

# Bethlehem Lutheran Church

*Living God's Word*

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Rev. James D. Smith  
Pastor

Greetings and Salutations to you all in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This past week has been a difficult one for our community as we were asked to cease all worship and group activities in response to the growing health epidemic happening across this country. Our world is gripped with fear and anxiety and I know that for a lot of people the church is a safe place to come in order to escape the world for a while, like home where we can be in community together and it may feel like it was taken away from us this week. However, in times like these we must remind ourselves that Church is not a building but the people who continue to hold others up in times of need, making sure they know they are loved and cared for.

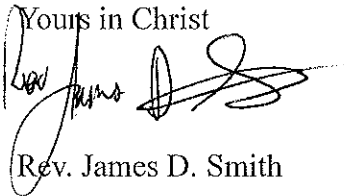
Over the past few days I have been thinking about how response to this health threat is distancing us off from others and I began to think back to a different time in my life when it was so important to maintain intentional relationships so that we can hold onto one another. It was the year of our Lord 1994 and the first time I went to camp at Pinecrest Lutheran Leadership Ministries. After spending a week there, nurturing all of the friendships that we built together, it was time to go home and there came the challenge of staying in touch. Pinecrest is a ministry of the church and yet we as campers were spread all over New York State. Some people had cars and could travel to be with their friends anytime but young people like myself still relied on parents to help us get around. However on the last day of camp as we prepared to go home I had an amazing Jesus moment. Each year we were given a folder that had our class schedule and other relevant information to get us through the week including cabin assignments, and with that contact information for all the campers. This golden envelope not held our hopes that we would still hear from one another during the year but more importantly the outside of envelope was blank, except for our names, so that we could write inspirational notes and memoirs to each other on the envelope. Even better was the fact that we could also include our phone numbers so we could not only write those letters but we could hear each other's voices from time to time (making sure, of course, that was after 9 p.m. when the phone rate per minute was cheaper and our parents wouldn't get mad). These intentional relationships were formed long before any social media presence, before email, before screen names and before cell phones. They kept us connected and forged the life long bonds that I still have today with friends that have become my family and help me through difficult times in my life.

I tell that story because we are in a similar situation now. We are not readily able to see all the people that we once were able to whenever we wanted. We have restrictions on how many of us can gather at one place, at one time and it makes it very hard. However, I do believe that we can look for the Good News in this situation because it will help us redevelop the skills of talking to each other

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit  
(Matthew 28:19)

again. It will once again give us a chance to form those intentional relationships with one another and we can grow stronger as a community. To borrow a line from our Synod it will give us a chance to be Church Together and lift each other up in this time of uncertainty. As we will have this time at home and away from each other I am going to give you a little homework assignment. This year I have asked several people to write their experience and talk about what Bethlehem means to them. I will now put this charge to all of you as you read this letter. I want your story to be like that golden envelope that I got blank at camp and quickly became something that shared inspiration, gave each person that good feeling that they were truly appreciated and that each of us can make a difference in this world because we all can. As we are charged in our baptismal service we must let our light shine before others so that it will glorify God who works in, around, and through us. I hope that you have read this letter all the way to the end and why not? You have plenty of time on your hands. My hope and prayer for you is that you not be discouraged in this time but lift up your siblings in Christ with a phone call, a letter, a text message, or however you feel that you can be a blessing. Remember we are all church together and we will continue to be the church together long after this virus is over. God's blessings to you all and I look forward to hearing your stories soon.

Yours in Christ

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rev. James D. Smith", written over a printed name.

Rev. James D. Smith