

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Sunday will be the end of the church year, and Advent begins the following Sunday, November 29.

When we first closed the buildings at Ascension in March we hoped we would be worshiping together indoors by Easter, or Pentecost. During the summer, we looked ahead to Labor Day and the new school year. And, most recently, we hoped we would worship indoors for the Sundays in Advent.

Unfortunately, that will not happen. Following the change in our state limits on mass gatherings announced last week, the synod's regathering task force provided new guidelines for congregations on Friday. Last night our congregation council voted to continue to adhere to state and synod guidelines as we have since the beginning of the pandemic. Those limits currently allow ten people indoors and up to 50 people outdoors, with precautions including wearing masks over mouths and noses, staying six feet apart and washing hands.

We will continue to have drive in worship with Holy Communion on Sunday mornings at 10:30 and online worship with a sending of home communion at 11:45.

I know it isn't what we're used to, and it isn't our first choice. As morning temperatures fall, if you worship outdoors, I invite you bring blankets, wear coats, keep a thermos of coffee or tea with you, and run your car as needed. If you worship online, have an Advent wreath or a candle that you can light during worship.

I will be leading a midweek Advent service on Wednesdays at 12:30 during Advent and continue to lead weeknight prayer online at 9 p.m. also. These services are available on demand on YouTube and the website if you want to watch later.

We will have an outdoor candlelight Christmas Eve service at 7 p.m. on the front lawn and an online service at 9 p.m. The sanctuary will also be open for a couple of hours in the afternoon on Christmas Eve for prayer.

I know this announcement is met with disappointment and even grief. I share those feelings.

Everyone is tired of living with COVID, and everyone wishes we could return to a normal that includes gathering indoors and the wonderful fellowship and celebrations that are part of our Christmas traditions at Ascension. But the council and I agree that we have a greater responsibility to the congregation that is born out of a duty of care, and none of us wants someone to contract COVID at a worship service at Ascension or unknowingly carry the disease into our community from here.

The season of Advent is always a season of waiting as we wait for Christ's coming both as the conquering Son of Man at the end of time and as a helpless infant in a manger. May we enter into this waiting season, holding onto the promise we have been given, looking for Emmanuel, God with us and living with patience in an impatient world.

Thank you. Stay well and stay safe.