

Positively Speaking

By Mark Wilson

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The Second Holy Week

Through 18 years of living in the north country, I've come to recognize that, by default, deer hunting season is Wisconsin's second "holy week."

It took me a while to figure this out. Year after year, I stood behind the pulpit on the third Sunday of November, and looked with dismay upon an empty sanctuary.

In Hayward, most of the men and half the ladies vanish into the woods on deer opener, and they normally don't re-appear for church on Sunday morning.

Of course, there are always a few devoted members of the flock who endure the annual Thanksgiving sermon, anxiously awaiting the concluding "amen" so then can hurry up and get out there. I'm happy to report that my Thanksgiving sermon usually has the intended effect. When it's over, there's a collective "Whew, Thank God!" then a mad scramble for the doors.

I regretfully admit that in years past, I've attempted to heap guilt and shame on the poor hunters of the congregation in the weeks leading up to "the great departure." They hung their heads, as I poured it on. "Surely, you can give your Creator ONE hour of your precious hunting time. Where is your commitment? Where is your sacrifice? Where is your priority?" I even made a vague suggestion that if they agreed to sit in church for an hour, that heaven would take note of such devotion, and perhaps reward them with a trophy buck.

They didn't buy it.

Several years ago, in mid-November, I went for the nuclear option. "People, if you truly love Jesus, then you're going to prove it by coming HERE next Sunday morning, rather than traipsing out into the woods before dawn!"

They didn't buy that either.

The good folks of Hayward instinctively know the odds of bagging big buck are much greater from a deer stand than a church pew.

One older fellow shook my hand afterwards and said, "Pastor, thank you for sharing your perspective, but next Sunday, I'll be lovin' Jesus in my tree stand." (I think he was giving a Norwegian rebuke.)

That day, I learned a valuable lesson. My job, as a northwoods pastor, is to bless the dear hunters, and not try to force them into being something else.

Besides, what other season affords such opportunity for solitude and reflection? What occasion brings a better place for prayer? In the normal course of life, most folks don't carve out enough time to be quiet and listen to God's voice.

One can certainly worship in the woods. In fact, there is no greater cathedral. The splendor of creation inspires the soul to greater heights.

Hunting season imposes "Sabbath" on us. The entire town slows down, and it's hard to find a mechanic, a repairman, or a barber. Slowing is good medicine for the soul.

Wisconsin's deer hunting season includes Thanksgiving – and that certainly is appropriate for such a holy week.