

“We bring the hope we share in Christ to all”

Dear Atonement Community and Friends,

We love you. God loves you. And we want to do our best to be proactive in our care for you and for the public. Your pastor and council, as it turns out, have never been in leadership during a pandemic before, so we ask for your grace and mercy as we assess our response in regards to the COVID-19 “Coronavirus”. We ask for your patience and kindness. We know we will make mistakes and we know that we do not know everything at this time. We also know that the Holy Spirit is present and active at all times and especially during times of uncertainty and unrest. In full faith in God and in one another we will walk in this situation with grace and wisdom.

Our council met Saturday morning, March 14, 2020 and had long, prayerful, faithful conversation that was not fear based, but based on the information we currently know from Yellowstone County United Health Command. In our conversation, we discussed several options. At this point, the council and pastor, in conversation with the other ELCA congregations in Billings, have determined that this Sunday, March 15, we **will** worship as a community, however, taking reasonable and extra precautions.

- Should you choose to “self-isolate” and stay at home, we fully support you
- If you are not feeling well or have vulnerabilities, we encourage you to please stay at home
- The offering plates will not be passed, rather will be stationary at the back of the church
- Refrain from skin to skin contact (Sharing of the peace and other greetings)
- We will omit Communion during face to face worship
- Ushers will open/close exit doors for you
- Coffee and donuts will be SERVED to you, please be patient
- Wash your hands often and use the paper towels to open the bathroom doors
- Continue to educate yourself and take all advised precautions

Going forward, the most faithful response we can have to our community and public health is to refrain from large gatherings, including worship, for a period of time. Therefore, Atonement Lutheran will be closed to all community meetings and face to face worship, **starting Monday, March 16, until Tuesday, March 31, 2020** or until further notice. We will be monitoring medical and health guidelines closely as the situation progresses.

We will be continuing to offer our online worship services this Sunday and following Sundays at 10:30 am. This will happen thru our Facebook Live <https://www.facebook.com/AtonementBillings/> and Atonement Webpage <http://www.atonementbillings.org/>. We are working to make this Simple and Easy for all. You do NOT need a Facebook account to watch the service. Simply go to our website on your phone or computer and click on the link that says Facebook Live Streaming to connect. Facebook may ask you if you want to create an account but you can say no and still view the service.

If you have questions about your group or meeting please call or email the office. Please make sure your contact information is updated with the office. Notifications will be made thru the Facebook page, webpage, and email.

We are not taking this lightly and other ELCA churches and other denominations may be closing as well. It is still early in this analysis, but we are following the guidance of our bishop and local authorities.

Taking Care of One Another:

Your pastor, staff and council are concerned about your well-being and spiritual connections. We will be continuing to work during this time via phone calls, emails and prayer. Please email or call the office with any needs. Worship: Worship will happen this Sunday and following Sundays via Facebook live stream. Worship will be different! And we will be connected in prayer together at that time.

Pastoral Care:

Pastoral Care is an important part of our community as well. You are welcome to arrange a pastoral visit by telephone. In urgent circumstances, Pastor Darren will be present as requested, and will respond to your concerns.

Pastor Darren Paulson: pastor@atonementbillings.org PH: 406/690-2854

Office: office@atonementbillings.org PH: 406/245-7004

Connecting:

We will be in touch with other ways we can connect! It is important for people to not feel alone at this time and we will find ways to create community. We will also continue to be in touch as information unfolds. In an effort to support each other, we invite you to join in prayer at noon each day wherever you are. Look for the daily prayers on the Atonement website or Facebook page.

Stewardship:

In terms of giving to the church we hope you will continue to help and support the ministry and mission of the church. If you would like set up online giving to support the ministry of the church please contact the office. Steps to do this are available on the Atonement webpage.

There is strong love and respect in our congregation, because we take the lead in doing what is good and wise... even when it is really, really difficult to do. We realize this feels like shaky ground and that it feels ominous. And really, all the closures, all the precautions from all the places that need to take them, is an act of social solidarity. We are giving something up, profoundly in this time of Lent, and we are doing so in order that our medical community and our most vulnerable have a chance at making a difference. This hurts. It is difficult and sad and disappointing to not gather together as we normally do and we are living the hope that it is an act of great love.

Remember the church is not shut down... **You are the church** and your pastor and leadership are here to walk with you. Help us in being a non-anxious presence and surround people in our community and beyond with love and support. Please look for updates and connection points online. Our hope is that we will grow as a community in ways we could not imagine.

(Thank you to Our Saviors in Ft. Collins, Colorado for helping others articulate their response to this epidemic. Much of this language in our letter is borrowed from them!)

In Christ,

Pastor Darren Paulson and the Atonement Church Council