



BETHEL  
PRESBYTERIAN

# MINISTRY OF THE WORD

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## Living in Perilous Times, Part 1

The Heavens Tell the Glory of God

Psalms 19:1, “The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.”

Luke 13:4-5, “Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, were *worse* culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

Proverbs 6:6-8, “Go to the ant, O sluggard, observe her ways and be wise, which, having no chief, officer or ruler, prepares her food in the summer, *and* gathers her provision in the harvest.”

These passages, and there are many more like them, indicate that there is much to be gleaned about God, His Kingdom, and eternal life from creation and the providence of the Lord. That is why one can look at the beauty of the flowers of the field and draw the spiritual insight that if God so clothed the fields, that He’ll take care of you.<sup>1</sup> We can look at the heavens and its wide expanse and see our “smallness,” and then marvel that God should care for us.<sup>2</sup> Calvin could look at the

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<sup>1</sup> Compare Matthew 6:27-29

<sup>2</sup> Compare Psalms 8:3-4

fluttering leaves of a tree and see in them an ovation on account of the glory of God "...and all the trees of the field will clap *their* hands" (Isaiah 55:12b).

In light of this, I have always gleaned insight into the body life of a church from two ailments common today: allergies and cancer. Allergies occur when an antigen such as pollen, dander, a bee sting; enters into our bodies and our immune system falsely identifies it as a threat and so produces antibodies to fight against the antigen. And so on account of a misdiagnosis on the part of our bodies, we suffer the affect of allergies-, which at times can be deadly.

In the church, allergies are experienced when two Christians turn on each other for no valid reason. It is Euodia and Syntyche who couldn't get along.<sup>3</sup> It's the Galatians who were biting and devouring each other.<sup>4</sup>

Cancer is the opposite of allergies. Cancer occurs when our body produces super-cells which do not function according to their design. And because these cancer cells are part of our body, on the whole they are not recognized as a threat and so allowed to grow and spread unhindered.

In the church, cancer was predicted by Christ when He said, "False Christ's and false prophets will arise, and will show signs and wonders, in order, if possible, to lead the elect astray. But take heed; behold, I have told you everything in advance" (Mark 13:22-23). Paul said this:

Acts 20:29-30, "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them."

Family of God, in accord with Christ's words, the cancer of false teachers, heretics, deceivers and the like remains a genuine threat to the body of Christ, even to Bethel Presbyterian Church. Part and parcel of the age in which we live is that deceivers will continue to creep into our assemblies unaware and destroy the fellowship of the church.

## The Setting

John recognized this fact and so penned 2 John in order to warn the body of Christ against the cancer of the false teacher. And because as we approach the last day deceivers and false prophets are going to increase<sup>5</sup> what John wrote here is as applicable to us as it was in his day... if not more! Accordingly, let's heed the exhortation of John here as he begins by stating "The Setting."

2 John 7, "for many deceivers have gone out into the world."

The word for "deceiver" is *planoi* from where we get the word for "planet." It carries the idea of "wandering," and was figuratively used of those who lead others astray or out of their "orbit."

Now the frequent use of this term in the Bible indicates that Redemptive History is lived out in perilous

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<sup>3</sup> Compare Philippians 4:2

<sup>4</sup> Compare Galatians 5:15

<sup>5</sup> Compare 2 Timothy 3:1

times. See, we have the idea that once a person comes to Christ everything will be O.K. And in reference to God's wrath, that is true. Yet we must see that so long as Satan continues to "prowl about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8), life on this side of the grave as Christians is going to be difficult. Accordingly, consider with me the reality of deceivers.

## The Reality of Deceivers

Not everyone who claims to belong to God and to speak for Him actually does so. As long as God has had true servants, Satan has had false ones. They are seen from the earliest times of Redemptive History. Moses warned us this way:

Deuteronomy 13:1-3a, "If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, 'Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them,' you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams."

As far back as the time of Moses, false prophets and deceivers were a very real threat to God's people. As Jesus sat on the Mount of Olives shortly before the last Passover week, His disciples asked this:

Matthew 24:3-5, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what *will be* the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" Jesus replied, "See to it that no one misleads you. For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will mislead many."

Paul warned the Roman believers this way:

Romans 16:17, "Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them."

=1 John 2:18, "Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have arisen; from this we know that it is the last hour."

One of the reasons they are so dangerous is that as sinners often times we don't want to heed the way of the Lord and so we are willing to listen to the voice of deceit.

Isaiah the prophet said this of Israel,

Isaiah 30:9-10, "For this is a rebellious people, false sons, sons who refuse to listen to the instruction of the Lord; who say to the seers, 'You must not see *visions*'; and to the prophets, 'You must not prophesy to us what is right, speak to us pleasant words, prophesy illusions.'"

It is because of this propensity that Satan will always find a hearing in the church. Family of God I hope you see that the reality of false teachers and deceivers pervades the teaching of God's word. On this side of the grave, walking with Christ will be perilous for there will be many false preachers and teachers urging us to follow this path or that.

And our day is no exception. The market for deceit is large today because most people do not want to

hear the truth. If given the choice to hear the word of God or to have our ears tickled, many in the church would choose the latter. Because we are saved we have a passion to learn about God and the things of His Kingdom. Yet because mankind has always sought to be “amused to death” we tend to listen to the messages which have the right packaging.

That is why Paul warned us “Do not despise prophetic utterances” (1 Thessalonians 5:20). Our tendency is to allow the packaging to dictate whether or not we sit beneath a teaching rather than the content of the message. And so John begins the substance of his exhortation to the church by stating the reality of the age in which we live.

2 John 7, “For many deceivers have gone out into the world...”

Don’t miss this, brothers and sisters! Not only is the world NOT a friend of grace, BUT so are many preachers and teachers of Christ.

## The Danger of Deceivers

From the beginning of His redemptive work, God’s true representatives- His preachers, teachers, pastors, prophets, and the like, have been marked by two qualifications.

- They are divinely commissioned and so called by God.
- They declare the message of God, and only that message- whether that be by forth-telling or fore-telling. A true prophet is God’s voice to man...

Ezekiel 33:7, “Now as for you, son of man, I have appointed you a watchman for the house of Israel; so you will hear a message from My mouth, and give them warning from Me.”

2 Peter 2:21: “For no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”

Any prophet in times past or current preacher have received the charge to proclaim the full council of God. The former were to do it by revelation, the latter by proclamation. And that brings us to the most dangerous characteristic of deceivers. They too claim to be from God and to speak on His behalf.

Jeremiah 14:14, “Then the Lord said to me, ‘The prophets are prophesying falsehood in My name. I have neither sent them nor commanded them nor spoken to them; they are prophesying to you a false vision, divination, futility and the deception of their own minds.’”

Jeremiah 23:16, 21, “Thus says the Lord of hosts, ‘Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are prophesying to you. They are leading you into futility; they speak a vision of their own imagination, not from the mouth of the Lord... I did not send *these* prophets, but they ran. I did not speak to them, but they prophesied.’”

In a promise of judgment the Lord told Zechariah this:

Zechariah 11:16, “For behold, I am going to raise up a shepherd in the land who will not care for the

perishing, seek the scattered, heal the broken, or sustain the one standing, but will devour the flesh of the fat *sheep* and tear off their hoofs.”

Such a shepherd is a greater danger to the flock than wild animals, because he comes among them as their protector. Under the guise of one who is supposed to feed and care for them, he instead slaughters and eats them himself. That is a picture of the antichrist who is the prototype of all false prophets.

Jude 4, “For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.”

False prophets and deceivers have always attached themselves to the people of God such that they mislead many. Taking advantage of the naïve Christian who tends to accept anything packaged as Christianity, they continue to pose a genuine threat to the body of Christ. In fact, notice their deception.

## Their Deception

Zechariah depicts a time when the *professional prophet*, the false prophet, will be exposed for what he really is and so will abstain from his treachery for a time.

Zechariah 13:4, “Also it will come about in that day that the prophets will each be ashamed of his vision when he prophesies, and they will not put on a hairy robe in order to deceive.”

When an enemy is seen for what he is, we are alerted and can be prepared to defend ourselves. But when an enemy poses as a friend, our defenses are down.

In Old Testament times prophets were often recognizable by what they wore. Like Elijah<sup>6</sup> they often wore rough, hairy, uncomfortable clothing as a symbol of their foregoing of the normal comforts of life for the cause of God. John the Baptist, as the last prophet of the Old Covenant, wore a camel’s hair coat and ate locusts and wild honey.<sup>7</sup> While there were exceptions, but prophets generally could be identified by their plain, coarse clothing.

For that reason, the false prophets of Zechariah’s day, in order to be accepted and listened to, would impersonate a prophet by wearing their clothing. And that is what makes the deceiver so dangerous; from the outside looking in they look like the “real McCoy.”

Matthew 7: 15, “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”

Like Old Testament prophets, New Testament shepherds donned a particular dress. Accordingly, it is not a surprise to read that the deceiver of Christ’s day wore the same clothing as the genuine shepherd. From this we conclude that false prophets do not deceive the flock by impersonating sheep but by impersonating shepherds.

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<sup>6</sup> Compare 2 Kings 1:8

<sup>7</sup> Compare Matthew 3:4

- They wear their clothes.
- They learn how to speak like a pastor.
- They take on their characteristics.

In fact of all false teachers referenced in Scripture, there are three categories, the deceiver is the most difficult to identify.

- Heretics are those who openly reject the word of God and teach that which is contrary to divine truth. It is easy to identify the heretic.
- Apostate teachers are those who once followed the true faith but have turned away from it, rejected it, and are trying to lead others away. Again, these blind guides are not difficult to discern.
- Such is not the case when it comes to the deceiver. Unlike the previous two, he is subtle and hard to identify. Biblically speaking, deceivers give the appearance of orthodoxy, frequently with great declarations and fanfare. They are not liberals, but ones who speak favorably of
  - Christ.
  - The cross.
  - The Bible.
  - The Holy Spirit.
  - Salvation.
  - Christian liberty.

From his looks, vocabulary, and associations the deceiver gives considerable evidence of genuine belief. But he is not genuine; he is a fake, a phony, and a charlatan. He has the speech of orthodoxy, but is a living lie.

2 Corinthians 11:13-15, Paul said, "For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder," Paul goes on to explain, "...for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness."

False prophets are almost always pleasant and positive. They like to be with Christians, to talk like Christians, and to be identified as Christians. They know and use biblical terminology and often appear highly knowledgeable about Scripture. The doctrines they affirm are seemingly biblical. They appear to be sincere, and because of that sincerity they easily mislead others. Paul warned us this way:

2 Timothy 3:13, "But evil men and impostors will proceed *from bad* to worse, deceiving and being deceived."

Another reason the deceiver is so dangerous is that they themselves are deceived. As such, they are thoroughly convinced in their own minds that their perverted beliefs are true. They have become so deeply devoted to falsehood that darkness seems to be light.

From all of this you and I must see that the age in which we live is perilous. Not only will there be

persecutions from without but there will be treachery from within. Accordingly, we must cease being naïve!

## My Naiveté as a Baby Christian

When I was first saved, I thought that anything and everything labeled Christianity was good. I had gone from being on a football team to being on a team which was in the service of Christ. And so, do you know what I did during my first months of salvation?

I blindly went to a Christian Science Reading room thinking they were friends of grace. I threw away all my secular music, and started listening to “Christian Music” which more often than not is a contradiction in terms. I viewed anyone “religious” as a friend and companion... even my Mormon friends.

And then about three months into my new life, I heard a sermon which referenced the fact that not everything packaged as Christianity is Christianity, and so exhorted the congregation unto discernment, caution, and care. What an important message not only for me back then, but for all of us today.

Now, in light of the peril of the age in which we live, ought we to leave the church and go it alone?

b. No!

As bad and as treacherous as it may be, the Biblical calling is NOT to leave the church, for that would be to abandon “the pillar and support of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15). Rather, John gives us a threefold exhortation of which we are only going to examine the first calling.

## Our Calling

The first command or calling that we have as Christians is to test the spirits.

2 John 7-10, “For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward. Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed.”

When John wrote this, the church was being attacked by false teachers who taught the heresy of Docetism, the teaching that Christ *merely appeared* to be human. As we’ve already discussed this in detail in past weeks, I won’t rehearse the content. Rather, let us back up at this point and get the bigger picture.

Clearly, what John exhorts here is one of many tests given in Scripture that we might not be deceived by the worker of iniquity. It falls in the realm of “Consistency with the Word of God” and so is identified as the first test given to verify the validity of a preacher/teacher, the test of “THEIR CREED.”

## The Test of a Prophet, Deuteronomy 13:1-5

In scripture there is an inviolable rule... you cannot add to God's word!

Revelation 22:18-19, "I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God shall add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book."

Deuteronomy 12:32, "Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to nor take away from it."

Man is not allowed to add or take away from God's word. Only God can add to His word! Now when God deigns to add to His word, He does so via the prophetic office; an office which He protected by three tests.

- First, the prophet had to be able to foretell the future, Deuteronomy 18:22. And if he was not 100% accurate, then he was deemed a false prophet and stoned.
- Secondly, he had to be able to do the miraculous, Deuteronomy 13:1.
- Thirdly, his prophetic utterance had to be consistent with the rest of God's word, Deuteronomy 13:2-5.

In fact, of the three, the latter test; the test of Creed was the most important! Notice the text.

Deuteronomy 13:1-3: "If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes true [again a mark of a prophet is the ability to perform signs and wonders], concerning which he spoke to you [this is his message], saying, 'Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them,' you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you to find out if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul."

Of the two tests, the miraculous and creed, the more important one is the test of creed! Before we submit to any teacher, it is our obligation to "examine the Scriptures" (Acts 17:11) to determine if they are a genuine servant of Christ or a deceiver.

1 John 4:1, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world."

For ultimately we are about NOT being moved by a sermon, BUT growing in our ability to know and walk with Christ.

Deuteronomy 13:4-5, "You shall follow the Lord your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has counseled rebellion against the Lord your God who brought you from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, to seduce you from the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk So you shall purge the evil from among you."

And so the first TEST for the genuineness of a teacher/preacher/prophet was/is the test of CREED. And it



is this test that John obviously is referencing in our text.

2 John 7, “For many deceivers have gone out into the world, [what is the first mark?] those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ *as* coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist.”

And yet, I want you to see that there are other tests that we have at our disposal when it comes to discerning the authenticity of a preacher/teacher. Christ said,

Matthew 7:15-16a, “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits...”

Indeed as children of God we are called to “test the spirits” by examining their fruit. And what are the tests? There are at least four more, beyond the test of Creed.

**Their Concern, Ezekiel 34:2; Romans 16:18; 2 Corinthians 2:17**

Ezekiel 34:2, “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to those shepherds, ‘Thus says the Lord God, “Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock?””

Romans 16:18, “For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.”

2 Corinthians 2:17, “For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God.”

Another mark of false teachers is that they use the things of the Lord for personal gain; they peddle the word of God! In fact, the characteristic as it is presented here could be stated this way, “The False Shepherd Cares More about His Own Needs than Those of The Lord or His People.”

In *The Didache*, one of the earliest Christian writings after New Testament times, we find a section devoted to dealing with false prophets. In fact, the term used to describe them is *Christemporos*, which means “Christ merchants.” False teachers use Jesus Christ and His gospel and church as a means for serving their own ends. They use the things of God as merchandise to promote their own advantage.

*The Didache* gives several means for distinguishing true prophets from false. One was that a true prophet would not remain as a house guest more than two days, because he would need to be up and about his work. A false prophet, however, would willingly stay indefinitely, since he had no real mission to accomplish except serving his own interests.

The second test was in regard to asking for money. The true prophet, said *The Didache*, would ask for bread and water, but nothing more; that is, only for necessities to keep himself going. A false prophet, on the other hand, is not the least averse to asking for or even demanding money. Dr. John MacArthur put it this way:

“A false prophet is always in church work for himself: to pad his own pockets, to satisfy his own

greed, ego, and prestige and to gain power, influence, and recognition for himself. Our day has more than its share of Christ merchants. Through books, radio, television, recordings in churches, conferences, seminars, crusades, and by various other means they package and sell the gospel in much the same way that Madison Avenue sells cars and soap. They are insincere peddlers of the Word of God who corrupt it for their own ends.”<sup>8</sup>

Find a preacher/teacher/pastor whose focus is on his own gain, and you’ve got good grounds to suspect the validity of that preacher.

### Their Care, Ezekiel 34:4, 6

Ezekiel describing the false shepherds of his day wrote this:

Ezekiel 34:4, 6, “Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them... My flock wandered through all the mountains and on every high hill, and My flock was scattered over all the surface of the earth; and there was no one to search or seek *for* them.”

Be careful with this test because as we already have seen, deceivers will associate with genuine teachers and preachers and so will demonstrate a caring and loving heart. So the issue here is not love, compassion, interest, etc., but whether or not the genuine needs of the Christian are being addressed.

What are a Christian’s genuine needs? The genuine need of any believer is for them to

- John 4:23-24: Worship God correctly.
- Ecclesiastics 12:13-14: Worship God and Obey Him.
- John 17:3: Know Christ.
- 1 Peter 1:15-16: Be holy.
- 1 Timothy 1:5: Be people of love, integrity, and dependence upon Christ.

If you find a “shepherd” who expresses love and concern for your welfare and yet neglects these, and you’ve got reason to suspect the genuineness of that shepherd. Paul said this in describing the false teachers of his day:

Philippians 2:21, “For they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus.”

### Their Character, Hebrews 13:7

Hebrews 13:7, “Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith.”

No one is saved *by* good works, but everyone is saved *for* good works!

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew 1-7, MNTC, pp. 466-467.

Ephesians 2:10, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

Accordingly, though it may take a while, nevertheless the true character of a false teacher will manifest itself- eventually you’ll see “the result of their conduct.” Dr. John MacArthur again wrote this:

“False prophets can disguise and hide their bad fruit for a while with ecclesiastical trappings, biblical knowledge, and evangelical vocabulary. They can cover it by belonging to Christian organizations, associating with Christian leaders, and by talking about divine things. But how they talk, act, and react when not in the view of Christians will eventually expose their true loyalty and convictions. What is in the heart will emerge, and corrupt theology will result in a corrupt life. False teaching and perverted living are inseparable, and eventually will become manifest.”<sup>9</sup>

Accordingly, if you find a supposed shepherd whose fruit is NOT one of character, devotion to God and His word, humility, love of the Lord, etc., you best run. In the words of Calvin, “Nothing is more difficult to counterfeit than virtue.”<sup>10</sup>

## Their Converts, 2 Peter 2:1-2

2 Peter 2:1-2, “But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned.”

The fifth and final characteristic of a deceiver revolves around the people with whom the false teacher surrounds himself.

I have found this to be a universal observation: Bad company not only corrupts good morals, it also reveals bad ones! Look at the types of people who sit beneath the teaching of a pastor, preacher, leader, and you will have a good indication of the character of the man.

- Do they love Christ?
- Is their passion His glory?
- Or are they more concerned with pleasing the teacher under whom they are sitting?

From the text at which we are looking, it should be obvious that we have been called to discernment. We must be careful who we listen to, what we subject our minds to, and the company we keep. Don’t miss this very important truth: “Many deceivers have gone out into the world.”

Let us not be naïve, but let us test the spirits to see whether they are from God (1 John 4:1)!

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<sup>9</sup> *Matthew 1-7*, MNTC, p. 469.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in MacArthur’s *Matthew 1-7*, MNTC, p. 470.

## **About Bethel Presbyterian Church**

*The Bethel Presbyterian Church Ministry of the Word* is published regularly.

## **VISIT US WHEN IN Broomfield, COLORADO**

Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10<sup>th</sup> Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

All our sermons can be accessed via the World Wide Web. The recording for this sermon (the last few minutes were not recorded because of a power outage during the sermon) and these notes can be found at [The Marks of a Deceiver](#). The web address for all sermons at Bethel Presbyterian Church can be found out as follows: <http://bethelpresbyterian.sermonaudio.com>

## **About the Preacher**

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on March 22, 2009. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.