

May 8, 2016 Spiritual Journeys: “Sound Panels and Story Quilt”

Presented by Naomi Schellenberg, Lynette Janzen, Kathryn Janzen

The occasion of a child dedication in our church is a happy one. Walter is just at the very beginning of his story. We don't know yet which experiences will stick with him the most in his life – whether they will be happy, sad, whether he'll feel lonely, or be surrounded by friends, but we know that we want his church family to form a community for him, as it has for us, and that we want all of you to be part of his story as it develops.

This year's theme for lent was “Living Ink.” It offered ways for us to think about God as Author and us as authors together with God in the grand story of our lives and our world. This seemed to fit well with an idea that had percolated for some time - that our church family could together create a strong visual element for this space. Together we gathered pieces of the fabric of our lives, literally - scraps of material that had some personal meaning attached to them. The call for fabric was answered with threadbare cotton from a baby blanket, terry cloth that used to be a baby's bib, silk from a life overseas, old T-shirts with memories of good times with family, colleagues, or friends at summer camp.

While we waited for these gifts of fabric and story, Worship Committee gave the go-ahead to begin another project. How hard could it be to put fabric on the sound panels at the back of the church? That creative process became a spiritual experience we think reflects our own journeys and the journey of the dear ones in our precious church family.

The installation began in response to the sound panels that Art Zacharias skillfully constructed and hung on the east wall of our sanctuary. This space is acoustically alive. These panels were meant to help with echoing sound that had become a problem for us, and they worked well in a down to earth manner. We wondered how we might bring life to them without taking away from their purpose.

Covering them with fabric seemed the best option. We wondered: how might fabric on sound panels reflect the Spirit's movement – in our individual lives, and the life of our community that seeks to follow Jesus?

When searching for a colour palette, the old church motto came to our attention:

*Happy are those who hear God's word and do it*

With that happy spirit in mind, along with a hope that each fabric could offer some deeper meaning to the finished product, liturgical colours shaped a beginning:

- Green symbolizes the ordinary, the common in life. It represents growth, life, hope and the graces that draw us into the life of God.
- Purple reminds of the violet flower that bows its head as a symbol of humility, mourning, penitence, quiet waiting. The colour of Advent is a hopeful rose-purple, like the sky just before sunrise.
- Red symbolizes the presence of God and is considered the color of the Church, since it can also symbolize the suffering of martyrs. As it is influenced by blue and becomes violet it continues to evoke pain and suffering but is also the colour of royalty to welcome the coming of a King. Deep rose is a symbol of joy and happiness. It calls us to rejoice!
- Royal blue is the color of royalty and also symbolizes the night sky in which the star appeared to announce the birth of Jesus. Brighter blue is a symbol of sky, heaven, water and the beginning of a new creation.
- Yellow symbolizes light which we often think of as the presence of God. It also speaks of renewal and hope, especially in the resurrection of Jesus.
- White is festive and joyous - borne of holiness, purity, virtue, respect and reverence. Because it also speaks of resurrection, it speaks of hope at times of loss.
- Gold symbolizes the priceless, the valuable as well as majesty, joy and celebration. Metallic gold is a representation of the presence of God.

We chose these colours – green, purple, red, blue, yellow, white, and gold – mixed with an earthy brown for the base, a foundation of humanity. Fabric was assembled and we began.

Covering sound panels with fabric sounded simple and straightforward. The entire project was conceived and laid out in the gym. We had ideas about how it would look, but the task of carrying out that vision was much more difficult than we had imagined. In our minds it was symbolic of the much deeper struggles, sorrows and troubles that many people experience. At one point it felt as though all we had was cloth everywhere yet nowhere and the looming deadline of Walter's anticipated arrival. We felt as though we had taken on too much for us and began to fear this would be a disaster. We were in Act 2 of our creative journey, the time in a familiar storyline when the main character is aware of the problem, and is in the midst of trying all the options she can think of to solve it, but nothing is working, a bit like the ninth month of pregnancy or a difficult labour. How would God meet us in this frustrating and seemingly hopeless mess of cloth?

God met us in the same way God meets us in our individual struggles and in our struggles as a community. We called and help came in the form of Ruth! A friendly presence surveyed the scene, offered words of encouragement and a few suggestions about how we might make sense of things. We were able to continue, feeling much more hopeful.

*“God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.” 2 Corinthians 9:8*

The colours and creative process that birthed these panels are a symbol to us that God breathes life to us and in us. Sometimes the struggles of “Act 2” are bigger or more difficult than we think we can handle, sometimes we can’t see through them, yet they are a womb that patiently nurtures hope, joy and peace that passes understanding. It is our hope that the finished sound panels continue to remind us that God is here with us providing help for our journey in the form of the Spirit which is at work in each of us, and in the lives and relationships we share in this community of faith.

One project flowed into another. We think the name “Crossroads” suits the story quilt you may have already seen hanging in the foyer. Our church family truly created it together. It became personal to all of us as fabric was assembled – most people included a written or spoken story to talk about why their piece of fabric was important to them. As these stories began to wind their way through the quilt, it became symbolic of the way our paths are intertwined and intersected with one another’s, and how God has cared for us along the way. Nelda, Louise and Anne provided expertise and good humour, sewing the varied pieces together. The story quilt, as we called it from the beginning, is a precious thing. Not because of the way it is constructed, or even because of the materials used to create it. It is precious because it embodies the spiritual journeys of our congregation.

Some of the fabric represents times of struggle - dark times of loneliness and depression. Some speak of loss and grief: a mother mourning her child, a child mourning her mother; broken relationships and the finality of death, We remember God’s faithfulness through those difficult times, which sometimes take a lifetime of healing.

Some fabrics speak to times of transition – moving to a new school, taking on a new Volunteer Service assignment, welcoming a new child into the family. Other fabrics speak of a sense of accomplishment in a child’s first stitches with auntie, or the comfort of touching a special blanket made by grandma.

Some fabrics are about the fun had with friends playing with cars, lego, watching Star Wars or a favorite team. Some speak of a father lovingly sewing PJ's for his daughter. The hospitality represented by a worn tablecloth is the backing for the quilt with its stains cut out and carefully placed in the front. Many squares represent the joy and the satisfaction in meaningful work or life on the farm. You'll notice a number of white terrycloth squares, inspired by the damp towel that was left in the basket after Charlie's baptism. They are a reminder of the sacraments that symbolize our lifelong journey to understand what it means to follow Jesus. Each square is a reminder of relationship – with God, with one another, with our own life experience – the common thread that ties it all together.

Our church family is represented in this quilt. We meet here together, each of us brings our own story and blends it with the others'. When we need support in our troubles or celebrations, we find it here, with one another. We help each other trust that God will always be with us, that God's love is what gives us the grace to love and support each other. We share the sacraments of breaking bread, prayer, baptism. We nurture our children, we love each other and accept one another's unique ways.

From 1 John, "What marvelous love God has extended to us. Just look at it, we're called children of God! That's who we really are. And that's only the beginning. God's seed is deep within us, making us who we are (as individuals and as a church community). My dear children, let's not just talk about love, let's practice real love. This is the only way we'll know we're living truly, living in God's reality. For God is greater than our worried hearts and knows more about us than we do ourselves. God told us to love each other. As we live deeply and surely in God, and God lives in us, we experience God's deep and abiding presence in us: by the Spirit we received."

This story quilt represents a crossroads. A place where our individual stories become intertwined with everyone else's, and where we are reminded of God's grace, God's love, and God's mercy. Wherever we are in our journey – at the very beginning, or carrying a lifetime of sorrows and joys around with us, or in the middle of our own "Act 2" – this is the story we are in together. God is meeting us here in stillness and waves, in earth and liturgy, in darkness and in hope.

May God continue to meet us as we gather in this place. Amen.