If you’re not aware, 10% of our giving gets passed on to our synod, nationwide, and worldwide ministries. At the beginning of each month, Paula writes a check to the Northeastern Ohio Synod that is 10% of the previous month’s giving. 5% of that goes to support our local synod ministries and 5% goes to our church wide office in Chicago to support our national and international ministries.

One of those ministries takes me back to my first nine years as a pastor in North Dakota. I started out serving two parishes, 14 miles apart along the Canadian border and next to the Turtle Mountain Indian reservation. There was a Native American Lutheran parish on the reservation in the midst of the woods and hills and on a small lake.

I took our confirmation and high school youth there to worship with drumming and sweet grass burning on the altar. We slept in an 8-walled circular retreat center, were taught by a Native American woman about her culture and history, learned some Native American dancing to drums, and experienced a sweat lodge.

I was the first pastor to take our youth on the reservation. Some parishioners liked it and some didn’t. I’ve always believed that it’s transformative when we crossover and experience other people’s cultures.

The ELCA sends out to congregations an annual magazine entitled “Stories of Faith in Action” with the subtitle, “Your Mission Support Gifts at Work”. In the recent edition there is an article entitled “A Life Changing Experience”.

“I Lift Up My Eyes To The Hills”

Psalm 121
It takes place in the Black Hills of the western Dakotas where I spent a week with high school youth from North Dakota on a wagon train riding horses and eating out of a chuck wagon.

Many of you have probably visited Mt. Rushmore in that same hill country. Also located there is the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation where some of our nation’s poorest people live. I share with you a story of our Lutheran ministry there that we help support…

“A Life-changing Experience”

Kay Ressel, an ELCA pastor and director of Lutheran Lakota Shared Ministries, stresses that a pillar of her work in Jesus’ name is to challenge people’s beliefs about Native Americans and to “hold people accountable for how they engage in ministry.

“My job is to push you out of your comfort zone so you come to a different way of knowing the Lakota people,” said Ressel, who is not Native American.

Headquartered on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation and funded in part by Mission Support from the South Dakota Synod and the churchwide organization, Lutheran Lakota Shared Ministries serves a geographic area that, at 3,500 square miles, is larger than Rhode Island and Delaware combined.

In 2000, Lutheran Lakota Shared Ministries opened a retreat center to house visiting teens who came to do missionary projects on the reservation.

“It was very appropriate in that time, but we knew we could do better,” Ressel said. “Our focus now is on learning and listening to people’s stories, getting to know one another, sharing time together, sharing meals…After we develop relationships, we find ways to work together.”

The ministry still offers what Ressel refers to as ”threshold ministries”, with household items—diapers, sandwiches, hygiene kits, blankets—passed out the door to those in need.
In addition, there’s the Lutheran/Lakota Job Corps, which employs about a dozen community members in numerous roles. Staffers work with visitors who have come to the reservation to lend a hand and, more importantly, to gain a new perspective. This cultural-immersion ministry receives a variety of groups annually.

Tammy Jacobi did a 10-day immersion in January 2018 as part of her studies at Wartburg Theological Seminary. The experience brought her face-to-face with her own privilege, which she found humbling.

“Given what we take for granted as daughters, mothers, wives living in western Christianity, the immersion was eye-opening”, Jacobi said. “(It) was a life-changing experience. Everyone had a lesson to teach, a story to tell.”

Just as the Native American story can’t be told without the Turtle Mountains or the Black Hills of the Dakotas, ancient Israel’s story can’t be told without mountains or what we would call hills.

So in Psalm 121, when the psalmist says, “I lift up my eyes to the hills”, he’s seeing what every resident of that land sees and by which they are affected. Both in the Psalms and in the Bible as a whole, hills and mountains are where God is found and therefore convey characteristics of God. Psalm 36:6 is one example. “Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains.”

I’ve learned from many weeks and years of backpacking in the Colorado Rockies that first, the mountains are always right, and second, we do feel closer to God’s presence on a mountaintop. “God’s righteousness is like the mighty mountains.”
Jesus retreated to the hills after his baptism to be tempted and strengthened before he began his ministry. Jesus was transfigured on a hilltop. He was crucified on Golgotha, a hilltop.

Because of the prominence of hills in Israel and how important they’ve been in the story of God’s people it’s easy to understand why the psalmist would ask the rhetorical question, “I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come?”

Then he answers his own question. “My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”

Native Americans believe their help comes from the Creator of heaven and earth. During my bible Camp staff days, while “guiding” a group of high school youth from Texas and getting caught in a “whiteout” on a ridge at 11,000 feet, well above treeline, my help came from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. We came upon a very old shepherd’s cabin that we holed up in for the night until the storm passed. The Lord has been watching over me for a long time!

Where does your help come from? When has the Lord watched over you?

The Lord was watching over a young woman this past week who was being stalked by her ex-boyfriend. Without coming into the church and telling any of us, she began hiding her white Jeep next to our dumpster and walking to a friend’s house so the stalker wouldn’t see her Jeep in her friend’s driveway.

Because the Jeep had not been moved since Friday, last Sunday after the last service, I visited a neighbor behind our garage who knew nothing about it. So I called the Parma Heights police who arrived quickly. I told the young police officer that the dumpster gets emptied early on Monday morning so I was hoping to get the Jeep moved.
He called in the license plates which were expired and found it belonged to a 61 year old woman in Brooklyn. He told me matter-of-factly, “there’s no way a woman that old is driving this kind of a vehicle. It must belong to one of her kids.”

Just then he shined his flashlight in the back seat and exclaimed, “there’s a body in here!”

Looking closer, it was a life-sized dummy with a hat, wig, and clothes that made it look real.

The owner was called from the police station who told the story of her daughter being stalked. When I came in Monday morning the Jeep was gone.

The Lord was watching over Corey and Natalie on August 22, 2015, when they were joined together in the covenant of marriage at this altar. The Lord was taking care of them again on June 25th of last year when they were blessed with the birth of Juliette.

This morning we gather again with family, friends, and our Divinity folks to welcome Juliette into the Lord’s family in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. Her father, Corey, joins her in becoming a child of God whose faith will continue to grow as he raises his daughter as a follower of Jesus Christ.

When the psalmist confesses his faith that his help comes from the Lord, he says that God stays awake and watches over him so he can rest without fear. He uses the Hebrew word “shāmar”, which means “tending”, “watching over” and “taking care of”.

“Shāmar” is used to describe the activity of God. Because the Lord is watching over us and taking care of us, we can live our lives together without fear.

“The Lord will preserve you from all evil and will keep you safe. The Lord will watch over your going out and your coming in, from this time forth forevermore.”

May the peace of God... #871 Sing Praise to God, the Highest Good