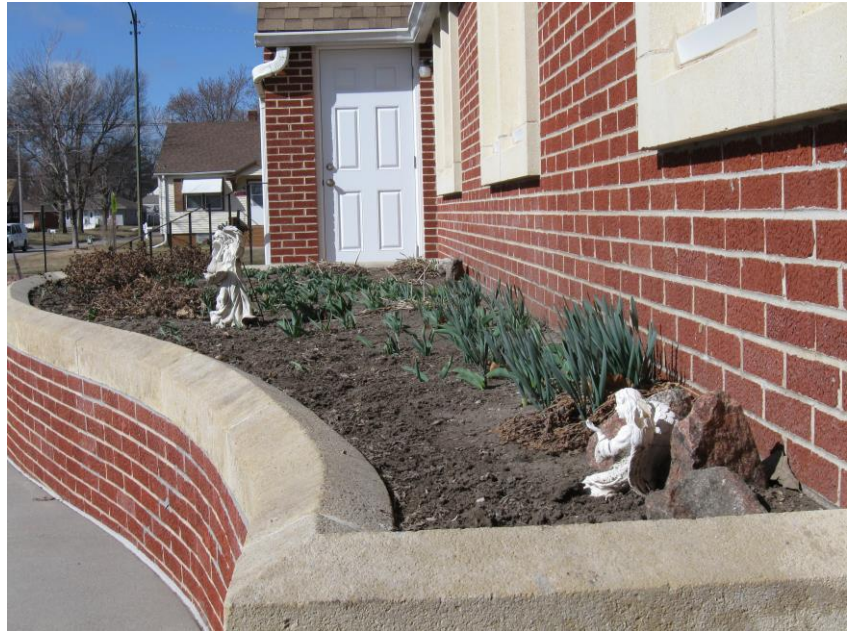


The signs of spring are everywhere. All one needs to do is look for them.

During the month of February, Rita and I ushered at our church. In addition to serving as ushers, we were responsible for the ringing the church bell at the beginning of each service. Knowing the exact time when to ring the bell can only be accomplished through careful listening and timing. Immediately following the minister's greetings and welcome to the congregation, I must pull the rope and ring the bell. Two weeks ago, I almost missed it. Rather than closely listening to the minister for that exact moment in time, my attention was temporarily diverted. I was staring out an exit door of the church that overlooks a large flower planter. The planter is filled with an assortment of perennial herbaceous flowers along with tulip and daffodil bulbs. To my excitement and amazement, I witnessed numerous sprouts of tulips and daffodils projecting above the soil line. Briefly, I started daydreaming that spring had arrived. The next thing I heard was Rita's voice, saying, "Pay attention and ring the bell!"



As I grow older, I've discovered I dislike winter more and more, and that I continually long for the arrival of spring. As a result, I am constantly looking for signs.

Only one day before the bell-ringing incident, I witnessed another sign of spring that would probably not be obvious to the average onlooker. That Saturday morning, Rita and I were in Omaha visiting our son and his family. As I was sitting at their kitchen table, I noticed, outside the window, a large silver maple tree in full bloom.



Most people would not notice these flowers due to their obscure appearance. The flowers of a silver maple tree start as reddish buds turning later to a yellow-green. Silver maples bloom in late winter to very early spring. Seeing these peculiar flowers in bloom reminded me that soon they would be followed by hundreds of thousands of samaras, the name of the seed-bearing fruit of a silver maple and more commonly called helicopters.

Later that same day, while driving back to Minden from Omaha, I noticed another obvious sign of spring. It was late afternoon/early evening and having passed the Wood River exit, off to our right, both Rita and I witnessed eight to ten Sandhill cranes taking flight, lifting up and out of a cornfield. How graceful and beautiful they were. Perhaps they landed again in another field or perhaps they headed to the river preparing for their evening roost. One thing I knew, they would be here for about a month, and soon be joined by others numbering in the hundreds of thousands. Every spring I am fascinated with their migratory flight. Just knowing these incredible birds have taken this same migratory path for thousands of years astounds me.

For nearly a week prior to the crane incident, and now almost occurring daily, I am witnessing other wonderful signs of spring. On the first day of March, I saw my first robin.

For nearly three weeks, I've enjoyed seeing thousands of water fowl, including ducks and geese, flying overhead. Hearing them approach from far off before seeing them high above is an eerie, yet exciting, experience. I am truly amazed how these birds can fly so closely together without colliding. We who live in Central Nebraska are fortunate to live in one of the world's largest flight patterns of migratory birds.

As the month of March continues, I will keep looking for more signs of spring. The good news is, in a little over two weeks, spring itself will officially arrive. I can't wait!