

March 18, 2020
Midweek of Lent 3

Dearest Saints in Christ Jesus Our Lord,

Grace to you and peace in the name of our God- Father , Son and Holy Spirit! I thank God for the grace that he has given you through his Holy Spirit, poured out on you through the waters of Holy Baptism and confirmed in you through faith in his Son, God was, is and always will be our refuge and our strength. His Word is sure, and he is faithful to his promise.

I write to you today in a time of uncertainty. Fear and anxiety grip the world, causing panic and hysteria. We have all seen pictures and videos of long lines at stores, carts full of supplies, and empty shelves inside. Schools and business have closed for weeks or months, all because of a new coronavirus that caused the COVID-19 disease. We are being urged to take this disease very seriously, especially because of how easily it is spread (even by asymptomatic people), because of its potential mortality rate (many times higher than influenza), but also because of the danger it poses to those who are elderly and those with underlying health conditions. Not only has the virus forced the closing of schools and business, but also sadly churches.

On Tuesday March 17, Governor Reynolds issued an emergency proclamation prohibiting ANY gathering of 10 people or more, churches included. The mandate lasts through March 31, 2020, but may be extended. Because of this, we are required by law to suspend public activities and gatherings, including Bible studies, Confirmation classes, choir rehearsals, Lent suppers, Sunday School classes, and worship services. through March 31. This also means that the church facilities will not be available from any other gatherings (receptions, bridal/baby showers, etc.)

The situation seems to be changing all the time, certainly on a day-to-day basis, but sometimes even hour-by-hour. Be assured that the leaders of Immanuel are in regular contact to discuss what needs to be done to abide by the emergency proclamation. Even more important, though, is that we will be doing everything possible to ensure that the ministry of Word and Sacrament at Immanuel does not cease during this time. Members of Immanuel will be looked after and cared for in every way that we can, with precautions taken to mitigate the spread of the virus.

To do this, we ask that you contact the church office to provide current contact information. This includes your physical/ mailing address, phone number(s) and email address(es). Having correct information will allow us to be in contact with you over the course of this period of time. It will also ensure that you are able to receive the resources that we have available for worship, home devotions, Sunday School materials, Bible studies, and further announcements regarding scheduling, activities, gatherings and other necessary information.

I will be live-streaming/recording the services for Wednesday evenings and Sunday mornings. They will be available on the church's YouTube page. Search "Immanuel Lutheran Church St. Ansgar, or go to https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCJuVB0_H5n_j3yHFaqKe2hQ . I will also be live-streaming/recording daily devotions on the YouTube page. Materials can also be mailed.

For Sunday school families, there are many resources available for learning at home. Please see the attached sheet for links to online resources. A package containing resources and a hymnal will be available for pick-up (or delivery if you are unable to pick it up.) More info to come soon.

As a congregation, we also have the opportunity to continue to help those in need. If you or someone else needs assistance with shopping, cooking, chores, or anything of the sort, please let the office know by calling or emailing, and someone will be available to assist you. You can also let us know if you are able to be a volunteer yourself.

Make no mistake -- the devil will be working overtime during these days and weeks to sow fear and anxiety in our hearts; to stoke our sinful nature into laziness and apathy toward the Word of God and toward the needs of our neighbor. We cannot make any room for him, nor for our sinful natures. We must, as God commands, continue to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:30), being sure to 'help and support him in every physical need.' (Small Catechism). We must, in the absence of public gatherings, find ways to resist 'despising preaching and his Word,' but [instead to] 'hold it sacred, and gladly hear and learn it'. (SC) Whether through live-stream, recorded videos, audio sermons, written sermons, daily devotions, personal Bible readings, or the myriad other resources at our disposal, it is imperative that we remain in the Word of God. We have no specific word from God about why this virus has come. But, we know that our response should always be to repent of sin (Luke 13:1-5) and to be ready for Jesus to return (Matthew 24:35-44). We do this, ultimately, through confessing our sins, receiving God's forgiveness, and always turning to him through the proclamation and study of his Word.

I also offer a word of caution. These are unusual times. As blessed as we are to have the live-streamed video, recordings and other technological resources, they are not ultimately replacements for the in-person gatherings that normally mark the life of the Holy Christian Church. Though it is necessary for us to make use of these resources for a time, we should not become complacent once the virus recedes. In other words, we should not be tempted to think "Live Streaming was good for me then. Why isn't it good enough for me now?" Sure it is a good resource if you are sick, unable to be in worship, or want to watch or listen for further edification. But, in normal times, we should never allow ourselves to be tempted to forsake gathering together as the Church. Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, an all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (Hebrews 10:24-25)

During this time, pastoral care will NOT stop. I will be available for visits as possible, taking every precaution to protect everyone involved. No may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24) the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you, now and always!

In Christ

Pastor Squire