**** **Fall Quarterly Newsletter**

Dear Northside Family,

Greetings to all of our regular attenders in person and online, and all of our visitors and friends from other parts of the nation! I began writing this newsletter right after the destruction from hurricane Ian. I dealt with this at depth in my 10/2/2022 sermon. If you haven’t heard it already, you can still access it online via our website northsidelakeland.com. As a reminder, please give to any and all ministry and recovery services that God puts on your heart. The church is specifically supporting two. 1) Casey DeSantis is promoting the floridadisasterfund.org. 2) And we are also supporting fellow AG church losses/damages/needs through our AG District office. You may give to either of these funds by designating such on your envelopes or stating such if you give online. Remember that this recovery is going to take many months; giving something extra every month would be a huge blessing. Had we been hit, we would be in the same situation as our brothers and sisters down south, so we will “do onto others.”

**Is all this Bible prophecy coming true? (Dr. Roth Commentary)**

Many Christians are wondering, with all the apparent catastrophes and world disarray, if we are beginning to witness the unveiling of the seven seals in Revelation 6-8 and/or the “beginning of sorrows” in Matt 24:4-8. Depending upon the severity and longevity of the worldwide recession we are likely entering, there could be an argument made that the third seal (Rev 6:5-6) is beginning. The problem with that possibility is that means we must have missed the first and second seals (Rev 6:1-4) – and/or they were much more nuanced and secret than the text seems to indicate they will be. Only God knows for sure, but I have my doubts that we are there yet. Certainly, given the whole world political situation (not just the USA) things could turn sour relatively quickly. But allow me to suggest some perspectives behind my reservations that anything we have seen so far actually fits the last of the end-times Biblical narrative. (Important concept: the “last days” actually began with Jesus’ resurrection. The issue that we Christians are always trying to figure out is the very end of these last days.)

First, by no means do I mean to underplay the recent events of hurricane Ian – it has been especially hard because it’s our family, friends, and neighbors here in Florida. Nonetheless, the number of deaths that the world experiences because of natural disasters today still pale in comparison to the deaths from events of the past. For example, as awful as hurricane Ian was, the Galveston hurricane of 1900 killed 8,000 people. In 1780 (Oct 10), most historians agree the storm that hit the Caribbean Islands and killed well over 22,000 people was a hurricane. In the USA, since 1875 (when hurricane results began being officially diagnosed, tracked, and recorded), at least twenty hurricanes have each killed more people than Ian did – several of them many more. Of those top 20 USA killer hurricanes, 13 of them were category 4 or 5. And had many of the hurricanes of the past made landfall in more recent years, with no pre-warning, where the population on beaches and barrier islands has exploded, the death toll would have been monumentally larger than we actually experience today.

Why? God has allowed mankind to minimize death tolls from natural disasters via forecasting, avoidance, better construction, etc. The argument that the storms of today are stronger, more frequent, and more severe than past storms just isn’t factual. The population of Florida in 1900 was around 500,000 people. Today, it is well over 22 million! Of course, the property damage today is going to seem astronomical, and yet in comparison to the past storms of decades and centuries ago, fewer people perished.

Second, take a similar look at epidemics. Over 50 million people died in the 1300’s from the “Black Death” (Bubonic plague) – over 60% of Europe’s population at the time! Over 400,000 people died every year in the 1700’s from smallpox. In the early 1900’s, up to 100 million people died from the Spanish flu in just a few years. Since 1981, over 40 million have died from Aids/HIV. Conversely, Covid deaths to date are between 6-8 million. I know all of these numbers are staggering and heart wrenching. When viewed from the level of history at large (past and present), accounting for the percentages and total world population at the times involved, then just like hurricanes, the death level from more recent epidemics is the lowest it has ever been in history. Again, why? God has allowed mankind to develop cures and preventative measures for these massive killers, as well as an amazing immune system that works fairly well for the vast majority of people.

Third, look at deaths from brutal leaders and wars. Mao Zedong murdered over 50 million, probably closer to 75+ million. Stalin killed over 23 million. Hitler 17 million. In addition, WWII resulted in 70 – 85 million total deaths (USA deaths were just over 405,000). WWI was around 40 million total (civilian and soldiers). There hasn’t been any war or mass murder remotely close to these numbers since WWII (the next closest would be the Second Congo War from 1998-2003 with just over 5 million deaths). Why again the decrease? God has allowed mankind to somewhat control crazy demagogues and brutal leaders. Notwithstanding, I am fully aware that nuclear-armed countries could go berserk and radically alter these statistics overnight.

The one rebuff to my argument could be the staggering abortion numbers over the past century. It’s difficult to know for sure the true numbers killed throughout the world via abortion, but given current estimates (70+ million per year), the total murdered in the past century could easily be over 2 billion babies. However, for the sake of understanding Biblical prophecy, the issues in Matthew 24 and Revelation are clearly dealing with the living population at the time. In other words, aborted babies go directly to heaven, so they would not be the ones referred to in the Bible experiencing the earthquakes, pestilences, wars, inflation, etc.

Per the book of Revelation, the amount of death and destruction in the last of the last days is going to be cataclysmic. It talks about 1/4 of the world dying (Rev 6:8) during the seals. Later another 1/3 die during the trumpets (Rev 9:15-18). The number of deaths during the wrath of God judgments and Armageddon come still later, and those numbers will be equally staggering. This all adds up to BILLIONS upon BILLIONS of deaths. That is just not anything mankind has even remotely experienced to date. The only potential argument that could be plausible is that the wars, rumors of wars, pestilence, earthquakes, famines, etc. described by Jesus in Matt 24:4-8 is actually a description of the past 2,000 years.

But most believers, myself included, sense that Jesus is describing a much more increased, compact, and intense time of trouble closer to the actual end days. Matt 24:8, “the beginning of sorrows” is a description/analogy of Braxton Hicks contractions and beginning birth pains, which are the pre-cursor to the actual birth just around the corner. The imagery and analogy that Jesus is using strongly suggests that there will be an increase in “natural” and man-made catastrophes just prior to His return. My argument in this commentary is that we should caution ourselves against fear and scare tactics to contend that we are already experiencing those beginning birth pains. As bad as it sometimes feels recently, there are just numerous more times throughout history that would better fulfill the descriptions of end-time birth pains – but they weren’t because Jesus didn’t return yet!

Please don’t misunderstand my point. Lawlessness is without a doubt on a major rise. And when you correctly define lawlessness as a rebellion against God’s divine law, as revealed in His Word, it is of epic proportions. So, on that front, there is no doubt the world is storing up great levels of sin that will eventually be dealt with by our Lord Jesus Christ via His final wrath. The days of Noah were defined as man doing evil continually. But interestingly, it doesn’t say there was a lot of death and destruction in Noah’s day (prior to the flood of course). Perhaps there was. But the picture we get in Genesis 6 is more of mankind living an increasingly perverse and selfish lifestyle. God’s grace was allowing them more than ample time to repent and return to Him. In that sense, Jesus’ statement that it would be “like” the days of Noah (Matt 24:37-39) before His return does seem to better fit the season of life the world is entering. But again, who knows (except for God) – one major world revival could turn it all around!

In the short term, allow me to share a pastor’s heart.

1. Live life, every moment, for Jesus. Speak kindly but prophetically to people – not trying to use scare tactics when tragedies happen. But rather focus on God’s track record of allowing long periods of grace in order for us to get right; yet proclaim His equal track record that eventually that time runs out and judgment comes. Daddy will discipline – Scripture guarantees it! Tragedies are God’s allowance for a wake-up call to human beings, and proof that we live in a creation marred deeply by sin – which ONLY God can (and will) fix through Jesus Christ!
2. Live and die wisely. Yes, be ready for Jesus’ return all the time, but plan as if it happens way after you die. Make wills, buy insurance, manage your property with excellence, and plan for your family to be taken care of if you should pass, and then leave the extra for future generations to utilize for winning even more people to Christ! Store up treasure in heaven – even after your death!
3. Live modestly to be a good witness and example for others---not in a spirt of poverty or “woe is me.” Enjoy God’s creation. Love God’s creation. Good clean fun is not a sin! Most “things” are not inherently evil. But do remember that sin is “fulfilling a God-given desire in a God-forbidden way.” Let God truly be your King, your Lord. Many will teach you that the tithe is God’s (which is true), and then you can do whatever you want with the rest. While I understand the principle trying to be conveyed in that perspective, it is misguided advice. If God is truly our Lord, we should seek His leadership on EVERYTHING we say, do, spend, etc.

4) Finally, live life for an audience of One (God!). Being rude to others, ignoring them, judging their actions/choices, etc. is certainly ungodly and should be avoided. Equally, you cannot live life trying to always please everyone. It will drive you crazy! And you never will be able to succeed at it anyway. You will eventually disappoint others, and they will disappoint you. Instead, know that Jesus Christ, by His Holy Spirit, is always with you, always watching you, always loving you, always correcting you. Only He holds the keys to life and death so live life for Him alone. It’s impossible to live completely for Him and not make a lot of others happy along the way!

In a very real sense, this undergirding perspective is the heart of our vision at Northside. If Jesus comes today, it would be great – we are ready! But candidly, I could not tell you that is likely to happen with any high level of probability because there are many things that, per Scripture, still need to happen. Certainly, He is God, and He can send Jesus back anytime He wants. And that is our Maranatha cry – come Lord Jesus! But He equally told us warning signs to look for and per my reading of Scripture, there are – unfortunately – much rougher days ahead that will begin to usher in the end days. Thus, we march forward at Northside – dreaming, working, planning, and ministering as if Jesus has many more decades, maybe even centuries, for Northside to impact the world for Jesus. Our focus should continuously be not upon ourselves and our desires, but upon the future generations that will come to Christ, and grow in Christ, via Northside’s ministries.

**Now on to other news**

As most of you are aware, we just ended an exciting summer of growth at Northside (assuming one could actually argue that “summer” is over in central Florida!). Allow me to share numerous major updates, information, and important thoughts the Lord put on our hearts.

* Thirty-two potential new members attended the New Members’ Dessert on Sept 23rd, 2022. It was exciting to share God’s vision for Northside with all of them, and to celebrate what God has done thus far.
* The official re-zoning process to allow our pre-school has started with the City of Lakeland. All indications from the initial committee meeting were that this will be allowed, but the long bureaucratic process will take some time to obtain final approval. The major expenses are going to be bringing our buildings and grounds up to current fire, safety, and health codes – something we should do even if we didn’t have a vision for a Christian preschool.
* September was exciting as we hired a Nursery/Toddlers’ Pastor – Jillian Roney. We now have something for every age group at the 10:30 a.m. hour. So, start inviting anyone you know who has infants, babies, and toddlers! It is much easier to get people on the right track, and keep them there, if they start when they are very young.
* October was also exciting as we hired a Praise & Worship Pastor – Brianna Turbeville. Our service on 10/9/2022 was devoted to the importance of praising and worshiping our Lord Jesus Christ. At the end of that service, we officially introduced Brianna and shared her role, experience, and AG credentials. We are again blessed to add another amazingly qualified and talented person to our pastoral staff.
* Additionally, our next dream is to provide a break-out session for our older pre-teens and young teenagers during the Sunday service time. Several of our “kids” are already at this age point, and we sense it is soon time to provide something even deeper for them Biblically.
* We have also started a Young Adults’ Coffee House. They will meet monthly for fellowship and fun, allowing a time for young adults to mentor, and be mentored, in Christ. Our first event was at Dr. and Mrs. Roth’s home and 14 attended! There is not an official top age limit, but it is geared for post high school adults – single, married, career, and student!
* After much prayer and reflection, Pastor Randy senses we need to pause and scale back our initial Food Pantry vision. Because of the economy, obtaining food donations, especially fresh produce and meats, is not possible for us at this time. Some food companies have gone out of business or have discontinued their donations, and several food bank ministries have closed or are struggling. Even Publix is cutting back on the items they have leftover each day. Therefore, rather than our idea of being open every week for people to “shop” and pick up food, we are going to aim to provide for major needs on a case-by-case basis, as we are able. In essence, the Food Pantry will be part of our benevolence ministry. Thus, we will certainly still accept donations of cash and/or non-perishables and/or frozen items to stock our shelves and freezer to assist people in need, but we won’t be an ongoing open pantry as we had talked about. More details will be forthcoming.
* Most of you are aware that we have five SEU students fulfilling their ministry Practicum hours this fall. This is basically like a mini-internship. An internship is a full-time job for a whole semester. Conversely, practicum students still have to attend classes full-time, so the hours of service required is much less than an internship. Nonetheless, the fact that five students chose our small church to serve speaks well of our mission and vision to serve. And it is another confirmation of our call to be a place of instruction and teaching! When they graduate, they will go and serve wherever God leads each of them. Think about how Northside is influencing their training and discipleship! How cool is that!
* We continue to upgrade our media and technical capacity, and more is coming. Please be patient with us as we grow in our streaming and video capabilities. While on the surface it seems like a well-polished, great sounding video of our services should be easy to produce, keep in mind that the equipment to do what you see large churches do every week is very expensive, especially relative to our budget. While I am amazed at what God is doing with our budget this year, we still must spend the majority of it on the things God leads and that most fulfill our ministry goals. Right now, in addition to our missions and outreaches, our major areas of expansion are more part-time ministry personnel and building upgrades for the future preschool.
* Nonetheless, please do take advantage of the services online, especially if you are homebound for any reason, or on a trip, etc. They stay available via the website northsidelakeland.com. Please also subscribe to our new YouTube channel as we post services there now as well. <https://m.youtube.com/channel/UCJeQ3QBZ0Hw_xlKPkFss7mQ>

**“Membership” has its privileges – and responsibilities**

While being a member of Northside is by no means required – anyone is welcome to be a part of our church family – there are actually some tangible benefits to becoming a member. While none of these should be a motivating factor for joining (you join because God leads you to join!) it is important for everyone to know the following:

* In Galatians 6:10, Paul states that we should especially “do good” to those in the “household of faith.” While this is directed at all Christians, the same principle would apply to members versus non-members in a local church. The reason should be apparent. Active members have committed themselves to regular attendance (in person or online) and continuous financial support of the church. Members also volunteer their time at some level: specific events, outreaches, ministries, etc. I am well aware that many non-members do all of these things as well, and as such they are clearly “unofficial members” and part of our family. But technically, per our by-laws, only active members have a seat at the table in terms of decision making and voting.
* Active members at Northside also receive priority when it comes to ministry – for example, visitations during times of sickness, home-bound visitations, flowers at weddings and funerals, priority for benevolence funds and/or volunteer support, etc.
* Active members also are not charged facility fees for weddings, funerals, personal events, etc. All we ask for is a love donation to assist with increased utility and janitorial expenses created. Conversely, inactive members and non-members have to pay a facility fee for such. The rate would depend upon how many buildings/rooms are needed, outdoor usage needs, length of event, kitchen use, janitorial needs, utility impact, nursery needs, supervision required, etc.
* Active members get to vote annually for new Board members, and any other major ministry projects/events that the church is considering.
* Active members (after one year) can also serve as a board member if nominated by the board and elected by the church.
* There are some leadership roles and/or service opportunities in/for the church that the Pastor and board would consider filling only with an active member.

While total attendance is increasing (107 people attended on Oct 9, 2022 – adults plus kids!), our actual membership has grown just slightly since early this year. Much of that is our fault for not offering a New Members’ Class until just recently. But there is still time to join and become a voting member before our annual January business meeting. We will eventually need members for future board positions and ministry needs. Some potential new members have applied, but many more of you do qualify, and I would challenge such of you to pray about taking the next step to become an actual voting member of Northside Assembly.

**Pastoral Respite**

Sandy and I will soon be leaving for our 40th year anniversary and sabbatical trip. This one will be longer than usual as we always plan something a little extra special at each “decade” marker. More importantly, we will be dis-engaging with everything here at home and at Northside for the entire duration of the trip. A married pastoral team we know and respect (and many others do this now too) shared how they go away each year for an entire month, with their kids, and literally stay off social media, emails, texting, etc. While it may seem counterintuitive, the spiritual benefits of this are enormous. Now, Sandy and I aren’t going away for a full month. However, because of the travel time, we will be missing two Wednesdays and three Sundays on this 40th anniversary trip.

Getting away is obviously a great boost to any family and marriage; keeping our marriages first (after Jesus of course), and families next, is the primary way we build God’s Kingdom and stand against the attacks of Satan. But even more important is the extra time it gives us to just be alone with God. It allows opportunity to receive fresh vision and insight from the Lord for ministry. Personal spiritual growth and maturation are increased. Family ties and bonds are strengthened. It should remind us of the “alone-time” Moses had with God for 40 days (twice), or the time Elijah fled to Sinai and spent it with the Lord, and the many times Jesus withdrew from the crowds to be alone with the Father. We (pastors) can get just as busy as anyone doing life. The statistics for pastoral burn-out are substantial – anywhere from 20-40% leave the “profession” each year. We are doing everything we can to not let that happen at Northside. I encourage my fellow staff at Northside to do likewise. And I would encourage all of you in the Northside family to do likewise as you are able. Like any new discipline in life, start somewhere – even if just a multi-day getaway. All of us need a time of refreshing with Jesus. He loves time alone with us just as we love time alone with Him and our families.

Blessings!

Doug Roth

Dr. Roth - Pastor