Vote for the Other Guy
by Todd Wilken

Wittenberg Trail:
A Present-Tense Gospel
by Edie Rudder Wadsworth

Winter, 2012

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Dear Issues, Etc. Journal Reader,

Greetings in the name of Jesus.

In this edition of the Journal, I might make you mad. In my article, Vote for the Other Guy, I confront the every-man-for-himself, enlightened self-interest voting strategy that many Christians have adopted. There is a better way: the way of self-sacrifice and putting your neighbor first, even when you vote.

Our Wittenberg Trail feature is from a loyal Tennessee listener Edie Rudder Wadsworth. She tells her story of the long road from the “legalism and the seductive draw of evangelical mysticism” to the “present-tense Gospel” of the Reformation.

You’ll also find a list of the many congregations of the Issues, Etc. 300 in the Find a Church section at the end of the Journal.

Enjoy this Journal.

Wir sind alle Bettler,

Todd Wilken, host Issues, Etc.
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Vote for the Other Guy
by Todd Wilken

I swear by my life and my love of it that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine.

-Ayn Rand, Atlas Shrugged

For man does not live for himself alone in this mortal body, in order to work on its account, but also for all men on earth; nay, he lives only for others and not for himself.

-Martin Luther, On the Freedom of a Christian

I have written dozens of essays and articles on theology. All of them have received criticism of some kind. I predict that this one will receive the most. Why? First, because this is a presidential election year, we are encouraged to suspend our critical thinking and adopt the party line. The party line permits no critique or questions.

Second, and more to point of this essay, some of you will take offense because I will be questioning your ideas about voting, and about yourself as a Christian voter. You may have believed these ideas your entire voting life. You may consider these ideas not only thoroughly American (they are), but also thoroughly Christian (they aren’t).

What ideas am I talking about? I think that many Christians have unintentionally adopted a politics of self-interest. Their reasons for voting are more influenced by Voltaire, Adam Smith and Ayn Rand than by a Christian worldview or ethic. Perhaps you are one of these Christians. If you have adopted an every-man-for-himself, enlightened self-interest voting strategy, you most certainly are. I intend to show that these ideas have no place in the mind of a Christian voter.

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Who Are You Voting For?

There are two ways to understand that question. Usually, it means which candidate is getting your vote? But, I’m asking something different. I’m asking, who benefits from your vote? Whose interests are you voting to promote and protect?

It should go without saying that a Christian doesn’t vote for the same reason the unbeliever votes. A Christian doesn’t vote because it is his right. That’s why the unbeliever votes. For the Christian, his rights have nothing to do with it. A Christian doesn’t vote to get his way. That’s also why the unbeliever votes. For the Christian, getting his way has nothing to do with it. A Christian doesn’t vote to protect his own interests. That, again, is why the unbeliever votes.

A Christian votes to serve his neighbor —period. This means that a Christian will sometimes vote for, and sometimes against his own interests, but a Christian will always for his neighbor’s interests. When the Christian enters the voting booth, the neighbor always comes first.

In other words, the Christian doesn’t vote for himself; he votes for the other guy, his neighbor. The Christian doesn’t use his vote to serve himself; he uses votes to serve his neighbor.

If you disagree so far, then read on. I’m talking to you.

Your Neighbor Isn’t an Idea

Now, when I say that a Christian votes to serve his neighbor, I’m not talking about “the greater good.” The greater good is an abstraction. Your neighbor isn’t an abstraction. I’m talking about real people. When I say that
a Christian votes to serve his neighbor, I’m not talking about a cause either. Causes are ideas. Your neighbor isn’t an idea.

The late Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Tip O’Neill was famous for saying, “All politics is local.” He was right, especially in the case of the Christian voter. A Christian citizen doesn’t have to go looking for a the greater good or a cause; his reason for voting is right there in front of him everyday, in the person of his neighbor.

Is there anything wrong with the greater good or political causes? Not necessarily. But your idea of the greater good or my political cause can obscure our neighbor, or worse, become a substitute for him.

**Your Neighbor Isn’t You**

You might ask, “Can’t I vote my own interests and serve my neighbor with my vote at the same time?” I know that it is an axiom of American politics that individual self-interest is the engine of progress. Most Americans believe that the purpose of voting is to promote and preserve one’s self-interests, and that doing so collectively promotes the greater interests of society. In his famous book, *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith wrote:

*Give me that which I want, and you shall have this which you want, is the meaning of every such offer; and it is in this manner that we obtain from one another the far greater part of those good offices which we stand in need of.*

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It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self love, and never talk to them of our necessities but of their advantages... By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he intends to promote it.¹

Sadly, this idea owes more to 18th century philosophy than to Holy Scripture. In fact, there is no teaching like this in the entire Bible. In contrast, the Bible requires you to subordinate, and sometimes even sacrifice your interests in favor of your neighbor’s:

_Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others._²

You say that voting your own interests often results in promoting your neighbor’s interests. True, it very often does. The greater interests of society are often served by voters concerned only with their own self-interests. Pragmatically, self-interest voting often works. But Christians aren’t pragmatists. Christians cannot allow the end to justify the means.

You say that we should consider the broader consequences of our votes. Of course we should. But don’t rationalize your self-interested voting by appealing to the broader benefit it may (or may not) have to your neighbor.

I say, start with your neighbor; not with yourself. If you start with yourself, your first concern isn’t your neighbor, but you. If you start with yourself, then you will always be trying to justify your self-interested vote with some peripheral benefit it may (or may not) have for your neighbor.
Start with your neighbor, and leave your self-interests out of the equation. If (as you rationalize) your neighbor’s interests are bond together with your interests, what do you have to worry about?

The politics of self-interest have no place in the Christian’s voting practice. Any attempt to justify self-interest is self-justification.

The Art of the Possible

I know what you’re thinking: “Wilken, you’re an idealist; you’re not being practical!” Yes and no. Yes, Scripture itself presents the picture of the Christian life as one of selfless service of the neighbor. Of course, this ideal is impossible for any of us to attain. But no, just because it is impossible is no reason to abandon the ideal. In fact, the ideal of selfless service is eminently practical. Nothing serves your neighbor’s interests better than putting his interests first.

“Politics is the art of the possible,” Otto von Bismarck said. He was right. Every political effort is an effort in compromise, even voting. The goal is to achieve the best possible outcome, not the best imaginable outcome. In politics, the perfect often is the enemy of the good. Does this mean that the Christian voter abandons the ideal of selfless service to his neighbor in order to get the job done? Far from it. This means that a Christian voter must hold to the ideal all the more --especially when that service proves inevitably incomplete, and when the results are far from perfect.

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Your Neighbor, from the Ground Up

If the Christian is supposed to vote to serve his neighbor, then you ask, who is your neighbor? Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan to answer that very question.

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.” But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

By the end of the parable, Jesus has turned the question around, literally: “Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?”

Even the lawyer knows the right answer; but he doesn’t know why that answer is right. The Samaritan “proved to be a neighbor” by recognizing that the man who fell among the robbers was his neighbor and by sacrificing his interests for him.

What about that man in the roadside ditch looked like a neighbor? Nothing, by our definition. By our definition, the man in the ditch is probably in the country illegally, doesn’t speak the language, and doesn’t have health insurance. In any case, he should have known better than to wander out on that road. Now, he’s just another member of society who is dependent upon government, who believes that he is a victim, who
believes the government should take care of him, who believes that he is entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you-name-it.

Like the lawyer, we want to define our neighbor from the top down. “Can he take care of himself?” “What can he do for me?” “What is in this relationship for me?” “How much is this neighbor going to cost me?” But our definition is very different from Jesus’ definition. In this parable, Jesus defines the neighbor from the ground up.

The Samaritan gets nothing out of his roadside neighbor. In fact, the Samaritan pays dearly for stopping to help him. No good deed goes unpunished in this parable. He finds himself obligated to this man in an open-ended way. This is going to be financially risky and potentially expensive. And, in this way, the Samaritan proves to be a neighbor to his neighbor.

Jesus doesn’t define the neighbor from the top down, but from the ground up. For Jesus, basic qualification for “neighbor” is the fact that he can do nothing for me. There’s no possibility of reciprocity or payback. This isn’t going to be a mutually beneficial relationship.

*If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.*

These words fly in the face of an every-man-for-himself, enlightened self-interest voting strategy, don’t they?
Too Risky?

I can hear it. Some of you, if you’ve continued reading this far, are saying: “I don’t care what you say, Wilken. This election is simply too important for me to take chances. Too many of my rights, too many of my freedoms, too many of my interests are at stake this time around. Your pollyannish ideals of voting for my neighbor’s interests sound good, but I can’t risk it.”

Repent. You have no higher priority, no higher calling and no higher duty than your neighbor. Love of neighbor is most necessary when it is most inconvenient, most costly and most risky. Stop trusting your vote to safeguard your interests and trust God to do so.

The every-man-for-himself, self-interest voting strategy says, “I have to vote my own interests. If I don’t, no one will.” But, the truth that the Christian knows is radically different. In his famous treatise, *On the Freedom of the Christian*, Luther writes:

*In all his works he [the Christian] ought to entertain this view, and look only to this object, that he may serve and be useful to others in all that he does; having nothing before his eyes but the necessities and the advantage of his neighbor.*

*All our works should be directed to the advantage of others; since every Christian has such abundance through his faith, that all his other works and his whole life remain over and above, wherewith to serve and benefit his neighbor of spontaneous good will.*

*Lo! my God, without merit on my part, of His pure and free mercy, has given to me, an unworthy, condemned, and contemptible creature, all the riches of justification and salvation in Christ, so that I no longer am in want of anything... I will therefore give myself, as a sort of Christ, to my neighbor, as Christ has given Himself to me; and will do nothing in this life, except what I see will be needful, advantageous, and wholesome for my neighbor, since by faith I abound in all good things in Christ.*

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You may be one of those every-man-for-himself, enlightened self-interest voters. You don’t have to be. You have none other than Jesus Christ looking out for your interests. You can now afford to put your neighbor’s interests first, even when you vote. So, from now on, don’t vote for yourself. Vote for the other guy. Vote for your neighbor.

Ayn Rand on Jesus

There is a great, basic contradiction in the teachings of Jesus. Jesus was one of the first great teachers to proclaim the basic principle of individualism --the inviolate sanctity of man's soul, and the salvation of one's soul as one's first concern and highest goal; this means- one's ego and the integrity of one's ego. But when it came to the next question, a code of ethics ...Jesus (or perhaps His interpreters) gave men a code of altruism, that is, a code which told them that in order to save one's soul, one must love or help or live for others. This means, the subordination of one's soul (or ego) to the wishes, desires or needs of others, which means the subordination of one's soul to the souls of others. This is a contradiction that cannot be resolved. This is why men have never succeeded in applying Christianity in practice, while they have preached it in theory for two thousand years. The reason of their failure was not men's natural depravity or hypocrisy, which is the superficial (and vicious) explanation usually given. The reason is that a contradiction cannot be made to work.

-Ayn Rand, Letters of Ayn Rand

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2 Philippians 2:3-4.
3 Luke 10:25-29
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I grew up at the table of American evangelicalism. I was the poster child for 'sold out Christian.' I memorized the Scriptures, wrote in my high school journal that I wanted to be a missionary, and was a member of all the right parachurch organizations from the Fellowship of Christian Athletes to Young Life to Campus Crusade for Christ. I listened to all the right Christian music, avoided the worldly temptations of alcohol, drugs, bad movies and rock 'n roll and took my role of personal evangelism to new heights of bravery. I was a pro at sharing my personal testimony.

But still there was an ache in the depth of my soul that could not be satisfied by clean living or personal witnessing or by a stellar quiet time. And sadly, I couldn't even sustain those for very long.

My tender conscious was so pricked by the law-dominant sermons of the various churches I attended that I was baptized at least eight times and could rarely stay in my pew when the "I Surrender All" altar call was given. I was always in tears. Always crushed by my sin. Always starving for something. I sat at the table of faith and was taught the important tenets of Christianity like the inerrancy of the Scriptures and the urgency of sharing the Gospel with the world. Apparently, there was a rich feast to be enjoyed in Christ, but it never seemed to be for me. It was for all the people we had
yet to bring into God's family. The gospel was 'feast food' for all those people who needed to get saved. I should be well past the point of needing that by now. I should be getting on with things. But it's hard to leave the table hungry.

I bought into the lie that since I couldn't find relief or rescue at church, surely I'd find it in the growing plethora of Christian (self-help) books. The Christian bookstore was bursting at the seams with them. I bought every one I could get my hands on. I prayed The Prayer of Jabez. I did Warren's 40 Days of Purpose. And I longed for what Joel Osteen called Your Best Life Now.

I read them with passion and dutifully tried to follow all the advice (i.e. more law) they touted. I'd be on a high for a while but only long enough to leave me 'jonesing' until the next new book came out. I was a Christian addicted to self-improvement. Addictions usually don't end well.

Fast forward a few years when I found myself married to a cradle Lutheran who had become agnostic during the heavy science years of his medical training. He was my new personal mission. Besides marrying him, I felt quite confident that I could evangelize him too. Only, he had been raised in an atmosphere of grace and he could smell legalism a mile away, even in his current state of post-modern agnosticism. I dragged him to evangelical church after evangelical church. He would sweat profusely during the meet and greet portion of the service (hard core Lutherans seldom like the 'passing of the peace') and then critique the sermon for its lack of gospel.
Who was he to be telling me what ought to be in a sermon? *I'm the spiritual one here, mister.* And why did he seem to be so singularly focused on the Gospel? What about the music and the kids' programs and the small groups?

But he had been raised at the gospel feast. And he knew that what we were being served was severely lacking.

We never went to a church during that period that passed his test. We went to an evangelical church in our town for 14 weeks straight without hearing the Gospel. Yes, we were counting. And that's when he put his foot down. If I was gonna drag him to yet another church, it would have to be Lutheran. Apparently, he believed that if you didn’t have the Gospel, you didn't have church. He wasn't all that crazy about going to the Lutheran church either but we were running out of options and I wanted our girls to be raised in the faith. We both went reluctantly, 'kicking and screaming', as C.S. Lewis would say. In retrospect, I was so arrogant and critical of everything back then. I criticized the formality of the worship, the pomp and circumstance, the pastor's vestments, the stodgy hymns, and all the old people.

I wanted something hip and relevant and alive! (Notice, my criteria didn't involve 'Jesus'.)

But I stayed. And I took the pastor's adult bible class. Oh, the patience of that precious man. His kindness toward me and lack of defensiveness as I shot rapid fire questions at him about infant baptism and the real presence in the Lord's Supper was utterly astounding. He was a brilliant man, fluent in

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German, Latin and Greek. He was never impatient. He never got rattled. He had a deep abiding peace in the power of God's grace and he knew that he didn't need to coerce me into anything. He trusted the Word to do its work. He wasn't trying to manipulate me in the least. I didn't feel any pressure at all to agree with him and he was so generous with the Gospel. I would dismiss him at first and say, "Well, yes I know Jesus died for me, but....."

He was so singularly focused on God's grace and Jesus finished work on the cross that I got frustrated sometimes.

I KNOW THAT BUT WHAT ABOUT NOW? HE DIED. I GET IT. BUT WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO NOW?

I was so well trained to rush right past the Gospel. I belittled it, dismissed it, wanted something more tangible, more doable. Give me 10 steps. A new book. A better devotional. Anything, I beg you.

Finally, after months of struggling, of truly 'working out my salvation', it began to sink in: Jesus died for me, a sinner.

It is finished.

It is finished.

It is finished.

It hit me like a ton of bricks. That's what I had been missing all this time. A present-tense Gospel. The very Gospel that I'm supposed to be sharing with others is also for me, now, and everyday.

But because He knows that I will continue to struggle with doubt, He invites me every week to a feast, where He himself is the passover Lamb
and His body and blood are served for the forgiveness of sins. And like a baby, I learn to listen closely to my Father's voice, to hear His words, "You are forgiven. I forgive you all your sins. It is finished."

Communion is his present tense love for me on display. It is relevant and alive, just not in the way I was expecting.

And to this very day, I seldom go to the rail without deep emotion -- that this Gospel feast is free and it's FOR ME.

In a nutshell, here's what I've learned: I don't crave the next new book of Christian living because I have the very body and blood of the Savior and His very own words of forgiveness.

I don't worry that I'm not getting better and better. Christ died for sinners, "of whom I am chief." I stand in good company with Paul when I stand as saint and sinner and trust in the perfect life of Christ.

I don't live with guilt because I'm not a missionary in Africa. The Lutheran teaching of vocation has freed me to serve my family and community right here in the good ole South.

When I doubt, I have learned to say with Luther, "Lord, I believe. Help thou my unbelief."

I live life to the fullest, in the beautiful tension and joy of the broken but baptized life, without the constraints of legalism and the seductive draw of evangelical mysticism.

I am in chains. But only to Christ.
Lutherans have taught me to feast! Christ is the Lamb of God, the bread and elixir of life, whose body and blood are broken and shed for me.

It took me awhile to see it but there is a genius of evangelicalism too. They are masters at getting people to the table and making them feel welcome. And we would do well to see the beauty of their gifts. Despite the fact that there was a Lutheran church 2 miles from my house growing up, the evangelical church 10 miles away knocked on my door and invited me to come. Not only that, they picked me up on a bus and took me to church. And for a little while, they fed me the feast of Christ's forgiveness. I will be forever grateful for that.

But Lutheranism has offered a deep well, a cistern of the best that Christianity has to offer. Lutheranism offers Christ and him alone, for you and for me.

To God be the glory that my latest attempt at personal evangelism was a complete failure.

And I'm perfectly okay with that.

Edie Wadsworth is a mother of 4, homeschooler, blogger and former evangelical who has that contagious enthusiasm that only a new Lutheran can have. She writes about a multitude of topics, including her faith journey, at her blog LifeinGrace. Besides homeschooling her two daughters in the classical tradition, she loves cooking, decorating and design, cowboy boots, C.S. Lewis and banjo music. She and her husband Steve recently rebuilt their home in Tennessee after a devastating house fire. She and Steve and have been long-time listeners and supporters of Issues, Etc.

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Dear Issues, Etc. Listener:

In the name of Jesus, greetings.

I was recently thinking about my last 14 years as host of Issues, Etc. Much has changed, the technology, the landscape of radio and the way you listen to the show. One thing has not changed --not even a little bit. The one constant has been Issues, Etc.'s Christ-Centered, Cross-Focused message.

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901 SW Fillmore St
Topeka KS 66606
785-354-7132

Kentucky
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Rev Matthew Vesey
2255 Eastland Pkwy
Lexington KY 40505
859-299-9615

Louisiana
Redeemer Lutheran Church
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1905 Highway 59
Mandeville LA 70448
985-674-0377

Maryland
Zion Lutheran
Rev Robert Riebau
209 N Main St
Accident MD 21520
301-746-8170

St. John’s Lutheran
Rev William Stottlemyer
3738 Resley Rd
Hancock MD 21750
301-678-7180

St. James Lutheran
Rev J Thomas Foelber
8 W Overlea Ave
Overlea MD 21206
410-668-0158

Michigan
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Rev Thomas Meser
325 E Warwick Dr
Alma MI 48801
989-463-5754

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Rev David Reed
303 Ruth St
Auburn MI 48611
989-662-6161

Emmanuel Lutheran
Rev Joel Baseley
800 S Military St
Dearborn MI 48124
313-565-4002

Resurrection Lutheran
Rev Scott Benjamin
20531 Kelly Rd
Detroit MI 48225
313-372-4902

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Rev Mark Braden
4305 North Military Avenue
Detroit MI 48210
313-894-7450

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616-681-0791

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2900 Burton St SE
Grand Rapids MI 49546
616-949-0710

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62657 North Ave
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586-749-5286

Lutheran Church of the
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1000 Bagley Ave
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248-930-0173

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6356 Center Street
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2904 20th St SE
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14385 Blaine Ave E
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29972 570th Ave
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262-633-4831

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Shawano WI 54166
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**Luther Memorial Chapel**
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Shorewood WI 53211
414-332-5732

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262-246-3200

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462 Meadowbrook Dr
West Bend WI 53090
262-334-0375

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Rev Michael Henrichs
6021 N Santa Monica Blvd
Whitewater Bay WI 53217
414-332-4458

**Wyoming**

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Rev Daniel Holthus
1240 S Missouri Ave
Casper WY 82609
307-234-0568

**Zion Lutheran**
Rev Paul Rosberg
601 S 9th St
Douglas WY 82633-2704
307-358-2810

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Rev Jared Tucher
1001 E 9th St
Gillette WY 82717
307-682-4886

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Rev David Bott
175 N. Willow St.
Jackson WY 83001
307-733-3409

**Zion Lutheran**
Rev Shawn Kumm
406 S. 19th St
Laramie WY 82070
307-745-9262

**CANADA**

**Redeemer Lutheran**
Rev Garry Heintz
13 Marion St
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