

December Remarks from Our Pastors

In their reports to Council each month, Pastor Gregg and Pastor Rachel conclude with some personal remarks that summarize the most recent period of their leadership here at Grace.

From Pastor Gregg:

“Maybe Christmas,” the Grinch thought, “doesn’t come from a store. Maybe Christmas ...perhaps...means a little bit more.” -Dr. Seuss’ *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*

To some extent, I sympathize with the Grinch around the holidays. I don’t steal presents, nor break into homes, but I *am* partial to dogs. I like my alone time, too. And while I don’t mind *some* holiday music, I must agree that the little Whos down in Whoville have not given us some of the better Christmas songs. But this year, given the circumstances, I feel more like the Grinch than ever.

So many have lamented – your pastors included – about our trudging through the Advent season and making our way to Christmas without the benefit of the hymns we all love to sing. Absent also are the local holiday events, social gatherings, and the weekly increase of anticipation as together we worship and hear stories of the Lord’s coming into the world at Christmas. It seems only committee work remains. And in those meetings, I frequently hear well-meaning suggestions about things we *could* do – a song added here, a restriction relaxed there – and if we did, maybe *then* it would feel like Christmas. I want these things, too, but regretfully, I am often the one to mention how these options make church more dangerous; since we are called to preserve life, that tends to snuff out some otherwise excellent options. To me, serving this role feels like those animated scenes where the Grinch is taking apart Christmas.

But then I am reminded, kind of like the Grinch, that the totality of Christmas is significantly more than the ways in which we prefer to celebrate it. Without presents (or presence), without singing, without feasting, God *still* shows up. It isn’t even Christmas yet and already I have seen this many times. God shows up on our living room television, with a Christmas concert that still brings joy even from a distance. God shows up on my computer screen, as I see our Youth and Young Youth share in a virtual Christmas party that sounds no less festive due to the distance. God shows up on our decks, where we celebrate the sacrament of life that proclaims forgiveness and embodies grace – my hands might be a bit chilly in the winter air, but my heart is more than warmed.

We have a great gift this year, and every year, really – a God who shows up. Maybe the unique blessing of this year is the reminder that God shows up even in times when we do not expect anyone would bother. God does not come into the world for the things that tend to captivate you and me. Instead, God comes into the world to bring it new life. I invite you to join me in being surprised during this season, by the ways God keeps coming into our lives with promises and possibilities we could not see on our own. Amazed by the love of God in Jesus Christ, we will find our capacity to love grows, too.

Peace in Christ,
Pr. Gregg

From Pastor Rachel:

Over this year, we've become practiced at constant adapting; it's becoming part of who we are. This can feel chaotic. It can seem like there's not a lot of solid ground. But adapting also leads to more solutions, more helpful options, and more opportunities to grow. Embracing adaptation allows us to be more open to the moving of the Holy Spirit, to new ideas, and to new embodiments of ministry. To me, this seems particularly appropriate in the season when we celebrate Christ coming into our midst - God embodied in a new way.

I've seen a lot of this positive adaptation recently. In November, we held our Congregation Meeting online for the first time, and it went very smoothly. A lot of preparation went into that meeting (especially by Pr. Gregg), and in addition to being able to conduct our congregation's business safely and effectively, it brought me so much joy to see nearly 60 households on the screen, including many faces I hadn't seen in 8 months. I know many others joined me in that joy, and were glad for the gift of adapting in that moment.

Our Young Youth and GYM had an online Christmas party last week, which turned out better than I hoped for, as our first online party. Each person got a party kit delivered in advance, and we played games and made crafts and enjoyed party treats together. The kids have gotten used to muting their mics in virtual school, which is usually helpful for our Zooms, but for the party, we all kept our mics on and the sounds of laughter and the delight we shared as we played together was life-giving.

Our fall stewardship drive adapted to our current situation as well, and some great blessings have come out of that. Through video, we were able to share our Temple Talks beyond Sunday morning, which meant that the witness and passion of our members reached more people. Members had to make an extra effort to return their commitment, since we couldn't do it in worship, and so many people have made that extra effort – the commitment to *make* a commitment speaks to the dedication of our congregation. We used an online commitment form option for the first time, and nearly half of the commitments turned in so far have come through this form; we are becoming more accessible.

One of the most uplifting parts of our fall drive, for me, is that one-third of the commitments include a "Yes!" to the invitation to share giving information with the pastors, allowing us to more fully celebrate their generosity, as well as walk with them more deeply in their journey of faith. I am so excited to tell people "Thank You" for their giving and to hear how God has been at work in their lives through their gifts. I look forward to seeing how the Holy Spirit moves us in this new-to-Grace adaptation.

We will continue to adapt, even when COVID is behind us. We will continue to seek the Holy Spirit's direction. And as we welcome the Christ child into the world, we will rejoice at the ways that God makes things new.

Peace in Christ,
Pr. Rachel