



**Wisconsin Conference
United Church of Christ**

God is Waiting Everywhere

by Rev. Lorraine Cenicerros

At the end of February, most of us had no idea of the changes that would soon be rolling toward us, making us adjust our way of living and how we are in relationship with the world outside of our individual family units. We were hearing news of a virus that seemed like it was happening in other countries but silently, slowly, moving toward the United States. By early March those of us who could work from home were adjusting to the work-at-home routine. Those in our community who did not have that choice or opportunity were continuing to go to work to help support our lives and the economy or were filing for unemployment.

In the midst of this, congregations were informed our sanctuaries where we physically gather to give and receive comfort in the times of need and distress would not be available to us because of the risk of contagion. We did our best to shelter at home. Pastors and lay leaders quickly adapted as they worked to provide worshipful experiences and gathering times over electronics. Our way of gathering changed, enabling us to stay connected as we sought to give and receive comfort in this time of need. We experienced shaky video and electronic glitches. We experienced blank screens and barking dogs. We were welcomed into each other's homes as we experienced come-as-you-are worship. Grace was given to learn and grow as clergy stepped into the uncomfortable and unknown world, at least for them, of preaching to a screen and providing pastoral care over the telephone.

For a time such as this, we adapted and changed. Some congregations grew in numbers as family members and others in the community joined them online for worship. Some who do not have reliable internet access or the ability to electronically connect had to rely on the beleaguered U.S. Postal service to send and receive their spiritual sustenance. We adapted and changed to meet the challenge at hand.

We reminded ourselves the church was not closed; only the buildings were closed. Churches and their congregations continued to, with safety measures in place, live out their mission for the surrounding communities. Food pantries continued to actively provide for those who were and are still are experiencing food insecurity. The church, not contained by a building, were faithful in bringing God's comfort to her people.

We began to have conversations focused on where God can be found and what the future of the church might resemble. By this time summer rolled around and the weather warmed. Our Conference, along with information gathered by the Wisconsin Council of Churches, continued to urge caution and discernment around the possibility of in-person indoor worship. New information was provided about how to safely gather together outside with the ever present safety precautions in place. Many congregations who were lucky enough to have a parking lot began to experiment having worship services outside.

This summer along with attending virtual services, I have been blessed to attend a number of outdoor services. The Trinity UCC's in Endeavor and Portage gathered in the church parking lot and at the curb of a long-time member, respectively. At both services the call and prayer to love all of our siblings, no matter the color of their skin or the amount in their bank accounts, was clear and strong.

Next was a parking lot service at Zwingli UCC in Monticello. The skill of the ushers directing vehicles into and out of the service was impressive. Zwingli's pastor used the story of Sarah and Hagar to illustrate God's love and care for all of his people; all of God's people truly do matter and because we all matter to God, everyone should matter to us.

Congregational UCC, Whitewater, celebrated its 180th anniversary the morning I attended worship. The celebration was modest. The love and caring was palpable as we gathered under a number of trees on the church lawn that hot Sunday morning. The pastor lovingly reminded us of the ideals in place at the birth of this nation and how we as people of faith can continue living into those ideals. That morning I felt a tearful hopefulness in the midst of the pain and anger and grief brought about by the pandemic and the racial injustice that has always been present but was uncovered more fully through the spread of the virus.

Community Church of Fontana was the most recent congregation I visited for Sunday morning worship. We gathered in the church parking lot under a darkening sky threatening rain, with many parking spaces between each of our vehicles. I experienced an ever present God through the pastor's words; our God who is with us no matter where we gather.

This summer our sanctuaries might have been closed to us but the presence of God was distinctly present through the gathered people. Whether by electronic means or in-person outside, meaningful sermons are delivered, prayers are lifted, and friends enjoy greeting one another, either by a wave to a screen or masked and distanced, the love and care we are called to live out for the well-being of the assembled community has been and is present. Yes, sometimes it is uncomfortable. Yes, we miss singing together, and yes, it is life giving to be together in these new and adjusted ways.

This last week a wise pastor directed me to the work of Barbara Brown Taylor wherein Taylor shared this story, "Last Sunday I passed a little country church with a sign out front that said, 'Come on in. God has been waiting for you here.'" Taylor writes that, "it is hard to think of anyone who believes that anymore. If God is waiting anywhere, God is waiting

everywhere.” If God is waiting anywhere, God is waiting everywhere; in our vehicles, in our parking lots, in our homes and yes, even in front of a computer.

At the printing of this, the future is still unknown. We don't know when it will be safe to come together in our buildings and we will need to take great care when we do begin to congregate in such a way. What we do know is God is with us however we gather, whether it is virtually or in a park. God is with us, and the sanctuary surrounds us wherever we are.

Blessings on this journey,

Lorraine