;

So. Our church is changing. A dozen congregations have left, another dozen are in the process of deciding what to do. Our synod benevolence is way down, and we have a lot of thinking and praying and reimagining to do. What is God calling us to do in this time and place? How is God calling us to function as this interconnected organism, this Body of Christ in which when one member stumbles, we all feel the pain, when another member decides to secede, we all feel the loss deeply.

Although this is primarily a theological conference, focusing on education, we will, this weekend, adopt a budget for 2011. A budget is always a guess. But it is also a hope. And it is a promise. When the Synod Council adopted the 2011 budget in February to propose to you at this assembly, we operated out of hope that we could continue to fund most of our ministry partners

at close to the same levels. Lutheran Social Services took a big loss, but others were spared as we sought to operate out of hope. Some congregations have challenged the rest of us by upping their pledge to the wider church despite a bad economy. And some have dipped into savings in order to come through with what they had promised.

Other congregations have reduced or eliminated their giving to the wider church, either because of financial difficulties, or because of unhappiness with the ELCA. It is the responsibility of every ELCA congregation to contribute to the mission of the wider church through synod benevolence. There you have it. Law. But also Gospel. Because it is a privilege to be able to share, to stretch, to give freely and to give often. It is a gift to be relieved of having to decide where every penny goes, whether the recipient is truly worthy and agrees with you on all points. God is faithful. And I am calling on us to be, too.

If your congregation has cut back giving, talk about it. Talk about the ministries of the church that are supported by our generous undesignated giving—social services and campus ministry, seminaries and colleges, missionaries at home and abroad, rural outreach, advocacy, studies, publications, disaster relief and development, gatherings of youth and more and more. If your congregation has maintained or increased your giving, thank you. You are helping to carry those who are not willing or able to participate. And yet we are all part of this same body. We are all interdependent. We are all beloved by God. And God is faithful.

*And I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.*

So what does it mean to be the church in these times? What does it mean to be the Body of Christ in Montana, Northern Wyoming, North America and the world? Listen to what our constitution says: “The Church is a people created by God in Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, called and sent to bear witness to God’s creative, redeeming and sanctifying activity in the world.” Created by God in Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, called and sent to bear witness to God’s creative, redeeming and sanctifying activity in the world. That’s pretty good, isn’t it? You should take a look at your congregation’s constitution some time—that should be in it. Constitutions may sound boring and arcane, but they’re not. They define us and give us our parameters. And, as some congregations find out to their chagrin—they sometimes keep us from doing what we think is the right thing. So it really is a good idea to check out your constitution on a regular basis.

But today I am not looking for flaws—I am looking for inspiration. Because it is so easy to get sidetracked—to think the church is the building or the budget or the attendance records or a consensus on political, theological or social issues. And it is not. All that is part of what we do, how we function. But it is not what defines us as church. What defines us as church is: Created by God in Christ; empowered by the Holy Spirit; called and sent to bear witness to God’s creative, redeeming and sanctifying activity in the world.” What a challenge! What freedom!

Now our constitution goes on to list a whole lot of other things, setting out what a synod is to do, what a congregation is to do, what a pastor is to do, what the wider church is to do. And I strongly suggest that you take a look at those as a way to challenge and ground you.

We are a church with a strong confession of faith. We confess the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the Gospel as the power of God for salvation of all who believe. Jesus is the Word made flesh. Scriptures are the written Word of God, inspired by God's Spirit, authoritative source and norm of the church's proclamation, faith and life. We accept the historic creeds as confessions of our faith, and the confessional writings in the Book of Concord. We are a church with a strong theology. (Some of our ecumenical colleagues even rib us about it—our strong theology can become a source of pride, God forbid.)

But it is not rigid. It is not exclusive. It is grace-filled, grace-led, grace-inspired. That's what keeps us from being insufferable. Mostly. Grace. God is faithful.

Our church is a big church, an interconnected church. Before all of us were on the world wide web, before Tom Friedman wrote about the flattening of the earth through global connectivity, the ELCA was a church body that articulated interdependence as a core value, as a good thing. We need one another—individual to individual, congregation to congregation, synod to synod, church body to church body, and all across the spectrum. Our structure reflects that principle of interdependence, of the importance of all the members of the body of Christ. This synod assembly is designed to be made up of 2 lay persons for every pastor. The laity get twice as many votes as the pastors, and that is not the case in all denominations. The same is true with the churchwide assembly, to which we will be electing voting members in this assembly.

We have lines of accountability in our church, but we are not a top-down church. Policies are made by the people, not by the leaders. The churchwide assembly is the highest authority in the church structure, not the presiding bishop; the synod assembly is the highest authority in the synod structure, not the bishop. Social statements are from the assembly, proposed by the assembly, authorized by the assembly, and accepted or rejected by the assembly. Anyone who tells you that social statements are imposed from on high on unsuspecting congregations simply does not know how our system works. And anyone who tells you that if you do not agree with a portion of a social statement, or more that you don't belong in the ELCA simply does not know how our church operates.

Social statements are not a litmus test for who belongs in the ELCA and who does not. This tent is big enough for us all. Social statements are the starting point for a conversation that the church has with others in society on important issues of the day. Social statements are one of the ways that we attempt to live out our faith, and "bear witness to God's creative, redeeming, and sanctifying activity in the world." As I have traveled the Synod this last year I have been asked again and again: "Why do we have to have social statements? Don't they just divide us?" And the answer is that we have social statements to help us have a voice in the issues of the day, the issues of the world that God so loved as to die for it, the issues that arise in as Wisdom "rejoices with God in his inhabited world and delights in the human race."

As a church, as a denomination we have chosen to be present in the world, to interpret the challenges and problems of our society through our strong biblical and theological and ethical tradition. So we have social statements on education, on health care, on the environment, on human sexuality, to engage the conversation in our churches and in the public sphere on these issues of today. And we have another social statement coming up in 2011—Genetics. And

2013—Criminal Justice. And 2015—Justice for Women. Are these the last word on these issues? No. But they are the faithful word of a church that struggles mightily to mine the depths of scripture and tradition to share words of hope and of caution to a broader audience.

Do you want to learn more about social statements? You can find all 10 on the ELCA website, www.elca.org. And you can find a statement on why we have social statements. The first draft of the genetics statement is there, and we are offering a workshop on it, with Dr. Christine Holler-Dinsmore. Check it out. Pastor Steve Rice, of Miles City, is on the task force that will present the statement on Criminal Justice in 2013. Talk to him. Check it out. The theme of the Theological Conference all day tomorrow is education. We have a social statement on education. (We're in favor of it.) The statement should be in your packets. And, thanks to Kathy Kelker, we are offering a workshop on it. Check it out.

When I gave my first report to the Synod Council almost 3 years ago, I outlined my vision of the Synod. The Synod Council adopted my 5 points as the emphases for the 5 next years, and we are now into year 2, the year of education. And that is the theme for our Assembly and Theological Conference. (If you want to know the others, they are: 1. Word and Sacrament; 2. Education; 3. Shared Ownership; 4. Ecumenical, Interfaith and Expansive Culturally; 5. Engaging the world. Each year we will focus our assembly on these themes.)

Lutherans are known for education. Martin Luther was a professor of Bible and a campus pastor, lecturer, and published author! Luther's conversion experience, as it were, was not an emotional encounter so much as an intellectual earthquake. We value an educated clergy, and make sure that we train our pastors. In the US we are among the few denominations who continue to have strong seminaries, supported by the church. We value an educated laity. That is why Martin Luther wrote the small and large catechisms that we still use today—to educate the laity. Whether it is congregational programs of education for all ages, family programs, synod and ecumenical programs to train lay leaders, lay schools of theology, church colleges, continuing education centers, camps, social ministries—we value education.

Near the beginning of the ELCA we engaged in a groundbreaking Study of Theological Education. There were unfinished issues at the beginning of the ELCA, unresolved differences that the merger didn't solve, so there were some task forces formed to deal with these things. Our own Pastor Paul Seastrand served on the Ministry Study Task Force, where they wrestled mightily with issues of ministry. The Theological Education Task Force was formed, in part, to answer the question of how do we deal with 8 seminaries—do we really need them all? And the answer was amazing. It was: we don't need less theological education, we need more! And so for the last dozen or more years, we have had here in the west the Western Mission Network, which is an unstructured, non-hierarchical gathering of representatives of providers of theological education in the west—seminaries, colleges, social ministry organizations, camps, campus ministries, our own NRIT, independent organizations, and more! It is an example of the interdependence and interconnectedness that is our church at its best.

Tomorrow we celebrate and explore and experience education as a core part of our Lutheran Christian vocation. The Rev. Dr. Jessicah Duckworth is a young Lutheran scholar of Christian education at a seminary of one of our full communion partners—Wesley Seminary. The Rev. Dr. Mark Gravrock, our Book of Faith Coordinator, will lead us in Bible Study. Elaine Ryan, our Wellness Coordinator, will keep your circulation moving through early morning wellness walks, and reminders at all the elevators that you can use the stairs! Morning devotions

are provided by the LPA class in eastern Montana—as part of their learning how to produce and lead worship. Workshops on every aspect of education are coordinated by Kathy Slehofer, as part of her education and training to be an Associate in Ministry. And after the banquet, to remind us that we also learn through the arts, Jeni Fleming will be presenting a concert for us at the Babcock theater down the street.

As always, we have representatives from our colleges and seminaries here with us to speak and to host the breakfasts. Our Sunday Assembly Offering will go to scholarships for Montana Synod seminarians, and we'll be hearing from Paul Hanson, who coordinates that fund in the ELCA Endowment office. We'll also be hearing from Dan Lehman, the Editor of the Lutheran Magazine. And if you don't subscribe to the Lutheran, do. It is a great source of information about the church, and you just can't beat it. And representing the Bishop is Beth Lewis, President and CEO of Augsburg Fortress, the ministry of publication of the ELCA. You will be hearing from her on Sunday, about the whole church. And you can direct questions to her by writing them on the hot pink forms before Saturday night. Beth Lewis is also doing a workshop on leadership during the Saturday sessions. We are so glad to have you with us!

At this Assembly we are moving forward in our mission as God's people. Tonight at our Opening Worship Service we will install our new Mission Table. This group, under the leadership of our Director for Evangelical Mission, Pastor Dave Peters, is the think tank for mission—for evangelism, stewardship, outreach, new ministries. We will support them with our prayers tonight. And we will support them with our benevolence over the coming year. Throughout the weekend you'll hear about some of the things that are happening in our Synod. A Prison Congregation at Deer Lodge in the works. Another Growing in God's Field event in Helena, October 10-11. A Glocal Formation Gathering in Billings August 6-7. An across-the-border event in January with the Synod of Alberta and the Territories focusing on rural life. The recognition of a new class of Lay Pastoral Associates. On Sunday we will welcome a new congregation, All Saints of Big Sky—a congregation that is federated with one of our full communion partners, the Episcopal Church. And our preacher for that morning will be the Bishop from our newest full communion partner—the United Methodist Church.

I encourage you to participate fully in this assembly and theological conference, and in this wonderful church of ours. In one of the workshops and on Sunday you will hear more about a churchwide brainstorming process that asks for your input on the future of our church. Living into the future together (LIFT) asks you to participate in shaping the vision for the church to come. These are exciting times. And God is faithful.

*Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?
On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand:
Beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out:
"To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live."
Change is hard. But God is faithful.*