I remember very clearly my years at Jocko Valley Lutheran Church in Arlee, Montana. I remember one older woman who thanked me every week on her way out of church telling me how much she appreciated my sermon. I thought I was doing such a great job with my sermons until I eventually realized that she was extremely deaf and probably couldn’t hear me at all. But her words were gracious and I am thankful for her kindness.

I remember attending the ecumenical community pastors prayer group where I was the only woman pastor. The first time I went I was asked to pray. When I began praying two male pastors stood up and walked to the window until I finished. They told me that women should not be pastors and they could certainly not pray if I was the one leading the prayer. (This was not the only time that this happened in my ministry.)

I remember one older couple who let me help with the sheep shearing on their ranch. (I don’t think I helped much but they let me think I was doing something. I have shared Montana sheep ranch stories in sermons for years!

I remember one late night when I was pregnant with my first child. The lights were on in the parsonage and I kept getting phone calls from parishioners. They wanted to know if I was in labor, if everything was ok, if there was anything they could do.

I remember collaborating with Sister Joan from the Roman Catholic Church in Arlee who taught me about pastoral care and leading a congregation.

I remember going to Chico Hot Springs with all the other Montana Synod pastors following Easter. I am so thankful for the other pastors throughout the synod, especially the first call pastors, who welcomed me as a colleague and a friend.

I loved attending pow wows, learning a little of the Salish language, and working with tribal leaders. Looking back, I wish that I had spent more time listening to tribal elders.

It has been over twenty years since I served at Jocko Valley Lutheran Church. My daughter Katie is almost 26 and my son Daniel just turned 23. After leaving JVLC, I served in Spokane, Washington for over twenty years and now am Bishop in the Northwest Washington Synod. I have been gone for two decades, but the folks of JVLC and the Montana Synod I carry in my heart.

I thank you, Montana Synod, for forming and shaping me as a pastor. The Montana Synod called women pastors when it was difficult for women to get calls. Thank you for entrusting the gospel to us.

I am grateful that the Montana Synod has been on the forefront of recognizing women’s leadership in the ELCA. May God continue to richly bless the ministry of each of the congregations and ministry sites in the Montana Synod. I hold you in my heart and in my prayers.

In God’s Abundant Grace,

Bishop Shelley Bryan Wee

Served Jocko Valley Lutheran Church 1993-1997