

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,
Grace and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

"There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens..." Ecclesiastes 3:1

The wisdom of this passage reminds us that over time, life's seasons change. As a people who generally embrace what is familiar, change can be viewed negatively; but with change comes opportunity as well as challenge, beginnings and well as endings. Throughout all these seasons and changes, God in our Savior, Jesus, and through the power of His Spirit is with us to comfort, guide, and bring new life. After considerable discernment, it is time to announce and welcome a new season of life for us as a congregation. Following our celebration of new life on the Day of our Lord's Resurrection (March 31, 2024), I will retire from my role as your Pastor and resign from my position as a pastor within the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Bishop Paula and I have had conversations concerning this transition and she will be proceeding to assist the congregation in securing pastoral leadership according to this time frame.

Considering the length and depth of our bonds as a family of faith, this news may be surprising, but ultimately because of those same bonds this news is necessary. In some faith traditions "pastors" are called "fathers". I do not prefer this title because it can obscure the truth that we have only one ultimate Father - who art in heaven. However, as I consider my experience as a father to my three daughters, there are some helpful parallels to a father's and a pastor's appropriate roles. As father to the girls, it has become clear to me that after 20 plus years of protective nurture, I need to step back a bit and prayerfully let them become who God wishes them to be. I have been a voice of comfort, correction, encouragement, and conviction for, literally, their life times. What they could learn from me has already been, both properly and improperly, received or rejected. I will always hurt for them, hope for them, and earnestly pray for them, but it is clearly time for me to entrust them to God's care and recognize them as the beautiful and faithful individuals they have grown to be. When they were entrusted to me as children, I did my best to fulfill a father's role. Additional efforts in this later season of their lives are, in most circumstances, less wanted and less fruitful.

I have been blessed to have spent 26 years sharing the Word of God in Christ with you. Like my daughters, if you have been listening at all, I am sure many of you quietly have thought to yourself (or even whispered to someone in your pew,) "Here he goes again..." or "We've heard that story before", or "Is he doing yet another series on the Lord's Prayer?" I frequently parrot the following saying to those who comment on a sermon or a teaching moment, "If it is good it's God and if it is bad it's me." I pray I have been more often faithful to that "Goodness" of God and just as earnestly pray for forgiveness from you and especially from our Lord for those occasions where I have been an unfaithful or inadequate vessel. But after 26 years, over an eighth of the 200 year history of our congregation, what new word would God have me speak here or what new way might I better speak it? I am convinced that to stay longer would not best serve this community or the Lord whom we all serve. It is only honest to recognize that ministry efforts in this later season of our life together; have clearly not been abundantly fruitful. It is a faithful and good time for me to hand over my fatherly/pastoral role. As a sort of "parent" figure in this family of faith, the lessons God laid upon me have been shared. It is time to entrust you to bear Christ in this place as fully grown and beautiful children of God.

Of course, there are multiple components beyond this more general discernment of "seasons" that God has used to affirm this decision in my heart. In many ways this decision is a long-time-in-coming result of long held deep disagreements with the institution of the modern church and the accommodationalism, reductionism, and secularization of its current proclamation and practice. Navigating these current times with integrity and clarity so that God's truth and grace are still clearly proclaimed but also received in a way that is life giving and interpreted through love has become increasingly problematic and unsettling for my soul. Furthermore, while I have been privileged to serve you as your Pastor, in many way I have always discerned my call in ministry to be less pastoral and more prophetic. In our time together, I sought to carefully balance the prophet's call for people to turn from the world to God in repentance with the pastoral role which certainly guides but more consistently comforts. However, as the world seems to change and the spiritual warfare of this age crescendos, God's call to speak His prophetic word increasingly moves me. As we have been reminded in our Advent reflections upon God's Word, the appropriate pulpit for prophets is seldom in the sanctuary but rather somewhere outside in the wilderness apart from institutional entanglements. I am ready for spiritual time in the "wilderness." Finally, this change and new season will hopefully enable me to dedicate myself to an abundance of unfinished work, both materially and spiritually, which weighs upon my heart and mind. While I have received no immediately dire prognostications, recent health challenges have moved me to recognize a need to get my house in order while I am able. Hopefully, this new season will enable long delayed visions and goals of faith and life to be addressed obediently and fruitfully in the ways to which both I and the body of Christ at Zion will be called.

The family at Zion stands at an opportune season. In this year of 2024, you have the opportunity to plan celebrations for the bicentennial year of our congregation in 2025. In part, this milestone may be a time to look backward, but more importantly it will be an opportune season to look forward and grow fruitfully in Christ. On the stained glass windows that grace the sides of the Altar are the names of the many pastors who have served this congregation over its nearly 200 year history. It is notable and wonderfully appropriate that those names remain largely unseen by the congregation. The purpose of those names and especially of the people who bore them was never to be at the center of attention. They served with the hope of simply being a vessel through which the Light might enter the sanctuary and ignite God's people. The Church is not about the pastor, if so it is an unfaithful assembly. It is about the Light and Life of Jesus in the Family of Faith. Jesus said, *"I am the light of the world..." John 8:12.* *"Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in Heaven" Matthew 5:16.*

Finally, words can not begin to articulate the gratitude my family and I possess for the many ways we have been blessed by God through you. This family of faith has been an intimate and vital part of our family and will always be so. We look forward to seeing you around town and will keep you in our hearts and minds and prayers.

May you receive a new Pastor who loves the Lord and will quickly grow to love you. May your ministry, however, not be dependent on your next pastor, but on your dedication to Christ and to His Body at Zion. May you recognize the gift you have in this family of faith, earnestly care for one another, and do the work needed to prosper the ministries of Zion. Most importantly, in this and every season, may you always know and submit to the will of our Heavenly Father, the redemption of Christ, and the sanctification of the Holy Spirit. May the peace of our Lord be with you all!

With gratitude, your servant in Christ,
Pastor Book