

One of my favorite stories from this past year came on a cold January morning in Redwood Falls. Shortly after 7 a.m. I left the house where I stay in Redwood Falls when away from our home near Sartell. Leaving the house on the very south side of town, with temperatures finally above zero after a LONG stretch of sub-zero days, I headed out to pray and to get some physical exercise. My daily prayer practice includes the joy of the “dawn prayer,” a prayer in which I enter into the ancient prayer of another, Zechariah. Zechariah, as he held his eight-day-old son, John, in his arms, felt the Spirit flow through him and his prayer begins, “Blessed be the Lord,” recounting nine ancient promises God has made. It is a fine start to each day as it reminds us of our own calling, “that we might serve You (God) without fear in holiness and righteousness all of our days.” God’s grace lived out. It’s the “dawn prayer” because it concludes with, “by the tender mercy of our God the **dawn from on high** is breaking upon us, to give light to those who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of Peace (Shalom).”

Daily I look forward to those promises, this recounting of grace, as the “dawn from on high” breaks in.



This morning was extra special. The sunrise was coming soon. I ran to a spot on a gravel road about a half mile away and took out my phone camera. For a better picture I stepped carefully across the ditch, full of snow, to capture this stunning sunrise.

While standing there praying and staring off at this sunrise, I heard the sound of a truck coming to a halt on the road behind me. When I turned a man had his window down. He called out, “Are you all right?” (*A man standing in a blaze yellow jacket on the edge of a field in single-digit temps. Well, I get his point!*) “Absolutely!” I said enthusiastically. Then I added, “How can I not be? Look at that!” With those words I swept my left arm across the field and pointed at the sunrise. The man kept moving his head back and forth, looking for something out in the field, before he said, “Look at *what?*” I said, “That! The sunrise!” He raised his eyes from the field, glanced, and said in a lackluster voice, “Ohhh....ok.” And then, he started to drive away. I was grateful that I could at least say before his window was up, “Thanks for caring!” He nodded approval and drove away. I stood there smiling as the dust rose behind him.

As he drove away, I turned back to the sunrise and something else occurred to me, “How often have I done that? How often have I missed the *beauty* of what God is doing right there in front of me?” And I laughed at my own lack of observation, took a final glance, and headed on to the day that beckoned.

How often do we miss what God is doing in our midst? How often, in the midst of harried lives, do we miss God’s beauty in our lives – personal, family, congregation, synod, churchwide, world?

Bishop Jon has been telling our new “Listening 2.0” groups his word for the year is “focus.” I’ve also heard him say that the word for our synod is “transition.” We are in a time of great transition as we learn to “be Church” in times and places that don’t look the same as they did even 20 years ago, the pre-internet and social media timeframe. Are we able to focus on the beauty of God’s grace while we transition to this new, digital age when spiritual centering of our lives in Christ is so vastly important?

I believe we are learning. This past year I've seen God doing amazingly beautiful things! Yes, lots of sunrises on trips from here to there to bring a word from Dr. Luther, who was out on 26 weekends, and also to bring a word to encourage what it means to be Church together. But more amazing to me are the partnerships that we are beginning to see happen more and more between those parts of God's Full Body – creation, congregation, family, community, synod, churchwide. They all have their something to add to God's beauty and our testimony to that beauty.

In creation, I'm excited as our Serving in God's World Board has begun to follow the encouragement of Ian Graue to look at a "Creation Table" to help congregations find ways to be more earth friendly. Also, that same board, with leadership from Pastor Amy Karlson, has seen the value of offering Wellness Grants. Care of body, mind, and spirit are all available for rostered leaders and others who have Portico insurance as they explore ideas offered through the Wholeness Wheel for better health.

In congregations, that beauty is happening as more and more congregations look at ways they are changing. Assessment tools like MAP, LEAD, and the ELCA Congregational Vitality tool are opening up conversations for new ways to explore vitality and leadership. The Redwood Central parish used a \$1,000 grant from our synod to explore a vitality project called "Hope in Christ." Hearing the stories of what partner, Peter Soli, is doing with these leaders has brought joy. Beauty in the midst of change.

In our synod, I witness that beauty as new partnerships were formed with congregations as we worked together to grow generosity. Through P.I.E. events, workshops on generosity, and through eleven congregations entering into a partnership with our synod to live out the "Stewardship for All Seasons" (SAS) process, we saw the needle move toward more appreciation of "We Are Church Together." I found great joy in capturing the stories from some of the eleven congregations who were part of SAS. That partnership was made possible through the generosity of individuals and congregations in our Embrace God's Mission + Equip God's People funding initiative. [Stories of Generosity](#) are told by these rostered leaders. God's Beauty being lived out!

Amazing beauty came to life as I heard stories again and again of ways congregations were living out their callings not only in local settings by providing a place of worship and spiritual growth, but also reaching out in new partnerships in their support for communities in which they lived their lives. Especially I was moved as partnerships were formed among ELCA congregations, other Christian and non-Christian groups to package more than 240,000 meals for hungry people in our area. The support for this came from individuals, congregations, and groups like the Women of the ELCA. People showed up and shared the love of Jesus. There are many other feeding stories to tell. God's beauty in our midst.

In our churchwide expression of Church, I have the privilege to be a voice on the Stewardship Table of our ELCA as we began a new partnership with the Lake Institute on Faith and Giving. That relationship has brought a new possibility to our synod as in the next year we will explore "Creating Congregational Cultures of Generosity," and I am trained as one of our ELCA's leaders to teach this process.

Transition is happening all the time. And there is much to be done during this time of transition so we appreciate and notice the beauty in the midst of change. For now I am grateful for the opportunity to work with an amazing staff of people in our synod office, with our synod council, and with numerous leaders from the variety of congregations of our synod, large and smaller. Thank you for that opportunity to witness God's beauty in sunrises, but even more in the transitions that the Spirit brings in this new time. God's beauty is there, new every morning (+).