

SPIRITUAL LIFE HIGHLIGHTS

Walking the Path of Jesus sermon series continues

ENTERPRISE — The Enterprise Community Congregational Church will hear a message titled “New Focus,” based on Mark 2:13-22, on Sunday, Feb. 20. Rev. Dr. Craig Pesti-Strobel will show how Jesus gives us a new focus in life, new priorities and greater perspective as we try to live Christ’s example in the world. The Feb. 20 service at the “big, brown church” begins at 11 a.m.

In-person gathering includes Eucharist and fellowship

LA GRANDE — St. Peter’s Episcopal Church will meet for Holy Eucharist at 11 a.m. on Sunday, Feb. 20, followed by a time of fellowship. Masks and social distancing are required. The service will be livestreamed, and the link will be posted to the church’s Facebook page on Saturday, Feb. 19. That same link can

SUBMISSIONS

Churches and faith-based groups are encouraged to submit Highlights for the Spiritual Life page by 4 p.m. Tuesday for publication Thursday. Submit by email to news@lagrandeobserver.com (with Highlights in the subject line).

be used to watch the service at a later time.

Broadcast for children and their parents and teachers available Feb. 19

NORTHEASTERN OREGON — On Sunday, Feb. 20, the La Grande 3rd and 4th and Enterprise wards of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will hold their Ward Conferences under the direction of the Stake Presidency. Members of the La Grande Stake High Council will speak in the other area wards on the topic of “Worthiness Is not Flawlessness,” which is a talk given by Bradley R. Wilcox in the last general conference.

A “Friend to Friend” worldwide broadcast, which was

recorded for children, their parents and primary leaders, will be available beginning on Saturday, Feb. 19, at 9 a.m. Visit the church’s website for more information.

The “Come, Follow Me” lesson for the week of Feb. 21 is based on Genesis 24-27 and covers the Abrahamic covenant, the importance of marriage and how Jesus Christ is a “well of living water.”

Worship in person or via livestream

LA GRANDE — The worship service at Zion Lutheran Church on Sunday, Feb. 20, begins at 9 a.m. Masks and social distancing are required, and fellowship time will follow. The service will also be streamed live

to YouTube. The link for that stream will be posted on Feb. 19 on Zion’s Facebook page and website.

Week of Compassion begins Feb. 20

LA GRANDE — The La Grande First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) celebrates Week of Compassion beginning on Sunday, Feb. 20. “Trust,” Pastor Archie Hook’s message, will refer to Proverbs 3:5: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding.” Worship begins at 10 a.m. and masks are required. The church elders will meet following the service.

Showing God’s love shares his mercy

LA GRANDE — The sermon at Faith Lutheran Church’s 10 a.m. worship service on Sunday, Feb. 20, will use Jesus’ words from Luke 6:27-38. In these verses Jesus promotes the Golden Rule:

“As you wish that others would do to you, do so to them” (verse 31). He follows this up with examples and explains, “If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them” (verse 32). This leads to the understanding that showing God’s love is being merciful as he is merciful.

Following the service will be the monthly Church Council meeting and Junior Confirmation.

What does spirituality mean to you?

LA GRANDE — The Observer welcomes thoughts and comments from community members on spiritual matters. If you would like to share how you experience spirituality, email news@lagrandeobserver.com or call 541-963-3161. Ongoing monthly columns and one-time submissions will be considered. Columns are generally 500-600 words and include a photo of the writer.

— The Observer

Faith in the metaverse: A VR quest for community, fellowship

By LUIS ANDRES HENAO
Associated Press

Under quarantine for COVID-19 exposure, Garret Bernal and his family missed a recent Sunday church service. So he strapped on a virtual reality headset and explored what it would be like to worship in the metaverse.

Without leaving his home in Richmond, Virginia, he was soon floating in a 3D outer-space wonderland of pastures, rocky cliffs and rivers, as the avatar of a pastor guided him and others through computer-generated illustrations of biblical passages that seemed to come to life as they prayed.

“I couldn’t have had such an immersive church experience sitting in my pew. I was able to see the scriptures in a new way,” said Bernal, a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, widely known as the Mormon church.

He’s among many Americans — some traditionally religious, some religiously unaffiliated — who are increasingly communing spiritually through virtual reality, one of the many evolving spaces in the metaverse that have grown in popularity during the coronavirus pandemic.

Ranging from spiritual meditations in fantasy worlds to traditional Christian worship services with virtual sacraments in hyperrealistic, churchlike environments, their devotees say the experience offers a version of fellowship that’s just as genuine as what can be found at a brick-and-mortar temple.

“The most important aspect to me, which was very real, was the closer connection with God that I felt in my short time here,” Bernal said.

The service he attended was hosted by VR Church, which was founded in 2016 by D.J. Soto, a former high school teacher and



Steve Helber/Associated Press

Pastor D.J. Soto, the lead pastor of VR Church, delivers a sermon in his home on Jan. 23, 2022, in Fredericksburg, Virginia. Soto sings, preaches and performs digital baptisms in the metaverse to a growing congregation of avatars.

pastor at a nonvirtual church. VR Church bills itself as a spiritual community existing “entirely in the metaverse to celebrate God’s love for the world.”

Soto had previously felt called to church planting, or starting new physical churches. But after discovering the VR social platform AltSpaceVR, he was awakened to the possibilities of connecting in virtual reality. He set out to create an inclusive Christian church in the metaverse, an immersive virtual world that has been gaining buzz since Facebook said last October that it would invest billions in building it out.

Attendance was scant for the first year as Soto often found himself preaching to just a handful of people at a time, most of them atheists and agnostics who were more interested in debating about faith. His congregation has since grown to about 200 people, and he has ordained other ministers remotely from his Virginia home and baptized believers who are unable to leave their houses because of illnesses.

“The future of the church is the metaverse,” Soto said. “It’s not an anti-physical thing. I don’t think the physical gatherings should go away. But in the church of 2030, the main focus is going to be your metaverse campus.”

The Rev. Jeremy Nickel, an ordained Unitarian Universalist who is based in Colorado and calls himself a VR evangelist, also saw the potential to build community and “get away from the brick and mortar” when he founded SacredVR in 2017.

Inspired by time spent in Nepal with Tibetan Buddhists and his alternative practices studies at seminary, Nickel began with secular meditations with the aim of being inclusive for all comers. But some religiously unaffiliated members of the community were put off by the name, he noticed, so he changed it to EvolVR and more people joined.

It wasn’t until the pandemic, however, that attendance soared from a few dozen to the hundreds who now attend dharma talks and meditation sessions via their chosen avatars, at times meeting

at a virtual incarnation of a Tibetan Buddhist temple high in the mountains or floating weightlessly looking down at the Earth.

“One of the reasons we’ve become so popular is you get the meditation that you need, but you get the community also,” Nickel said. “We have deep relationships, hundreds of people from around the world who know each other and wonder, ‘Is your dog OK? How’s your wife?’”

The anonymity of virtual reality can help people feel more confident about sharing deeply personal issues, said Bill Willenbrock, who leads a Christian fellowship on the social platform VRChat with worship and counseling services for a flock of mostly teens and early 20-somethings.

“I can’t even count the number of times that I’ve heard, ‘I’m considering suicide,’” said Willenbrock, a hospital chaplain and longtime Lutheran pastor who recently converted to Eastern Orthodoxy and calls himself a “digital missionary.”

On a recent Sunday, he preached at a cavernous virtual cathedral, its long halls illuminated by light from stained-glass windows. A colorful assembly of avatars listened to the sermon: a giant banana sitting in the first pew next to another of a man in a shirt and tie, plus a mushroom, a fox, armored knights.

At the end they took turns sharing why they came to the virtual community. Some saw it as something to complement, not replace, in-person gatherings.

A person with the username Biff Tannen, said it was convenient: “For example here in Scotland it’s cold, it’s wet, it’s not very nice outside, but here I am sitting in this beautiful church with my heating on.”

Another, represented by a robotlike avatar and the username UncleTuskle, said that “as a person with social phobia, it’s

easier for me to be here” than in a physical church.

Virtual reality can allow people to meet without judgment regardless of physical ability or appearance, said Paul Raushenbush, who is senior adviser for public affairs and innovation at the nonprofit Interfaith Youth Core and who hosted a VR talk show last month with religious leaders who use the technology.

“What I love about it is that it’s taking ... whatever technological opportunities are being offered and they’re leveraging it to gather people together for positive encounters,” Raushenbush said. “And they’re changing lives.”

Alina Delp can attest to that. A former flight attendant who traveled across the country for years and loved to skydive, since 2010 she has been mostly confined to her home in Olympia, Washington, due to a rare neurovascular condition called erythromelalgia.

She wept the first time she attended a VR Church service, knowing immediately that she had found a home. Delp was taken by the community’s judgment-free ethos and focus on “God’s love rather than fear.” She began to volunteer with small groups and eventually became a pastor.

“I was given a life,” she said. “It’s the difference between endless time of sleep and television versus my ability to be productive.”

Soto baptized her in a metaverse ceremony in 2018, submerging her purple robot avatar in a pool as relatives and friends cheered her on virtually. While even many VR proponents believe such sacraments should be offered only in a physical space, to Delp it felt like a real blessing.

“Jesus is who baptized me. Jesus is who changes me,” she said. “The water, or lack thereof ... doesn’t have the power to change me.”

Northeast Oregon Directory of Churches

COVE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
1708 Jasper St., Cove, OR

NORTH POWDER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
390 E. St., North Powder, OR

JOIN US... *Catch the Spirit!*
Worship: 9:00 a.m. Cove
Worship: 10:00 a.m. N. Powder

First Christian Church
(Disciples of Christ)

901 Penn Avenue 963-2623
lgdisciples@gmail.com

Worship 10:00 a.m.

~Join us at The Lord’s Table~

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The Place
62848 Philynda Loop in Island City
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Sunday School for all ages - 9:00 am
Sunday Worship 10:00 am

Phone: 541-568-4230
grace.lutherancove@gmail.com

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440 RUCKMAN, IMBLER 534-2201
www.imblercce@gmail.com

Sunday Services
9:00 a.m. Sunday School
10:00 a.m. Worship Service

SUMMERVILLE BAPTIST CHURCH

Sunday Services:
Sunday School & Adult Bible Classes 9:45AM
Children’s Church & Worship Service 11:00AM
Family Worship Service 6:00PM

Wednesday:
Prayer Mtg, Children’s Bible Club, Youth Group 7:00PM

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“OPEN HEARTS, OPEN MINDS, OPEN DOORS”

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Pastor Taylor Gould

For service information go to
www.lagrandeumc.org

LaGrande CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE

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Sunday Worship 10:30 a.m.

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2702 Adams Avenue, La Grande 963-4018
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Little Friends
Christian Preschool/Childcare 963-6390
La Grande Adventist Christian School K-8th Grade 963-6203

FIRST LANDMARK MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH

1812 1st St. La Grande
Pastor Dave Tierce • 541-605-0215
We use the King James Version Bible

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Worship 11:00 am
Sunday Evening Bible Study - 3:00 pm (Effective June 10)
Wednesday Evening - 6:30 pm
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Services This Week