

## Four Windows and a Sculpture

Newsletter Reflections  
by  
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June, July, August,  
September, October  
and November 2010



In the year 2010,  
as University Lutheran Church  
celebrates its 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary,  
we dedicate to God the several  
sanctuary enhancements.

Among these enhancements  
are four stained glass windows  
and a metal and glass sculpture.

May you enjoy the following  
reflections about the message they  
bring into our sanctuary.

## **I Am the Alpha and the Omega**

People often ask questions like, "who is God?" and "what is God like?" While such questions are certainly understandable, they also have good answers. As a matter of fact, in the Bible it seems like God is constantly defining who he is and what he is like. Take this verse for example from Exodus 20:2. Here God says quite clearly, "*I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*" With these words God defines himself by what he has mercifully and graciously done for his people.

In the New Testament God defines himself in another interesting way. God says, "*I am the Alpha and Omega*" in Revelation 1:8. Since alpha and omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, here God defines himself as the beginning of all things, the end of all things, and everything in between. What this means is that God is the sovereign Lord of life in general, as well as the Lord of your and my life. If you look carefully in our church sanctuary, you can see the "alpha" and the "omega" set into the wrought iron of our communion rails.

Jesus also spends a lot of time defining God and himself for us. Some of his most remarkable statements come in the Gospel of John. We have come to know these as the "I am" statements of Jesus. Here they are for your consideration: *I am the bread of life; I am the light of the world; I am the gate for the sheep; I am the good shepherd; I am the resurrection and the life; I am the way, truth and life; I am the true vine.* In each one of these statements, Jesus is saying something important about who God is and what God is like.

Just yesterday four of these statements of Jesus appeared in our church sanctuary! Paul Anderson of Stained Glass Workshop of Fargo was here to install our stained glass windows. They are beautiful, remarkable and wonderful windows, each with their own message about God and our Lord Jesus. The four statements from left to right are: *I am the Light of the World; I am the Bread of Life; I am the Good Shepherd; I am the Way, Truth and Life.* Now it will be possible for us to reflect on who God is and what God is like simply by looking at our windows.

Over the next several months, I will be attempting to reflect with you about the messages on these four windows, as well as our new sculpture. All of them are deep and ripe with meaning. Through them our Lord Jesus has tried to define himself and God in certain ways – as our light, our food, our provider, and our future. As I said at the outset of this article, the Lord has often tried to tell us who he is and what he is like. If we really want to know, we simply need to listen to him speak in Scripture, in our prayers, and yes, now even through our four windows!

Just this morning it was reported that a man was granted permission to have ISNOGOD on his North Dakota license plate. I believe it is constitutionally his privilege to do so. His doing so will not diminish the truth, though it makes me want to have GODISREAL on my license plate! My real point, however, is this. While this man has a message for the world on his car that negative and hopeless, we at ULC will have five messages for the world on our windows and sculpture that are positive and hopeful, giving help, strength, life and salvation to all who believe them.

## I Am the Light of the World

Many of you have now seen our new and beautiful stained-glass windows. Your comments about them have been nearly as fun as the windows themselves. One person expressed their approval with two "thumbs up". As I promised earlier, I will be writing articles about the windows and the sculpture. However, do not let my words distract you from discovering your own interpretation. As you study the windows with their words and symbols, I hope you will carefully and prayerfully reflect on Jesus' words and what they mean particularly for you.

This month I will start with the window that was given by Bruce and Eunice Bohlman in loving memory of their parents, Ernie and Louise Sannes and Edward and Agnes Bohlman. This window quotes Jesus in John 8:12 where he says, "*I am the Light of the World*". These same words are etched into a mostly blue background with a yellow star shining brightly at the top. The star is of course the symbol in this window representing Jesus. After all, Jesus is the one true shining star in our lives. Jesus is the one true light of this world.

Now obviously Jesus is not literally a star or a light, so what is he trying to teach us here? The answer to this question is in the second part of verse 12 where Jesus says, "*Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.*" Darkness in the Gospel of John refers to the powers of sin, evil, struggle and death. In this verse Jesus is trying to tell us that he, the Light of the World, will overcome any darkness we face in life. He is the light who enlightens our path so we can walk even in the midst of such dark circumstances.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of this I have experienced in my life happened in South Dakota at Wind Cave National Park. My family stopped there while we were on vacation in the Black Hills. During the tour of the main cave, we were brought into a large cavern deep beneath the ground. The cave had electricity and many light fixtures, so it was bright with light. In order to demonstrate how dark it was in the caves these lights were turned off. It was so dark that we were not able to see even the ends of our noses. We were surrounded by darkness.

It was at that point the guide lit one small candle in the midst of that huge cave. The light of that candle amazingly enlightened the whole place. I immediately thought how light is stronger, more powerful than darkness, and later reflected how Jesus, the Light of the World is stronger, more powerful than the darkness of sin, evil, struggle and death. Just like one huge dark cave was no match for one small candle, the dark struggles we face in life are no match for Jesus. As John 1:5 says, "*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*"

Now when you look at this new window, I hope you will think how this relates to your life. Try to remember whenever you or someone you love is surrounded by darkness that the Lord Jesus, who is the Light of the World, is with you to enlighten the situation, brighten your life, and save you from every dark power. There is no sinful situation, no devil you face, no struggle you go through, and no grief or death you experience, that the Lord Jesus cannot overcome with his light. As a favorite hymn exclaims, "Shine, Jesus, shine" and "Shine on me, shine on me!"

## I Am the Bread of Life

Rumor has it that people are paying more attention to our stained glass windows than to my sermons. Some are counting the panes of glass, others are fixated on the blend of beautiful colors, and still others are having profound thoughts about a particular window's message. Please know that I am fine with this. If you find yourself staring at the "new" windows while your "old" pastor is preaching, I understand – sniff, sniff. Besides, my words will never be so deep and true as are the words of Jesus in these windows!

This month I am writing about the window that was given by the Thompson family in loving memory of Bob, Eleanor and Renee. This window quotes Jesus in John 6:35 where he says, *"I am the Bread of Life"*. These same words are etched into a mostly purple background, though shades of blue, yellow and orange are also apparent. The centerpiece of the window is a red cross overshadowed by a loaf of bread and chalice of wine. The bread of course is the body of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the wine is his blood.

There are few smells and tastes more wonderful than homemade bread. Yet as wonderful as this is, we proclaim as Christian people that Jesus provides an even better food, a heavenly food that gives people eternal life. This heavenly food is of course he himself. Jesus says, *"I am the Bread of Life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."* In other words, people who take into themselves the Bread of Life, Jesus, no longer need to hunger or thirst for eternal life, because this very gift is theirs.

Jesus makes this point even clearer when he says in John 6:54, *"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life."* Of course, no one could eat and drink Jesus while he was alive on earth. That would be cannibalistically gross. Instead, these words of Jesus are meant to focus our attention on Holy Communion. After all, where else do we connect so intimately with the body and blood of our Lord Jesus? It is around the communion rail we reach out our hands and open our mouths to eat and drink the Bread of Life and his blood.

That is why it is no accident we placed this window next to the altar. The altar is the place from where we receive the body and blood of our Lord through the sacrament of Holy Communion. The words that are spoken are so important. Jesus says, *"This is my body given for you"* and *"This is my blood shed for you and for all people"*. These words remind us that the cross is behind the bread and wine, the very place where Jesus gave his body and shed his blood for each one of us, so that we who believe in him may have eternal life.

I remember being at the bedside of a man, Bud, when he was dying of cancer. He was a person of faith, but was also very anxious about what was happening. When I read to him these words of Jesus from John, chapter 6, and reassured him that through Holy Communion he could once again receive Jesus into his heart and life, he literally begged me for the sacrament. That day as he ate and drank, as he received Jesus, body and blood, into his mouth and therefore his heart, he with tears in his eyes thanked Jesus for the wonderful promise of heaven.

None of us knows what our future with God will look like. We wonder what happens when we die. We have pictures of heaven in our mind, but also seek to grasp what resurrected life will be like. Yet with faith in Jesus Christ, we set aside questions and trust that as we receive him into our lives, as we eat and drink his body and blood at Holy Communion, that his promises for us are true – he loves us, forgives our sins, and is preparing a place for us to live with him forever. Indeed, Jesus is the Bread of Life. The very smell of it makes me hungry!

## I Am the Good Shepherd

The month of September means the beginning of a new Church School year as well as the start of many other church programs. I view this time of year as the beginning of a new journey. As with any journey, it's good to have a guide to lead us in the right direction. Perhaps we could use a map, GPS, or a person who knows the way. As Christian people who are on a journey through life, we can say we have all three in our Lord Jesus. He is the map who shows us the way, the GPS who gives us direction, and the shepherd who leads us by his staff.

As you may have already guessed, this month I am writing to you about the third stained glass window. This window was given in loving memory of our own founding pastor, R. A. Aanestad, by our own ULC women (WELCA). This window quotes John 10:11, where it says, "*I am the Good Shepherd*". These exact words are etched into a mostly green and blue glass background. The centerpiece of the window is a sheep and a shepherd's staff. It's impossible for me to look at this window without thinking about a Psalm many people know well – Psalm 23.

Psalm 23 speaks of the Lord as a shepherd who provides for sheep, leads and guides them, and protects them in times of trouble. The green in the window reminds me of the "green pastures" the Lord provides for his sheep to eat. The blue reminds me of the "still waters" to which the Lord leads his sheep so they can drink. The sheep reminds me of God's people, kind of cute, but also fragile, vulnerable and at times lost in the world. Then there is the shepherd's staff. The very rod the Lord uses to lead and protect his sheep through life's "darkest valleys".

Our Lord Jesus is this Good Shepherd who with his staff, voice and hand, leads us through life. John 10:27-28 puts it this way, "*My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.*" In these verses we see that Jesus is a shepherd who guides us as we journey through this world, leading us by the hand to good things like eternal life, and protecting us from hard things like death. We follow one who knows the way but also has our best interests at heart.

Speaking of a good shepherd, I would like to say a few words to you about Pastor Aanestad. He himself was a longtime pastor and shepherd of ULC. From 1950-1972 he led the way for us as we began a congregational journey that continues to this very day. The location of the window in memory of him is behind the pulpit, and this is no accident. It is from the pulpit Pastor Aanestad preached many sermons, using his voice to guide the people of God at ULC through both good and hard days. He was faithful, loving, and protective as he led the way.

Lyle Nelson, a charter member of ULC, once told me a story about Pastor Aanestad. Lyle and his wife Doris experienced the death of a child. Lyle said that he struggled so hard with this death that in anger he stopped coming to church. Pastor Aanestad, who also experienced the death of two of his own children came to call on Lyle and simply said, "Lyle, it's time to come back to church. You and I will get through this together." This was all Lyle needed, a shepherd like Pastor Aanestad, to guide him through the wilderness of his loss and grief.

This is the same way the Good Shepherd relates to us. Whatever we face in life, whether it is a daily need or a time of great struggle, Jesus calls us back to himself. He says, "You and I, we, will journey through this together." With this in mind, we receive with thanks the daily gifts the Good Shepherd brings to our lives, and we face without fear any trouble or evil that seeks to harm us. As you gaze at this window, listen for the voice of Good Shepherd who says, "I love you", and hold the hand of a Lord who protects you as you journey through life.

## **I Am the Way, Truth and Life**

This month I am writing about the fourth and final stained glass window, the one given by the Sorbo family in loving memory of Curt and Bernice Sorbo. The window quotes Jesus in John 14:6 where he says, "*I am the way, the truth, and the life.*" These very words appear on the window amidst some rather striking red glass. The images that are the centerpiece of this window are the Bible and a tongue of fire. What might these images together with Jesus' famous words communicate to us? I will begin my explanation with a short story.

When I was about 16 years old my dad and I were in Chippewa National Forest for a long weekend with friends. The sun was nearly set when a whitetail deer caught my attention. The deer was a buck and his antlers were amazing. So I followed him by myself for quite awhile. By the time I realized I should go back to our cabin, it was dark and I wasn't entirely sure what direction to go. I retraced my steps as far as I could, but then in confusion I sat down on a fallen tree and stared into the night. I was concerned of course that I might be lost.

My first course of action was to call out to my dad. After doing this for a few minutes without success, I sat back down on the fallen tree. At that point I started wondering what I should do. I did not know the way to the cabin. It was then I looked deeply into the forest and much to my surprise I saw a small flicker of a light far off in the distance. Immediately, I started moving toward the light, and as I walked it grew closer. When I finally reached it I was back at the cabin. The light of one lantern in a window guided me exactly where I wanted to be.

There are times in life where we need something to guide us. I needed something to guide me back to the cabin. Jesus' disciples needed someone to guide them as they faced life in this world without him. It was for this reason that Jesus spoke the words we see on our fourth window, "*I am the way, the truth, and the life*". These words are part of what is often called the Farewell Discourse in John's Gospel. Jesus was teaching his disciples what it will be like when he is gone. Jesus was preparing them for his farewell - his death, resurrection and ascension.

What Jesus told them was that when he was gone, he would be with God in heaven preparing a place for them in God's house. This of course caused the disciples to wonder who would guide them in his absence. Jesus answered them by saying that even while he was in heaven with God, he would be their guide. "*I am the way, the truth, and the life*" means that from heaven Jesus would lead them in this earthly life; he would lead them in the way of truth; and he would lead them after they die to be with him again in God's heavenly home.

How would Jesus do this? He would lead them through the Word and the Spirit. We see the Word represented in our window by the image of the Bible, the very place Christians go still today to find guidance from the Lord. And we see the Spirit represented in our window by the image of a tongue of fire. The same Spirit that led disciples to speak in tongues on the day of Pentecost still leads Christians today as we seek direction, purpose and inspiration from the Lord. Jesus gives us his Word and sends us God's Holy Spirit to lead and guide us.

Therefore, as we seek direction in life, as we search for truth, and as we face the mystery of death, we look for Jesus to guide us as we read through our Bibles and call on God's Spirit. For through these Jesus faithfully leads us in all of life. When Jesus says, "*I am the way, the truth, and the life,*" he has declared himself to be our guide through every blessing and every hardship we face. Furthermore, he has declared himself to be our guide through the mystery of death, the one who will guide us by the hand all the way to our heavenly home.

## **I Am the Vine; You Are the Branches**

Front and center in our sanctuary is our new sculpture. This bold metal piece was sculpted by Badman Designs of Grand Forks, and the glass work done by Stained Glass Workshop of Fargo. The vast majority of you have expressed very positive thoughts about the sculpture, yet I sense a few of you are still getting used to it. It can take some time to get used to a major change like this, even if that change is strikingly beautiful. Part of my challenge in writing this article is to help us all appreciate the sculpture because of its wonderful message.

Jesus says in John 15:5, *"I am the vine; you are the branches"*. These are the words that appear around the border of our sculpture. After a careful reading of this whole chapter, the central theme becomes apparent. Jesus is communicating how important it is for us to stay close to him. Since he is the vine and we are his branches, we are dependent upon him and we face potential problems if become cut off or separated from him. This is why this chapter in John has a refrain that can be summarized by Jesus' own words, *"Abide in me"*.

This past summer during a storm, a rather large branch in our elm tree was partially broken by the wind and left hanging in the tree. We could not get it down because it was too high to reach. So for the next several weeks I watched as the broken branch died. It was easy to see that it was dying because the leaves started to wither, dry up and fall to the ground. Prior to the storm, this branch was strong, full of leaves, the picture of health. Now that it was cut off and separated from the tree, it was no longer healthy and its future was bleak.

As people of God, we have the same relationship with Jesus as did this branch with our elm tree. When Jesus says, *"I am the vine; you are the branches"*, he is telling us that our life, our strength, and our future depend on staying close to him. In order for us to remain alive in every sense of the word, we can not allow ourselves to become cut off or separated from him. Instead, we need to stay close to Jesus. When we stay close to Jesus, we receive strength, life and a bright future because of our relationship with him.

This is why Jesus says, *"Abide in me"*. Take a look at the sculpture and see the thick vine in the center, and see branches and leaves that move out from the main vine. These branches and leaves are strong and full of life because they stay close and connected to the vine. They abide in the vine. In the same way, we are to stay close and connected to our vine, Jesus. We abide in Jesus; we abide in his love. When we abide in Jesus and his love, when we stay close and connected to him, we too are strong and full of life.

Furthermore, when we stay close to Jesus and abide in his love, we are not only strong and full of life, but we bear fruit. John 15:5 also says, *"Those who abide in me...bear much fruit."* This fruit is pictured in the sculpture by the 7 bunches of grapes. When we bear fruit, however, it is much more than grapes, it is love. The fruit that we bear when we stay close to Jesus is love for one another, love for our neighbors. Love is the very same fruit that Jesus bore for the whole world when he died on the cross, and love is the fruit we bear for people as well – fellow Christians, coworkers, neighbors, and strangers.

However, even when we stay close to Jesus, we will face storms in life just like the elm tree. Through such life struggles, it is Jesus who will calm us and give us peace, and it is Jesus who will help us to remain strong and bearing fruit for the world. When we stay close to Jesus, we will never be cut off or separated from him. He simply loves us so much that nothing in this world can separate us from his love. So we abide in Jesus. We trust him, follow him, pray to him, live in him, and he promises us a strong, abundant and bright future.

# Stained Glass Window Dedications

Gifts given in loving memory of:

Edward and Agnes Bohlman, Ernest and Louise Sannes  
Bob and Eleanor Thompson, Renee Thompson  
Pastor R.A. Aanestad  
Curt and Bernice Sorbo

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