

YOU COULD SEE VULTURES OVERHEAD

St. John Lutheran Church in Cedar Crossing recently celebrated their 75th Anniversary. It only seems appropriate to share with you how it all began.

Rev. Darrell Wolfe spent fourteen hours working on his first sermon. He took the call from a congregation that shared a certain bond of pioneer spirit. Pastor Wolfe and the members of St. John began their relationship in the middle of a corn field that had yielded its last harvest only three days earlier. The rough accommodations of their new venture did not have the slightest dampening effect upon the forty-two people sitting on bales of straw that served as initial pews. They knew that they would build structures, and all the trappings would follow. For the time being, their worship would take the simplest form possible—the heart of the created, to the heart of the Creator.

While Pastor Wolfe welcomed everyone to the inaugural service, Jimmy Fogel whispered to his grandpa, “Poppop, lookie at Gracie over there.”

“Yes, Jimmy, Grace likes to follow me everywhere.”

Bud Fogel named all his dairy cows after distant relatives. Grace the dairy cow happened to be where she was because Bud’s farm framed the church grounds on three sides. The future home of St. John belonged to Bud’s farm until he gave it to the church. So, Grace looking out over the fence with Bud just a short distance away did not surprise anyone.

With no pump organ to lead, Pastor Wolfe thought he should choose a hymn that everyone would know, so he picked “Amazing Grace” to begin the service. With a resonant baritone voice, Pastor Wolfe set the pace, “Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound.”

As soon as the word “sound” came out of the reverend’s mouth, Grace let loose with a loud, “Mooooo!”

Jimmy Fogel giggled loudly, and the adults had a hard time not joining him with laughter. But for a momentary hesitation, Pastor Wolfe tried to

maintain some sense of dignity and continue with the hymn.

“That saved ... a wretch ... like moo!”

The preacher, unaware of his mistake, sang the following verses pretty much alone, because everyone else spent the next couple of minutes asking each other, “Did he say moo?”

Finally, the moment arrived for Pastor Wolfe’s first sermon. He opened with a glorious prayer, urging all those in attendance to listen attentively. In hindsight, some would say that the prefatory prayer lasted as long as the sermon itself. The preacher pulled out his sermon paper and carefully laid it out on the rudimentary lectern that Jacob Dreps built the night before. In writing his sermon, Darrell put a lot of thought into his opening sentence. He wanted it to grab the congregation and hold their attention.

With perspiration dripping from his forehead, the preacher glanced at his notes and boldly proclaimed, “Don’t let worry kill you—let the church help.”

While that cautionary statement certainly caught the attention of his flock, he quickly realized it wasn’t the opening statement he had penned

for his first sermon. Confused thoughts flooded his mind as he looked back down at his notes. The title of the paper in front of him read, “Actual Announcements Taken from Church Bulletins.” He immediately felt his pockets for his sermon, but he found no other paper. Remembering that he had read this humorous list before going to bed, he decided that it had to be a simple case of putting the wrong paper in the wrong place.

In a situation like that, the concept of time can vary between the speaker and the audience. While Pastor Wolfe considered it a lifetime, the congregation regarded it as little more than a moment. The preacher needed to make a decision. Could he possibly salvage things by using the list in front of him as a basis for a sermon? He quickly looked at items two and three on the list:

2) Remember in prayer the many who are sick of our church and community.

3) The rose bud on the altar this morning is to announce the birth of Gunther James Heber, the son of Rev. and Mrs. Ingmar Heber.

No, no, he couldn't continue with that. Panic blocked any memory of what he had written for his sermon ... the Bible ... yes, he could read something from the Bible and try to improvise. He

decided to just open the scriptures and randomly select a passage. While reaching for his Bible, Pastor Wolfe thought he should bridge the significant time gap he perceived with a comment that might prepare them for his improvised sermon.

“Brothers and sisters in Christ, I hope the words I’m now going to read become the starting point of a long and prosperous relationship.”

Feeling like he was on the way to salvaging the moment, the preacher opened the Bible and made his random selection, “Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you in the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.”

As fate would have it, those sitting upon the straw did, at that very moment, sort of stiffen up their necks when they heard those words. When Pastor Wolfe saw the faces of those to whom he had addressed the words, he became deathly silent. It looked like all life had drained from their relationship.

Jimmy Fogel pulled on his grandpa’s sleeve and pointed to a large group of birds circling above the stiff-necked people gathered in the corn field.

“Poppop, what kind of birds are those?”

The young lad's question echoed in the minds of everyone present, and they all just naturally looked up.

“Those are, uh, vultures, Jimmy,” answered Bud Fogel.

“Oh, we saw them flying over that dead skunk on the trail yesterday,” replied Jimmy.

The minister stumbled through a correction and mercifully ended his sermon with an “Amen”, to which the congregation obediently responded “Amen”, as if it were just a regular part of the planned liturgy.

The good people sitting on the bales of straw took it all in stride. What was, at one point, perceived to be birds of ill omen by those sturdy farmers, constituted but a slight bump in the road to a long and prosperous relationship. Two years after the good reverend passed on, he was posthumously awarded with the recognition of having given the second worst first sermon in the synod's history.