

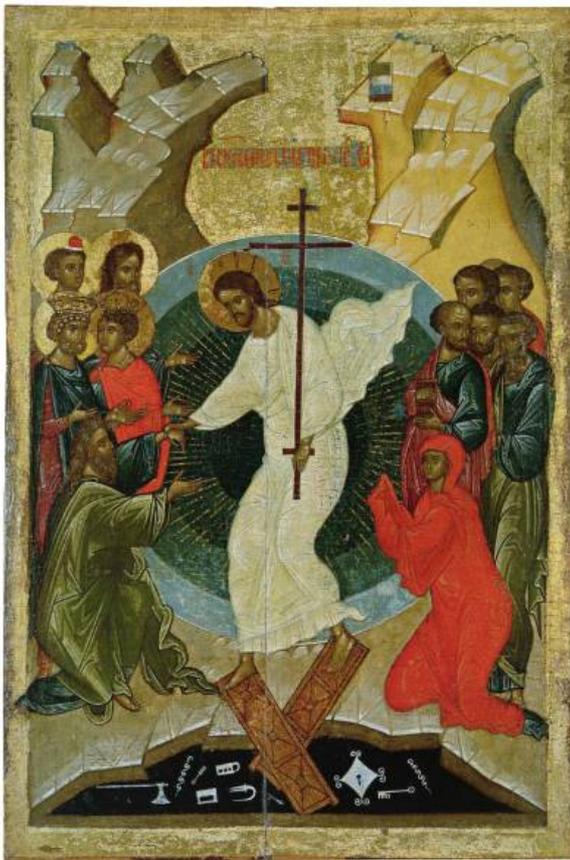
Holy Saturday

Dear friends,

This year, unlike the previous few since moving back into educational ministry, I had the responsibility of leading Holy Week services. As I visited scattered congregations in south central Siberia, I heard the story of Jesus' last week again and again. I heard the words of his betrayal and arrest, of his physical and emotional anguish, of the violence against him; it is a story of how the Lord endures it all with human vulnerability and with Divine love and forgiveness.

Today, Holy Saturday, is a quiet day in our liturgical calendars. In many Western churches it has little meaning on its own except as preparation for the celebration of Easter. Our brothers and sisters in the Eastern Orthodox Church, however, associate the day before Easter with the Harrowing of Hell. This probably makes little impression on most of us. It seems to me that there is no other phrase in the creed that receives so little attention as "he descended into hell/ the dead;" the wording itself doesn't come directly from the Bible, and the way it is interpreted varies not just between denominations, but within them.

The implications of this phrase from the creed, however, are widely accepted and clear - Christ really died; in his death, death was defeated and our salvation was accomplished. It is this moment, and not the empty tomb as such, that is depicted on canonical icons of the Resurrection in the Eastern church. Standing on the fallen gates of the "Doors of Death" and surrounded by righteous people from the Old Testament, Jesus pulls Adam (or both Adam and Eve) up out of Hades, which is depicted at the



bottom of the icon as a chasm of darkness, often with various pieces of broken locks and chains strewn about. Sometimes personifications of Death and/or the Devil are shown in the darkness, bound in chains. Rowan Williams in his book *The Indwelling of Light* interprets the icon: As [Christ's] hand grasps the hands of Adam and Eve, Jesus goes back to embrace the first imaginable moment of rebellion and false direction in human life...he goes fully into the depths of human agony. He reaches back to and beyond where human memory begins: 'Adam and Eve' stand for wherever it is in the human story that fear and refusal of God began--not a moment we can date in ordinary history, any more than we can date in the history of each one of us where we began to forget God. But we are always dealing with the after-effects of that moment, both as a human race and as particular persons. The icon declares that wherever that lost moment is or was, Christ has been there, to implant the possibility, never destroyed, of another turning, another future..."

This year this message has particular meaning for me. After the terrorist attack earlier this month in the St. Petersburg subway, after all the subsequent news of violence in this country, in the Middle East, back home in America, the depths of our fallen state are as clear as ever. And not just in a way that is "out there," far away, but right

around me, within me. It is the renewed sense of the prison that is sin that helps me appreciate anew the words of the traditional Orthodox hymn:

***Christ is risen from the dead,
Trampling down death by death,
And upon those in the tombs
Bestowing life!***

Christ is the victor – even our best-intended attempts to win will fail. It is only in the Kingdom of God, initiated by Christ, that death and sin are no more. Let us put our trust, then, in the one who with dignity and love suffered so that we might have true life.

Your brother in Christ, Bradn

Renewal and Hope – Part 3

In my last two newsletters to you I spoke about the courses on congregational strategic development that were led through the “Equipping for Service” program at various sites around Siberia. This issue is an important one for the Russian Lutheran church, and this spring presented a new opportunity to spread and deepen our work in this area at a retreat held for leaders of five congregations in the Omsk area.



«Asset Mapping» with participants from Azovo, Omsk region

We had time together for singing, fellowship and prayer, but most of the weekend was dedicated to lessons related to analysis of a congregation's situation, its gifts and its potential call as the people of God in that place. In addition to study and application of the book of Acts, we also covered materials that are applicable to almost any organization regarding life-cycles, focus and goal-setting. The mix of the practical and theoretical, of the human and divine elements of the church, brought a lot of life to our discussions, work and plans.

I'm especially pleased with that result given that it is the first time I've led this topic on my own. We were hindered a bit by a lack of time such that we did less *concrete* ministry planning than I had hoped. On the other hand, it must be acknowledged

that these topics are totally new for most people here, and so it may be unrealistic to expect to move so quickly.

Area Dean Vladimir Vinogradov, the seminar's co-organizer, and I agreed that it will be important to find good ways to follow up with those who attended; we're looking in to further seminars or congregational consultation as options. We will see where God leads us, as we strive to continue to increase the capacity of the Russian church to spread Christ's love.

Tea with Milk, Paul with Luther, Bashkortostan with Sisters and Brothers

It is hard for me to say which part of my ministry I enjoy more - returning to congregations where I have already been (which gives me the chance to see how God has been working there since my last visit) or coming to a place for the first time. The latter not only allows to meet new brothers and sisters in faith but, almost without exception, teaches me something new about the country where I am serving. This is particularly true, I've found, when visiting regions of the country with significant regional ethnic and/or religious differences. This was the case when I visited Ufa, the capital of Bashkortostan, a majority-Muslim region in the eastern part of European Russia. In my five days there I noticed how people looked, the architecture and pace of life, the tea they drank (Bashkir or not, everyone drank it with milk)... all differed from any other place where I had been. Ufa showed me that this huge country can continue to surprise.

The Lutheran congregation in Ufa, however, fit in to a pattern I have seen in many places - a strong lay woman, inspired by her faith and driven by a God-given strong will, accomplishes the miraculous. In this case her name is Elvira; she (not single handedly, of course, but certainly as the leader of the charge) was able to get the local government to return the congregation's historical building. Not only that, she is able to find sponsors - in this case most of them local - to restore the "kirche," today their building is a small but beautiful church snuggled in Ufa's historical center. But the story doesn't stop there. Elvira was able to find a way to dismantle the warehouses that had been built in Soviet times on former church property and have built in their place a new congregational center. As sometimes is the case here, while all of these practical concerns have been on the front burner, congregational life as such has been given less of a priority. A clear witness to this fact - Sunday worship in which large parts of the liturgy are translated from German into Russian. It is hardly a satisfactory worship experience for anyone new, and certainly unnecessary when there there are no exclusively German speaking people in the congregation.

Pastor Igor Zhuravlev joined me for this seminar to help me teach on “Paul and Luther.” While I have taught on these topics many times, I thought that for a multiple-day event it would be very helpful for the participants if there were more than one teacher. Igor, after finishing the seminar, got a Master's degree in theology from a Christian university in St. Petersburg, and both he and I have been looking for a good opportunity to put it to use. Originally I had thought that it would be the two of us teaching, but in the end Anton Tikhomirov joined us to take part in two days of teaching and in order to be the central speaker at a public theological conference on the 500th anniversary of the Reformation organized through the congregation. While these changes led to greater cost for transport, this seminar's overall expenses were kept low thanks to local contributions (which covered room, board, and local transport).

Our time in Ufa was broken up into a number of segments – teaching for 20 or so members from the Bashkortastan and



Theological Conference in the church

Orenburg deaneries, the conference, a youth group meeting (the first time I've led youth group for many years; besides having good discussion with the youth, we also had a good time pelting one another with snowballs) and worship.

The wonderful facilities and hospitality in Ufa created a very positive environment for such seminars. There seemed to be a hunger there to expand and deepen congregational life and, while the topic was challenging for those who are not used to dealing with theology, I found that the participants were good, engaged listeners. I pray that as they look forward to their next steps I can help play a positive role in their journey of discipleship.

Reformation and Partnership

From my first year in Russia I've been blessed by the presence of mission workers from the Presbyterian Church (USA) here. THE PCUSA has a very interesting vision of mission here; instead of trying to establish congregations of their own denomination, they put their efforts into helping those churches that have historical roots in the country. Most of their contacts have been with the Baptist and Orthodox churches, but they've supported the Lutheran church in significant ways, too. Two of those that have been most significant in my ministry - Joseph Kang's teaching of Biblical subjects at the Theological Seminary in Novosaratovka, and Ellen Smith's work partnering congregations.

Ellen has been a good friend and colleague throughout the years, and together with her husband Al they have been really good people with whom to reflect on life and ministry here. We've had ideas about how to actually work together in the past, but only this year did it gain concrete form....and in two different ways within one week. More about the second of those below, but the first is related to my latest trip to the Northern Caucasus deanery near the end of March.

Dean Sergey Maramzin and I had spoken about the continued need of folks in his deanery to gain a sense of what the Lutheran branch of the Christian family is and what it might mean for us to build up the church in this region. With that general idea in mind, we developed a couple of goals for a seminar through the "Equipping for Service" project: 1. To help congregational leaders become "local experts" on Luther and the events of the Reformation in this important anniversary year. 2. To make a first attempt to use the new deanery retreat center for an educational event. Sergey has been working very hard to construct (much with his own hands) a building that could be used for deanery-wide events or simply for individuals looking for a place of spiritual restoration. Having the seminar planned pushed Sergey to make the place livable by the date we had set.

While we were planning, we learned that Bishop Dietrich Brauer had suggested to Ellen that it would be helpful if she try to establish partnerships for our churches, too, starting with the Northern Caucasus region. Ellen, Sergey and I decided that we could combine these things; she and I flew down, then, to visit two congregations and to meet regional leaders at a day-long seminar.

12 people from four different locations were in attendance; Dean Maramzin kept the number deliberately relatively low insofar as this first use of the retreat center was an experiment; more will get invitations in the future. As it is, though, we were together for most of a good day. While it wasn't too much time, it was of high quality - we had fellowship, a meal, conversation, a short sermon on the occasion of the Annunciation (it was March 25, after all), and a basic course on Luther's life and the Reformation. Besides getting to know one another better, the participants also had a good chance to meet Ellen and to hear from her how PC(USA) envisions partnership.

Sergey, Ellen and I, as we reflected on the weekend, were filled with hope for the potential of what God might do with us and the congregations with which we are in contact. The deanery retreat center has now been "tested" and Sergey mentioned afterwards that now he feels more comfortable using the space for other activities. This was a very important achievement, and Dean Maramzin is to be praised for his hard work to make a place for retreat for the church. It is still certainly a work in progress and there is much potential to do more, but even now it is quite usable, with sleeping places (up to 7), seating (for more than twice more than that), a place to prepare food, wash, and a place for outdoor activities. Ellen was also able to get an impression of congregational members in the region and has already started praying for potential partnerships... and is already recruiting staff for the region's plans to do a day-camp this summer... For my part I heard from seminar participants that they appreciated the way Reformation-area materials were presented in a way that was understandable and accessible, that it helped them bring order to their scattered thoughts on the subject.

Overall we can see that God has provided for the people of this region and, after a long period of stagnation, how something new is happening there. It is a blessing to be a part of it.



Ecumenical, Educational, Diaconal Cooperation

Lutheran, Presbyterian, Orthodox, Methodist. Russians, Africans, Americans, German-Russians, Tartar-Russians... It was quite a mixed group that came together in Moscow at the end of March for a seminar related to caring ministries. Three-way cooperation between my colleague in the Presbyterian Church (USA), Ellen Smith (see above), myself and the leader of diaconal ministries for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in European Russia, Artis Petersons, led to really unique gathering that probably was not for everyone...but for those people called to this ministry, in particular for those who give pastoral care, this seminar was very meaningful.



Participants from Lutheran congregations from various parts of European Russia took part, while the ecumenical guests were all local... with the exception of the teachers! They were two American women who have experience practicing and teaching in the area of caring ministries – Nancy Jude and Eamon Anderson from PC(USA). The former gave the basics of lay-led pastoral care and the organization of such ministry while the later spoke on the topic of the effects of trauma. This was one of those cases in which I was not a teacher, but my roles, instead, were to help bring people together, to lead a service or morning prayer, and to help channel “Equipping for Service” funds into a project that fits with the project's goals. I am always happy to be a coordinator rather than a teacher in those situations where I see that others can contribute their expertise in a way that I could not. And I was able to observe that Lord blessed this gathering and will certainly use it to strengthen those seeking to touch others with God's love.

Lent in Khakasia

My last newsletter to you was sent after having spent some of Advent in the Siberian regions of Khakasia and the Krasnoyarsk krai; this one – immediately after having spent most of Holy Week there. The region's four



With Confirmands in the village of Bograd

viable congregations and other preaching points are served by three dedicated, competent lay ministers who continually seek out ways to improve their ministry skills and to gain knowledge that will help them fulfill their responsibilities.

Together with them and the Area Dean, we decided that it would be good if I could visit them during Holy Week this year in order to provide them with some additional pastoral support and to introduce them to some of the options for enhancing liturgical worship during that time.

Maybe it's their Montana-like landscapes, maybe it's the people's warmth, but I always feel a bit like I'm coming home when I visit Khakasia. I was privileged to interact with them in an intense week of worship services, theological discussions, Bible study and

planning for the future. The preachers, who now have mastered the basics of leading worship, were surprised and excited to hear about the ways our services on holy days can be enhanced or altered. They saw, as I had hoped, that a renewed experience of worship can help us feel closer to the events that took place in Christ's life and bring us deeper into our sense of what that all has to do with our lives.

Prayer requests

I would appreciate your prayers for the leaders of the Russia and the West, that they might seek ways to build mutual respect and trust that takes into account the needs and concerns of the citizens of our countries; the Lutheran congregations in Russia that they might clearly witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ as they share of themselves in this Reformation-anniversary year and that they might be inspired to follow through on their ideas for creative new ministries. As usual I would be thankful for your prayers for my wife (Natasha) and boys – Matvey (12), Martin (10) and Lukas (3).

The basics....

I am an ELCA pastor serving through the Evangelical Lutheran Mission of Lower Saxony (ELM) in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Russia, where I am in charge of an educational program entitled “Equipping for Service.” I maintain relationships with partners (individuals and congregations) in the U.S. and in Germany; if you have any questions for me, please feel free to write to me at: bradnbuerkle@gmail.com. You can read more at my personal blog: russiancorrespondent.blogspot.com or on the site with news articles on the church here: elcrosnews.blogspot.com

