



LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

By Pastor Merv Thompson

Pastor's Update

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"To all of God's beloved in West Des Moines, who are called to be saints." (Romans 1:7)

Growing up in Minnesota (I have also heard some similar echoes in Iowa) there is a saying which is part and parcel of our life experience. It is a phrase which is repeated continuously and has accumulated profound meaning and significance. From the time many of us were children and lasting well into the retirement years, in fact all of life for many, these words have become a sort of mantra. T-shirts and sweatshirts herald these words, poems and songs focus on them, and people in the bitterly cold climates keep sane during the winters by singing the refrain.

What are the magic words? Very simply; "up north." Ask an average Minnesotan in the summertime where he or she is going to be on the weekend and the answer very likely will be "up north." Ask the average family members where they are going for vacation this summer and the answer is often "up north." Ask most fisherpersons or hunters or hikers or bikers or water skiers or four-wheelers where they find the best place to exercise their passion and most likely the answer will be "up north."

Up north has so many different applications. For some it means going to a rustic cabin which may have been in the family for generations, a cabin which may even be without modern conveniences. For others it might be a second home, including such urban amenities as microwaves and air conditioning. For still others it might be a mobile home or a tent which is parked in some remote campground or state park. For countless others it might be a rental cottage or a resort or a motel.

But one of the things we learn early in life is that "up north" is more than a place, it is more than a geographical location, it is more than real estate, but it is a metaphor with multiple meanings. Up north is a dream, it is a vision of life away from the drivenness and intensity of life, it is a promise of renewal and revitalization.

Up north means back to nature, experiencing the beauty and wonder of God's creation, listening to the birds, watching the wildlife, experiencing the sunset. Because there are so many lakes "up north" it also usually means that water is somewhere nearby. The sound of the loon becomes a symbol of being up north, the bald eagle and the wood duck replacing the sounds of airplanes and interstates.

Maybe this is what led the Psalmist to write, *"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul."* (Psalm 23:1-2).

We made a pilgrimage "up north" for a couple of days last week. It is always good to get away. But much to our chagrin, something was wrong with the picture that we encountered. Even though spring was just beginning and most of the trees had not yet leafed out, the whole landscape appeared dry and dusty and depressing. The lawns looked parched already, the trees looked stressed and the lake had dropped a couple of feet. "Up north" is so dependent upon rainfall, as is the rest of the earth.

But the second day we were up north we started hearing reports about storms and heavy rains in the area. We hoped and prayed that these would not veer to the northwest, as they often did. But suddenly late in the evening we heard the exquisite sounds of pouring rain. All night long the rain continued, and there is nothing more melodic than listening to the rain pelting the roof of a place "up north."

When we awakened in the morning, the entire landscape had been transformed. It was a miracle. In just a few hours the rich green colors had replaced the drab and ugly browns and grays.

The trees seemed to straighten up and highlight the brilliant springtime colors and the lake seemed to be higher and cleaner all at once.

The birds were in full concert as they expressed their collective joy and appreciation for this watery gift. All of the dust and dirt which had hung so oppressively in the air a day earlier was now washed away, replaced by the incredible aroma which comes right after the rain. Rebirth was evident everywhere, turtles and herons and woodpeckers were giving each other high-fives.

Water is such an important dynamic in our lives, without water we could not live. Not surprisingly the Scriptures use the metaphor of water to convey much of the truth of Jesus Christ and the incarnation. Perhaps some of this has to do with the fact that the people of the Bible lived in such dry and parched lands, so that water was more precious than gold. Water became a symbol of God's redeeming and refreshing Spirit, given to us, much like up north, for renewal and washing and regeneration.

Zechariah 14 in the Hebrew Bible prefaces the coming of Christ with the words, *"The day of the Lord is coming, ...on that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem."* Think about that vision, some day living water will flow when the Messiah comes, when the Savior of the World will be here. Up north we saw ample evidence of what happens when water comes into the dryness of the life, but just imagine what happens when "living water" comes to us.

Or recall the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, where Jesus says to her, *"If you knew the gift of God and who it is who asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."* Here is the fulfillment of that Zechariah's promise, Jesus is the one who gives living water. Anyone who is thirsty, anyone whose life has become dry and parched, come to the water, the living water. John 7 asserts that anyone who believes in Jesus, streams of living water will come to that person.

Within Lutheran theology much of our understanding about the power of water comes from the Sac-

rament of Baptism. We have two Sacraments in the Lutheran Church, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Luther said a Sacrament included three things: (1) Given by God (2) Includes some material substance (bread and wine or water) and (3) bestows a spiritual blessing.

John 3:5 sums up the teaching, *"Unless one is born of water and of Spirit, one cannot enter the kingdom of God."* Baptism is a gift of water to a drought-stricken world. When water is poured on us in Baptism, we experience the Holy Spirit of God, the power and beauty and growth that comes with the water. As Luther stated, "it is not the water itself that does such great things, but water used together with God's Word and by his command."

So we live in the power of that Baptism, we return again and again to the "living water." John 7 amplifies: *"If someone is thirsty, let that person come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, streams of living water will flow from within."* How this dry and dusty earth needs people who have streams of living water flowing within and will allow that water to flow out. There is nothing like water to transform the earth, nothing like living water to regenerate the earthly and the human landscape. Make sure you get very wet this summer.