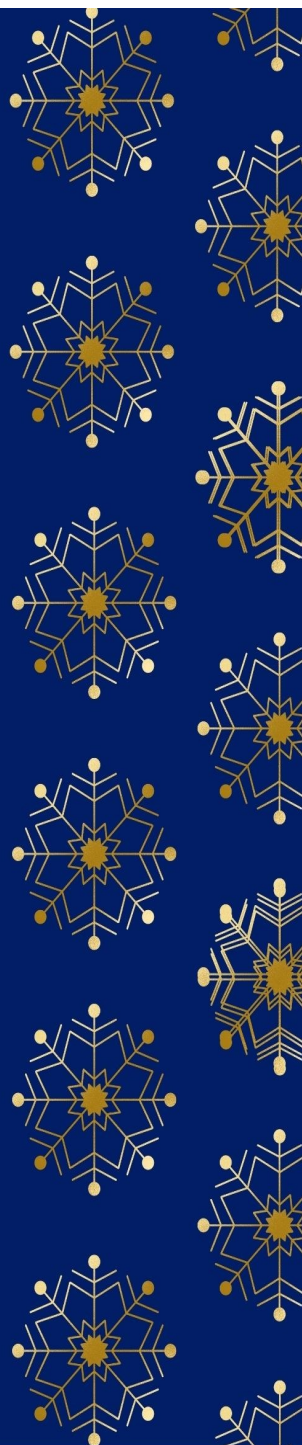


CHESED: LOVE THAT ENDURES



Devotions for
Advent and
Christmas





**Eastern Missouri ELCA
Ministries**

"Chesed: Love that Endures: Devotions for Advent and
Christmas"

Created by and for

The Eastern Missouri Conference,

Central States Synod, ELCA

Advent/Christmas 2025, Narrative Lectionary

A word on the series:

The concept of *chesed* (lovingkindness, mercy, steadfast love, loyalty, faithfulness) is woven throughout scripture as God's enduring love. What early Jewish scholars believed to be the defining attribute of the divine pulls us into hope. Redemptive history cannot occur apart from *chesed*.

In this Advent season, how can we talk about the promises made to the people of God, and the covenant promise that is shown through actions, as a contrast to the way that worldly forces are pushing dominance and oppression? How can we emphasize our call to end things that are antithesis to God's promises of *chesed*, steadfast love?

Each week in this series we are opening up the concept of *chesed* for the world today. "Chesed is never merely an abstract feeling of goodwill, but always entails practical action on behalf of another." (Dr. Will Kynes) As we (loosely) follow the Narrative Lectionary stories of exile, hope, rejoicing, and new creation, Psalm 118 will be our refrain, reminding us each week that God's love endures forever.

God shows up. God brings life and hope out of, and is present in, places that seem burned out (fiery furnace), barren (dry bones), parched (all who are thirsty come to me), in the shadows (the Light shines in the darkness). God is with us in our difficult times. Our steadfast God keeps showing up, pushing us to receive enduring love and to reflect that same enduring love every day. From the fiery furnace to the valley of dry bones, from songs of rejoicing to the coming light of Christ, *chesed is the love that sustains, delivers, and welcomes us home. It is the love that comes running in the birth of Jesus, the ultimate promise fulfilled.*

Join us as we open the gates to God's steadfast love, trusting that in every moment – even the hardest – God's faithful love endures.

—SAM Jane Brda, The Rev. Carrie McElfresh, and
The Rev. Jill Seagle

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ADVENT 1

Read: Daniel 3:1-30

We begin Advent 2025 with a push into the fire. Admittedly, this is not what we usually associate with Advent.

In fact, this text (along with next week's Old Testament text) are associated with the Vigil of Easter. What do we do when we encounter the fiery furnace out of seasonal rhythm?

Advent itself is a vigil, a time of watching and waiting. We have been waiting and watching for the promised Messiah, not merely as a babe in a manger but as the one who will bring about the fullness of time. In these generations of watching and waiting, we have found ourselves in many times of hardship. We have found ourselves pressured by the powers of this world to bend the knee to things that will not bring us salvation. How do we withstand these fires?

The Vigil of Easter in the ELW includes this prayer to go with the fiery furnace: "Almighty and eternal God, the only hope of the world, by the proclamation of your prophets you declare to us the word of salvation. By the grace of your Spirit increase the devotion of all the baptized, that, strengthened by your presence, we may withstand hardship and sorrow and be united with your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord." This prayer is the essence of our prayerful Advent.

As we watch and wait for the only hope of the world, let us cling to the power of God's love which surrounds us in the midst of the flames, and will not let us go.

—Pr. Jill Seagle
Dean of the Eastern Missouri Conference

MONDAY

Read: Genesis 8:1-19

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *chesed* (often translated loving-kindness or steadfast love) is sometimes paired with or correlated with the word *rechem* (a word that means "womb," but is also often translated as compassion, mercy, or faithful protection). These two words when put side-by-side, help us to understand the love of God that is steadfast, compassionate, merciful, kind, protective, and might even be thought of imaginatively as womb-love.

And what better time to consider what womb-love might be than during Advent when we think about the baby that is forming, growing, and will be born from Mary's womb? Emmanuel - God with us - because of God's love for us, and as the embodiment of God's love for us, offering hope in places of hopelessness.

Our passage today is from Genesis 8:1-19, the story of Noah's Ark. The Ark itself was like a womb too perhaps (Am I stretching things too far here? Stick with me.) The Ark was a place of protection, a place to weather the storm, a place of steadfast connection to the love and mercy of God, a place of hope and promise for new life. Noah and his family remained connected to God's faithfulness during the flood and thereby experienced a rebirth of Creation. The process was surely long and painful and messy, and yet they were able to endure because of God's steadfast love that was their source of hope.

How have you experienced the steadfast love, mercy, and compassion of God, perhaps like a womb, even as a storm of life has pounded down all around and upon you?

What is forming, growing, being birthed in your life during this season of expectation and promise?

—Rachel Helton
Christ Lutheran, Webster Groves

TUESDAY



—"One Like the Son of God" mixed media artwork by Karen Bynum

St. Mark's Clayton

Think about the places in your community that seem to be mired in hardship and sorrow. How can you show up today as the hands of God at work to bring hope?

WEDNESDAY

"And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven...Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled." - Matthew 24:30,34

These verses raise questions about whether Jesus was speaking metaphorically, or mistakenly even, since the events described did not occur within all his listeners' lifetimes. However, Matthew was writing after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. That time of turmoil and suffering, for both Jews and early Christians, makes sense of the grim prophecies and parables of chapters 23-25.

Matthew concludes these chapters with a vision of the Son of Man coming in glory to judge the nations, separating people as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. The "sheep" are those who cared for the needy, and the "goats" are those who neglected them. The message is clear that we should serve others; it is the equivalent of serving our Messiah.

Here in the early days of Advent, the text reminds us that the kingdom of God is present both now and not yet. During this middle time, how we treat the most vulnerable (like an infant in a manger, for example) reveals the Gospel to all the world. The poverty and danger facing the Holy Family echoes today in the poverty and danger facing so many families. In Matthew's time, as in our own time, the world can know those who Jesus has saved by their acts of lovingkindness.

—*Daryn Holdsworth*
Shepherd of the Hills, St. Ann

THURSDAY

Advent invites us all to reflect on how Christ is leading us now in this world and leading us toward the goal of the reign of God in the time to come.

The compulsion to counter the worldly forces that exhibit dominance and oppression is a difficult challenge to meet. Just praying and preaching feels like “not enough.” But, God does show up! The biblical witness gives plenty of examples – from many centuries ago. How about today?

The world tries to make us conform to its ways. We are encouraged to play the zero-sum political game, using the divisive tools of persuasion that earthly kingdoms thrive on.

“My kingdom is not of this world,” says Jesus to Pilate in John 18:36. In other words, the reign of God is not simply opposed to the kingdoms of the world. It refuses to play the game that the kingdoms of our world like to play. “If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over,” Jesus further explained to Pilate. Jesus refused to submit to Pilate’s authority. He refused to play Pilate’s game. But in so doing, he also declined to fight Pilate’s power over his body.

Not that Jesus’ followers weren’t itching to fight for his freedom. Naturally, they hated the injustice of it all and wanted to play the empire’s game to help Jesus win the battle. But Jesus forbade them – precisely so that the steadfast love and mercy and care of God could continue unabated. This shows Jesus’ sacrificial love.

Jesus doesn’t play Pilate’s game because he’s playing his own game. Pilate’s game is really the game the world has been playing then and now: earthly rulers giving their subjects what those rulers feel their subjects deserve (a

game that is currently dominating our news cycles today). Jesus' game? Giving all people what Jesus deserves. He staked his life on this game, and God raised him from death to show God's favor for this kind of game.

We can find God's steadfast love and mercy and care in this act of God that happened almost 2000 years ago. We can come to his table where he feeds us his body and blood any time we like. We can share this gift with each other in words and action. Simple acts of love and tenderness amid the strongarm chaos that seeks to overwhelm us into submission.

Who knows? Perhaps the seven million people who demonstrated peacefully across all fifty states on the recent "No Kings Day" were a manifestation of this very different game of God's. The protestors exhibited both "words" of God to the country and its leaders – the word of law ("No Kings!") and the word of promise, love, and mercy more subtly in their peaceful demeanor. The Trump administration saw both critique and blessing at the same time – all without infringing on that regime's right to interpret this protest any way they wanted to, surely another moment of grace that was unilateral. By the same token, it opens up the possibility for us to live by the courage that Jesus gives us. His act of salvation and redemption beckons us to stand with him and say, "our kingdom is not of this world." Thanks be to God!

Let us pray: O God, help us to live in this broken world on your steadfast love. Strengthen our hope as we dare to counter the world's chaos with the hope and mercy that are ours through your son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

—PMA Jim Squire

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Hazelwood

FRIDAY

Read: Isaiah 30:19-26

Are you worn out, tired, or feeling discouraged? Maybe a series of events beyond your control have left you starving for hope and joy. Or, maybe you are experiencing real starvation and scarcity of basic needs, like food, clothing, or shelter. Have you tried to seek alternative solutions only to come up with little result?

In these times we will see and hear the enticing ringing of a new polished bell, promising something newer, bigger, or better. But, they will grow dark and clunk mute like a foil-covered plastic decoration, or a glitter-glued wire hanger that has been bent into the shape of a deer, lacking life. These things offer dimly lit, resource-draining, cheap imitations of hope. Don't confuse the imitations for the real things.

The prophet Isaiah encourages us, saying, "your Teacher will not hide any more." With a light and a hope seven times brighter than the sun in the middle of summer, you will see God working to bring rescue. With words of promise and hope, you will hear the voice and word of God saying, "this is the way; walk in it." The Holy Spirit is at work, are you seeing it? God's Word is encouraging you; can you hear it?

It may be difficult to make out at first. But, as we begin to take note of these lights of hope and words of joy and promise, God will shine forth into our lives. If God has blessed you with the means to bring joy and hope to others, please seek to help others in need to see the light and life of Christ breaking through.

Prayer: God of light and life, you have never failed to take

care of your children. Fill our world with the joyous sounds of your word, the overflowing supply of nutritious food, and shine brightly the life-giving healing that only you can give. Help everyone to see your great love and be drawn closer to you.

—Pr. Matthew Helfrich
Holy Cross Lutheran, Creve Coeur

SATURDAY



—Kind Hearts, watercolor by Janis Dillon, STHS

Take time today to stop and consider: how are you offering kindness in a world that seems to want to throw others into fiery furnaces?



ADVENT 2

At Unity in Bel-Nor, we practice the Triduum, and the Easter Vigil is a great celebration with twelve scripture

readings. When I read the scripture passages for Advent 2, I thought, "how is this mine; the reading I love to share from Ezekiel 37; the reading that inspired me to make this banner for the Easter Vigil?"

The banner is inspired by the text, but also by the spiritual "Dem Bones," written in the 1920s by James Weldon Johnson and set to music by his younger brother J. Rosamond Johnson. James Weldon Johnson, a civil rights activist, also wrote the lyrics to "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" to honor Booker T. Washington and now known as the Black National Anthem. My question is this: in times of disillusionment and despair, what is it that brings you to restoration, to new life, to energy, to joy?

—*Jeanine Seifert Arrighi*
Unity Lutheran,
Bel-Nor



MONDAY

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 4:1–12

Advent is a time of waiting. While we wait for Jesus to return and for God's kingdom to be established fully, we're not supposed to just wait idly. While we wait, we're called to live "to please God" by abounding in love for one another and for all people. This isn't a sentimental feeling, or just having kind thoughts about others; this is a love that is faithful, and enduring and rooted in God's own heart.

When we're down in the valley seasons of life, when we're in places that feel more like Lent than Christmas, love can feel like dry bones: exhausted, scattered, virtually lifeless. But even in those valley places, especially in those valley places, God's Spirit of steadfast love is moving. Like the wind that swept over Ezekiel's valley, the Spirit fills us again with holy purpose: to live quietly, to work faithfully, to love deeply. We don't need to climb out of the valley before love begins; Love meets us there, breathing life into what seems lost.

Paul's message for the Thessalonians is the same message Advent has for us: that our lives should be reflections of God's love, a love that enters into the world's pain, abides there, and transforms it.

In this Advent valley, we wait for the One whose love is stronger than death and raises us to new life, right here, right now, and in the world to come.

Prayer:

God of all, breathe your Spirit into our desert places. Teach us to live to please you, to love deeply, work faithfully, and wait with hope for the coming of Christ. Amen.

—SAM Jane Brda
Family of Christ Lutheran, Imperial

TUESDAY

The Candle of Peace

Matthew 5 :9 Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the children of God.

On the second week of Advent, we light the second candle, the candle of peace. The Advent wreath serves as a reminder of the spiritual peace Christ brings. A call for us to once again, prepare our hearts for His coming, by seeking peace within ourselves, our families and the world. Peace with others begins as we understand that God calls us to be peacemakers in our world. Is there a place where you could be a peacemaker in your personal life? An invitation that needs to be extended to smooth over a fractured family relationship? An apology to be made or a silence to be broken that has stood as a barrier for too long? Don't miss the blessings God promised to you, as you respond to be a peacemaker in your own inner circle. We can help bring peace to our world, one heart at a time.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help me to bring peace to others, and guided by your Spirit, help me find peace within myself.

—Gail Freedman

St. Thomas/Holy Spirit Lutheran, Sunset Hills

WEDNESDAY

WANTED

What might a WANT AD for God's perfect love look like?

Looking for strong, tough ligaments and tendons capable of pulling messy parts together. Must be capable of providing a sturdy and everlasting framework for others. Should possess advanced skills in encouragement and in the gifting of empowerment, be a competent self/kick starter, and a rejuvenator of the heart. Requires experience in stirring up old bones and reluctant relics. Must be able to give a gentle nudge, or even a hearty push when needed.

In Ezekiel's vision, God raises up dry old bones from a sad and shadowed valley. Old to new, lost to found - God's love can be so much like that: so powerful and amazing that it can pull us up and out of the darkest places.

In trying to describe the totality of God's love, though, I really am at a loss for words. As I thought further about this, an old but well-known song from the group Queen came to mind, and as the repeating words of the song and its melody floated through my head, there seemed to be an aligning with how experiencing God's extraordinary love, has at one time or another made me feel.

God's love is capable of eliciting within you a wonderful revitalizing or relieving surge; a surge so powerful that you may feel as though you are ready to face just about anything.

With God's love we can feel like the Queen song suggests, that "We Are the Champions, my friends!" While life may offer many struggles, setbacks and obstacles, with God's extraordinary love to support us and provide us with the "backbone" we need "...we'll keep on fighting 'til the end"... and that no matter what happens, we "ain't going to lose!"

Hearing this Queen song always gives me an emotional boost and a sense of confidence. I believe having faith in our extremely loving God, and by accepting and try-

ing our best to mirror this powerful earthshattering sort of love, we “can come through...” anything this world might put before us. And that we “do mean to go on and on and on and on!” Forever and ever. Amen!

—*Debbie Schaller*
Gethsemane Lutheran, St. Louis

THURSDAY

Read: Psalm 146: 5-10



—Generosity, watercolor by Janis Dillon, STHS

Advent is the season of waiting. This much we know. But for what are we waiting and how will we know when our waiting is over?

I think our text today from the 146th Psalm gives us

some clues about our waiting. Our waiting will be over when the oppressed receive the justice that is due to them. When the hungry have been fed, the prisoners are set free and the eyes of the blind come in focus.

That's the vision of Advent that we hope. We wait on the Lord, who lifts up those who are bowed down. The One who grants justice to the orphan and widow and ruins the way of the wicked. And the day when the Lord will reign forever more.

That is the world God is bringing to birth in Jesus. A world where the lowly are lifted up, the spiritually weary are strengthened. It's the kind of hope that doesn't come from wishful thinking, but from the promise of scripture that the "Lord will reign forever."

Even in our waiting, we can rejoice. Even in the uncertainties of life, we can trust in God's faithfulness. Advent comes among us in every act of compassion and mercy, and through every glimpse of justice breaking through like the morning star.

Let us pray: Come, Lord Jesus. Come and open the hearts of your faithful people to your way of peace and justice throughout the Earth. Open our eyes to see Your kin-dom taking shape around us. Help us to trust in your promise of accompaniment as we join you in your work of redeeming love for the sake of the world you love. In the name of Jesus, I pray. Amen.

Prayer concerns: It is Human Rights Week this week. Pray for the dignity for all of God's children.

—*Pr. Steve Cauley*
Living Lord Lutheran, Lake St. Louis

FRIDAY



—"Can these bones live?", mixed media by Karen Bynum, St. Mark's

Take time to breathe. Feel the rush of the air into your lungs. In Ezekiel, we are asked if the dry bones can live. The bones are connected and enlivened. And then the prophet prophesies to the breath: the very breath that is the power of God, the very breath that is Spirit.

How do you feel enlivened by the Spirit of God?

Where is the living power of the Spirit moving you to work for new life in the season of Advent?

SATURDAY

December 13, 2025: The Feast of St. Lucy

Each one of us has experienced darkness and walked through seemingly endless valleys due to grief, exhaustion, loneliness, illness, addiction, infertility, regret. Our faithful Father in heaven sees us and holds us close. God asks us to look up, trust Him and receive forgiveness, grace, and hope, which God provides through Jesus Christ, the Light of the world. Creating light in the darkness. Turning despair into joy.

Early Christians seeking refuge in the inky, blackness of the catacombs one night saw a light and discovered a woman named Lucy with her arms full of bread and a wreath of candles on her head to light her way. What an example of hope, encouragement, and surprise amid darkness. We will never be able to predict a change in our circumstances, but we can rely on God's promise to save those who believe in God's only son, Christ Jesus.

Seek the light, this Advent season, in the stars, in a smile, a flickering flame, in the mirror. Trust in God's love for you and God's great plans for you. Be still and look up.

—*Kathy Steinke*
St. Mark's Lutheran, Clayton



ADVENT 3

**December 14, 2025 – St.
John of the Cross (1542-
1591)**

Living Flame of Love

Flame, alive, compelling,
yet tender past all telling,
reaching the secret center of my soul!
Since now evasion's over,
finish your work, my Lover,
break the last thread,
wound me and make me whole!
Burn that is for my healing!
Wound of delight past feeling!
Ah, gentle hand whose touch is a caress,
foretaste of heaven conveying
and every debt repaying:
slaying, you give me life for death's distress.
O lamps of fire bright-burning
with splendid brilliance, turning
deep caverns of my soul to pools of light!
Once shadowed, dim, unknowing,
now their strange new-found glowing
gives warmth and radiance for my Love's delight.
Ah, gentle and so loving
you wake within me, proving
that you are there in secret, all alone;
your fragrant breathing stills me
your grace, your glory fills me
so tenderly your love becomes my own.

*From The Poems of St. John of the Cross and translated by
Marjorie Flower, OCD*

—Pr. Tina Reyes
LuMin Ecumenical Campus Ministry, St. Louis

MONDAY

Read: Isaiah 29:17-24

Mary's Magnificat stands on the shoulders of the prophets who have come before her. We hear the echo of Hannah praising God for the birth of Samuel. But we also hear the echo of Isaiah who speaks of the end of tyrants and the meek obtaining joy in the Lord.

I have always assumed that Mary knew Hannah's song. It is the type of song that would have been passed down from mother to daughter throughout the generations. But I wonder if she also sang knowing the words of the prophet Isaiah who voices hope to a people in need of redemption. Perhaps the prophetic voice of Mary mingles in the great cloud of witnesses with the voice of Isaiah, the harmonies true, reminding us that God's word for us has always been the promise of the world turned right-side-up.

Do we, today, voice the vision of this world turned so that the deaf will hear, the blind will see, the meek will rejoice, and the tyrants will be cast down? Moreso, do we witness to the world that such a vision should be our reality today, and not in some far-off future?

God is bringing redemption to us. God is bringing the promise to life through us. Knowing this, we cannot keep from singing God's promise.

—Pr. Jill Seagle,
St. Thomas/Holy Spirit Lutheran, Sunset Hills

TUESDAY

Read: Psalm 42

I don't know how I started doing it or where I first heard about it—but at some point, in a small congregation in South Dakota, I started my congregations in offering a Blue Christmas service on December 21st, the longest night of the year. I didn't know who might attend (if anyone), but I planned the service and advertised it to the community of about 750 people, and waited.

A small handful of people attended. And those who attended really needed to be there.

I now serve a much larger congregation, but I have led a Blue Christmas service every year on December 21st since that first one about seven years ago, wherever I have been. And always, it's a smaller crowd—but it's so worth it to have the service. Because those who attend, really need to be there.

If you haven't heard of these services, congregations of many Christian traditions sometimes offer late-evening Longest Night or Blue Christmas services on the longest night of the year. These are to worship God in his coming at Christmas into a world that is not all festivity and joy, but lament and sadness, confusion and chaos, grief, darkness, and even despair. In truth, this is the world God did enter when Jesus was born. Blue Christmas is still a service where the traditional readings are read and even some traditional songs are sung ("O Come, O Come Emmanuel"), but the sanctuary is kept rather dark, and people are given space to bring the harder feelings they may have at this season of the year. Every year, we seem to get a few more people attending than the year before, as the word spreads about what the service is. People appreciate the truth of God's

coming to be born into the darkness, to be part of our lives, and ultimately, though through times of pain and suffering, lead us into hope. And this is the truth.

Psalm 42 is for us at many times of life. It is indeed for us who, at this time of year, remember when this season was happier and more joyful. When we weren't divorced or widowed. When our families and friends were a larger group of people. When our kids were little and at home. When we were at home, ourselves. When our bodies could do more. When we felt like we had more to offer others or our finances or our bodies were in better shape. Sometimes it does feel like maybe the best years are behind us or the joy of the Christmas season is, for whatever reason, just beyond our grasp.

If this describes you, Psalm 42 is for you. It is indeed a psalm of lament: "My tears have been my food day and night." And if you need that verse alone to rest in over and over, it's yours. If you need to cry out with the psalmist, "My bones suffer mortal agony," it's yours. Do it. God will hear you and wrap you in God's embrace as you do. For as long as you need.

Just know: "By day the Lord directs his love, at night his song is with me." That comfort and truth is yours, as well, and will always be. We are encouraged that in the end, the lamentor is able to get to this place...and we don't know how long it took to get to a place to be able to add these last lines. Maybe right away, but maybe weeks, months, longer? But it came to them: "Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God."

May God bless you with all hope in believing.

—Pr. Beverly Struckmann
Living Lord Lutheran, Lake St. Louis

WEDNESDAY

Read: Zechariah 8:1-17

When I first read through this text I was reminded strongly of portions of Dr. Martin Luther King's famous "I have a dream" sermon. The images in verses 4-5 where the old men and women sit with staffs in hand, and the boys and girls play in the streets reminded me of the dream of peace and unity. The idea that there will come a day when we are not separated or divided by class or race. Where there is so much prosperity for all that our elders can rest and enjoy life and our children can just play. That as much as we have been through pain and hardship, there will come a time when the whole world will know joy.

It may still be a dream, for us and for the world, but the unfailing hope that God is still with us and will see us through this time of struggle is what we hold in our hearts. Advent is the waiting with hope. As we close in on the big Christmas celebrations, may we find in ourselves the strength to live out the dream that God has for us. May we be the people who speak truth to one another, make for peace, and devise no evil in our hearts against one another. May God's continuing love flow through us and into the world in need of hope.

—*Pr. Carrie McElfresh*
Trinity Lutheran, Kirkwood, MO

THURSDAY

Read: Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

"Stir up your might and come to save us!" I don't know about you, but these days a phrase like this flits through my mind just about every day. I often wonder—is

God angry with us? There is so much sorrow, so much pain in the world.

We can often be fooled into thinking that the brokenness in the world is a result of God's anger with us. We can think that we don't pray hard enough or pray in the correct way. We long for restoration.

Yet, in my heart I know that God has never turned from us. In my heart I know that God's face has been shining. Instead, we have lost our way.

In this season of Advent, as we wait and watch, we are called to move beyond lament into the promised hope of God with us. We are called to turn again to see that we have the power to ease sorrow and pain in the world. We have the ability to reach out, to be the incarnate one even while we wait for the fullness of God's presence among us.

Take time in this season to be the compassion and healing we need in the world. Take time to reach outside yourself. Or, if you are the one in pain, look for the people who are offering you love and care. Know that restoration comes in partnership with God.

Salvation has come. Salvation will come again. And our tears and our sorrow will be turned to joy.

*—Pr. Jill Seagle
St. Thomas/Holy Spirit, Sunset Hills, MO*



—“Duty is another name for love” mixed
media artwork by Karen Bynum

St. Mark's Clayton

FRIDAY

Read: Galatians 4:1-7

Have you ever felt alone, like you didn't belong, without a place? In the reading from Galatians this week, Paul writes to people who feel displaced. Having been conquered by the Roman Empire, enslaved, and identified as second class citizens, the Galatians are displaced and alone. While the language of this epistle may leave us scratching our heads at times, an "Empire critical" lens for interpretation helps us to consider the experience of the Galatians as those under the (Roman) law. Without the status of citizens, the people to whom Paul writes are caught between a rock and a hard place--blown about by the winds of change and the whims of the powerful. Reading Paul's letter to the Galatians this year brings to mind many people in our country whose status is precarious, and whose identity is in flux. From trans folks to immigrants to those who receive public assistance, there are many people who may feel like the people to whom Paul writes--caught between a rock and a hard place and blown about by the whims of change and the winds of the powerful.

For those in these liminal spaces, standing on a precipice of uncertainty, Paul's words are a balm. Instead of an uncertain future and an identity which depends on the inclinations of the powerful, Jesus offers a secure identity rooted in the love of God. Through the presence of God's Spirit, we have been given a strong and sure foundation in the love of Christ. For those who may feel like they don't belong, those who wonder whether their status will be ripped away, those who depend on their country to care for them, Galatians offers a new perspective: You are beloved and your identity is secure in God, your heavenly parent. Paul

writes that our hearts cry out, "Abba, father!" We are no longer orphaned--we have a home with God. This week, as you consider what it means for you and your neighbors to be loved and adopted by God in the midst of a world which so often leaves us orphaned, take a moment and listen to "Prayers of the People" by the Brilliance, whose beautiful music reminds us of the gift of calling out, "Abba, father."

—Pr. Delaney Schlake-Kruse
Zion Lutheran, Ferguson

SATURDAY

loving kindness



—Loving Kindness, watercolor by Janis Dillon, STHS

What can you do today to spread God's love to others?



ADVENT 4

"In the beginning..." This is how the story of God and God's people begins. Before there was light, before there was land, before there was us, there was God's steadfast love—chesed—hovering, speaking, calling forth life from nothingness.

John's telling echoes this ancient beginning: "In the beginning was the Word." The Word who is God's own heart. The Word who has always been the pulse of creation, the breath in every creature, the light that no darkness can overcome. This Word, John says, has never been separate from God's being, and now, in Christ, this eternal Word is born into our world, taking on our human frailty, our flesh, our story.

Jesus is the steadfast love of God with skin on. The One who was "in the beginning" is the One who now dwells with us, full of grace and truth. Grace upon grace—enduring, unshakable, ever-present.

As we wait for the fullness of light, we do so in a world that still knows deep shadows. But Advent calls us to remember that before darkness ever was, God's love already existed. Before fear, love. Before brokenness, love. Before sin, love.

And that same love is being born again in us.

May we receive the Word who was at the beginning. May we trust the love that has never let creation go. And may we embody that steadfast love in a world longing for dawn.

"O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good; God's steadfast love endures forever."

—SAM Jane Brda

Family of Christ Lutheran, Imperial, MO

MONDAY

Read: Genesis 17:15-22

In our reading we have God reaffirming the promise to bless Abraham and Sarah with a child, to be named Isaac, even though they are both well beyond the childbearing age. We can see parallels between this story and the one of Zachariah and Elizabeth. Here, Abraham is still unsure if Ishmael would live under God's blessing. God states that not only will he and Sarah have a son, but that an everlasting covenant will be established with Isaac and all of his descendants. But it does not end there; God also states that Ishmael will not be forgotten and will be blessed with a great nation as well. We can see here that God's love extends beyond just those direct descendants of Abraham and Isaac.

We also see in later text that God again confirms the promise of a son. God did not give up on Abraham and Sarah as the promise, even though unbelievable, was fulfilled. We see that too as we head toward Christmas, through the promise of a Savior. God fulfills promises and continually does the impossible through unexpected ways. A child is born to a couple beyond childbearing age and a Savior is born as a defenseless baby. This passage demonstrates God's power in fulfilling not only promises but prayers as well. We find that God never gave up on humankind through promises, covenants, and a Savior. God's love encompasses all people, regardless of who we are.

As we prepare for Christmas, we should look at the love God has extended through Isaac, Abraham's son, and ultimately through Christ, God's only son, where that everlasting covenant now extends to all that believe in him. Questions for discussion:

1. Where have you seen God's faithfulness in your life?
2. In what ways have you used your faithfulness to extend God's love to others?
3. Have you doubted God's faithfulness in your life?
4. When you lose some of your faithfulness what helps you bring it back?
5. How does your faithfulness in God challenge you to action in a world that has lost its way?

—SAM Mike Berry

St. Mark Lutheran, Cape Girardeau, MO

TUESDAY

Read: Genesis 21:1-21

What a roller coaster ride for Sarah! Having also tried for many years to conceive, I feel empathy for her. The sadness was always with her, I know. Then visited by God! A promise of unbelievable joy! Then the months of pregnancy and finally, childbirth. Feeding, swaddling and crying. All the fun a baby brings to its family.

And Abraham, no lack of drama for him. He accepted his wife's maid as mother of his child according to custom. He loved his son Ishmael, who was his own. What a shock to find Sarah with child! He was probably very happy and proud of both of his sons. He observed all the customs of that time, circumcisions and feasts. But as the children grew, their mothers feared one would supplant the other.

How sad Abraham must have been to send his child away - but God had commanded him to do just that. We see Hagar putting her child away from her so as not to see him die. From happiness at bearing an heir to the depths of despair in the desert. Again God comes to save and guide.

Certainly our ways are not God's ways. We simply do not know what is in store for us. The happiness and fear and sadness and hope these three experienced is so like our own lives. As Christians, we know we are as important to God as these people of old were. It's a crazy ride but we don't fear because our God is with us always.

—Angie McDonald
Hope Lutheran, St. Charles, MO

CHRISTMAS EVE

One year on Christmas Eve, I was ad-libbing during a children's message, and it came out in our conversation that the stable where Jesus was born was like a garage. We talked about "parking" the animals there, the mess all around, the temperature. No one wants to eat in the garage, let alone have a baby there. But if you don't have room in the house, that's where you sometimes put your stuff – in the garage. Mary and Joseph, because there was no room at the inn, essentially ended up in the garage. Jesus was born in a garage.

I don't know about you, but I've got some good stuff in my garage, stuff that I love and really want to hang on to. Some of it is expensive. Some of it is storage. Much of it is useful, and I'm really glad I have it when I do. But not all of it (just ask my wife). The garage is often a little too hot or a little too cold, but it's a place I still like to spend time and do some good work despite being a little uncomfortable. I also end up talking to my neighbors a lot in our garages, whether they stop by for a minute while on a walk, or we are sharing a tool that one of us has that the other doesn't, or just sitting together watching fireworks or having a drink. The garage is kind of an in-between place, between me and

the rest of the world. And God shows up in the garage.

Garages are also usually kinda messy. And I am so thankful that God shows up in the messiness of my garage and the messiness of my life. Throughout Advent, we've talked about God in the burned out places, in the barren deserts and parched valleys, in the shadows and in the songs. God's love and presence endures in all those broken, hurting places. Sometimes however, with our pain and baggage, we just end up tucking it away, hiding it, stuffing it down, or boxing it up and putting it out in the garage. But Jesus can even reach us there, outside of normal life, where we are uncomfortable, feeling abandon, hanging on a shelf, in the in-between places, or when life is just kinda messy. It's not a traditional Christmas image, but I love that God shows up in the garage.

—Pr. Chad Langdon
Bishop's Associate, CSS-ELCA

CHRISTMAS DAY

Read: Luke 2:8-14

Do not be afraid...

As I write this in November, we are in the midst of a perfect storm in our area: a government shutdown, strikes, layoffs, tornado recovery, and suspended programming serving the most vulnerable. There is panic, worry, and fear.

As you read this in December, my prayer is that it is all over, and all of God's children are housed and fed.

But I have doubts, and I am struggling with the command 'do not be afraid'.

God sent angels to tell essential workers of the coming of the Lord. The angels didn't appear to those living in

the gilded houses or to those in power with social media accounts. The angels appeared to those who were among the lowest in society, covered in the filth of the field and the life of the sheep.

God is still sending angels to the fields. The fields look like parking lots filled with food distributions, small congregations gathering essential items to welcome an immigrant family, a group of children creating birthday cake kits for a food pantry, so everyone can have a birthday cake. Angels look like people who donate food and warm coats. Angels look like those who reach out to the homebound and unhoused. Angels look like us.



"Love looks like", watercolor by Janis Dillon, STHS

I grew up on a small farm in rural Kansas. We had a few sheep and pigs. As soon as I woke up, I would run out to the pens and sit among the sheep. My most incredible joy came when the lambs were being born. The ewe would allow a little girl to be with her during this time and even allow me to hold the new baby. Covered in dirt and manure, I would burst into the house screaming at the top of my lungs that there was a new lamb. I wasn't afraid to announce at the top of my lungs. And, I wasn't afraid that my mother wouldn't still love me as I stood covered in muck and manure. I was so filled with joy that I just had to tell

everyone!

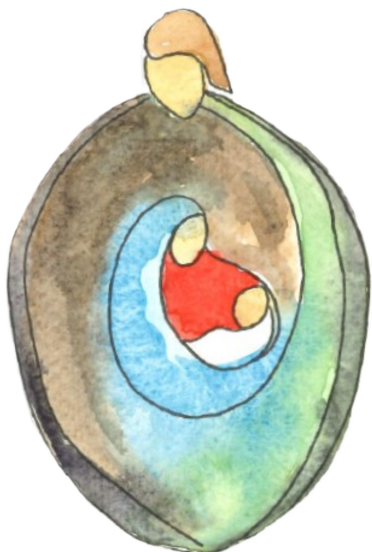
Now that I'm older, I find the joy has faded. I'm afraid for all that I can't control happening in this world. I'm afraid there are children who don't have enough to eat and go to bed hungry. But when I look around at all the Angels who aren't afraid to serve and speak up, I know that God still loves us, sends us God's precious son, even though we are covered in muck and manure.

Dear siblings in Christ, let's go into the world as angels, proclaiming, "Do not be afraid" for we know God is with us.

Merry Christmas!

—PMA Alesia Roccia
Family of Christ Lutheran, Imperial, MO

FRIDAY



—Holy Family, watercolor by Janis Dillon,
STHS

God sent light into darkness when He sent Jesus into our world as a infant. He sent His promise of Jesus to provide contrast to the worldly forces of dominance and oppression. The shepherds who were in the fields were people existing on the edge of society that didn't fit in; proof that we don't choose who God's love is meant for, He does. Though the shepherds were a group of nobodies, they couldn't keep

silent. They were more than happy to share the good news of Jesus's birth with anyone who would listen. Through them and with the help of the heavenly angels, God declared His love and salvation were for everyone.

In our world today, we continue to be called to share God's amazing news of a baby born into our world to save us all! We are invited into action in even the smallest gestures: a prayer for someone who is struggling, a smile across the room, a hug, a kind look. Every act of mercy becomes a reflection of God's unending love. We are called to be intentional in sharing God's love with everyone we meet!

Like the young boy in "Little Drummer Boy" - brought to life by the well-known and loved contemporary Christian singing group "For King and Country" - we are reminded that it's not the size of our gift that matters, but the offering of ourselves. In the monologue read and performed by Joel of "For King and Country," we hear how God's unfailing love meets our imperfect hearts, turning even the simplest act of giving into something overflowing with mercy and grace.

The full monologue:

*To think that a baby boy born in a stable, no prestige, no privilege, No social media or social status, political campaigns or private airplanes, And yet, He turned BC into AD. He flipped the world on its head. He's the most famous name around the globe- Inspired the most-read book ever written. He reconnected us to Heaven
And in turn, brought Heaven down to earth. And now, He offers us redemption- A fresh start - Freedom - So that we can hold our heads high and march through this life knowing that we are never alone.*

*That every woman and man, boy and girl - to all of us who feel like we have nothing left, nothing to bring. We can know that God is smiling at us - that He's loving us. That we are enough.
So light up that Christmas tree, stand under the mistletoe.
Surround yourself with ones you love the most. And together, let's celebrate the greatest news this world has ever known.*

So let's step into the world carrying the rhythm of the little drummer boy-Let's be living proof that God's smile still shines through us, one act of love, one beat of the drum at a time!

—Judy Jobe

St. Thomas/Holy Spirit Lutheran, Sunset Hills, MO

SATURDAY

Our Advent collections are over. The strains of Christmas Eve have faded. The bacchanalia that is Christmas Day is over. What are we to do now?

On this first weekend after Christmas, we invite you to be the love of Christ in the world. The child that was born for all is still present with us today. We are called to donate what we can, to care for those who are ill or sad, to feed those who are hungry. We are called to do this in our daily vocations.

Today, take time to share with someone in need. Be a helping hand where it is needed. Make a plan to reach out to an organization or a person in your community in need of help.



—Be the Love of Christ, watercolor by Janis Dillon, STHS

CHRISTMAS 1

Read John 1:19-34

My two favorite church seasons are Advent and Lent. Something about spending time in

preparation and the anticipation of what is coming stirs up the Spirit within me. I look forward to finding time in the season to contemplate and try to express the season.

Whether I give up something, take on a new spiritual practice, or commit to serving others, I find something that grounds me in the season. And that grounding leads me to a better understanding and appreciation for what we celebrate now, in the season of Christmas.

John the Baptist understood this preparing. He did not know when it was coming or what it would be like, but he knew he needed to prepare. He chose to ground himself in proclaiming what he knew as true. Day in and day out, he worked with what he understood. He proclaimed forgiveness and a message of hope to a world that was desperate. They needed to hear that there was indeed something coming that would change their world. Even when people doubted what John was doing, he clung to his faith that he was indeed preparing the path for something wondrous. And then it happened. John's faith and hope led to a moment of fulfillment. "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

We are called in Advent to prepare ourselves. We know at Christmas the Good News of a child born to us. We know all that child did for us on a cross. And we know that one day, Jesus will return. So, we prepare. So we point to



the moment of fulfillment. For each of us, this looks different. As we have been gifted, we use those gifts to proclaim to the world our King's reign. Through our preaching, teaching, comforting, singing, playing, companioning, praying, serving, and supporting, we help the world so that they may know our Savior in his arrival. My prayer is that you recognize your place in God's work in this world. I also pray that you find new, uplifting ways to proclaim our Savior's birth because right now, the world is crying out for what God is calling you to do. Amen.

—Chad Ryberg
Living Lord Lutheran, Lake St. Louis

MONDAY

Read: Psalm 20

Wait, what? LORD answer you in the day of trouble! The name of the God of Jacob protect you! This doesn't sound very Christmassy. None of the psalm sounds like something we would want or need to hear on the fifth day of Christmas, in the midst of our celebration of Jesus' birth. Shouldn't we be sitting around waiting for five golden rings or something? Did someone make a mistake? I want my joyful feasting and celebrating back!

But today we are confronted by the Holy Innocents. These were the male children of Bethlehem, under the age of 2, who were murdered by Herod, the tyrannical and paranoid Roman puppet king of Judea. God warned the magi in a dream not to return to Herod, so they left for their own country by a different road. Then an angel warned Joseph in a dream to flee with Mary and Jesus because Herod wanted

to destroy the child.

Read: Matthew 2:16-22

That's not very Christmassy either. What do we make of it? Just because Jesus entered the world, sin, suffering, and sorrow did not disappear. It remains with us. They faced it in the ancient near east, and we face it today. Just because we are celebrating does not mean the world has become perfect. During this season some of our neighbors will face the death loved ones. Some of our neighbors will receive devastating medical diagnoses, such as cancer, kidney disease, or heart failure. Some of our neighbors face crushing poverty and hunger. Some of our neighbors are sheltering with their families in war zones. It may not just be our neighbors. Some of us might be suffering now too. Perhaps, in this time of celebration, we should make space for whoever might be suffering. Perhaps we should reach out to comfort all who suffer. The words of the psalmist remind us that God is with us in our suffering. That God cares about us, and that we care about us. Maybe a little solemnity in the midst of our joy helps us remember the needs of those around us.

Gracious God, we thank you for the gift of your Son, a gift we celebrate during this Christmastide. Help us to remember that even in this joyous season, our neighbors might be suffering. Help us to remember their needs and to care for them, even as we are distracted by the events in our own lives, during this season, and always.

Amen.

—*Dan Lilienkamp*
Unity Lutheran, Bel-Nor

TUESDAY

“Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, and constant in prayer.” Romans 12:12

Hope is the feeling that we have that the feeling that we have is not permanent.

What do you hope for the people in Israel?

What do you hope for the people in Gaza?

What do you hope for their leaders?

What are your hopes for Ukraine.?

What are your hopes for Russia?

What are your hopes for their leaders?

Is there hope for the Christians of Nigeria?

Is there hope for the Islamists of Boko Haram?

Is there any hope for those with hearts of stone?

Is there any hope for our broken world?

—Karen Bynum
St. Mark's Lutheran, Clayton

WEDNESDAY

Read: Revelation 21:1-6a

December 31 in our black communities is known as Watch Night. On December 31, 1862, they gathered together to remember where they had been and waited in antici-

pation for what was to come – freedom. They were waiting for the anticipated proclamation from President Lincoln that they were no longer slaves. No longer property. No longer less than. On January 1, 1863, they would be freed-men and women. I think about what might it have been like in those churches, as they waited for the clock to strike midnight. Could you feel the anticipation? Hope? Fear? Cynicism?

The text for today is from the second to last chapter of John's Revelation. In it, he describes a new reality, a new freedom that comes because of God's love for all of us made manifest in Christ Jesus. Tears wiped away, souls joined together before God's throne, without pain, crying, or mourning. And the announcement that God is making all things new. (AMEN. Alleluia!)

We are at a transition point – from one calendar year to another. Are we watching and waiting in anticipation to be a part of what God is doing in and through us right now? Do we look to this vision and see ourselves a part of making that new thing come to pass? Are we anxious? Hopeful? Cynical? Fearful?

Beloved, you are invited to pause with me, to wait, and to be in awe of the amazing love and grace that is given to us RIGHT NOW. And in the brilliance of that love, to work to bring the new thing to life.

—Pr. Tina Reyes

LuMin Ecumenical Campus Ministry, St. Louis

THURSDAY

Read: Genesis 28:10-22

I think one of my favorite things about the stories in Genesis is how God continues to love each continuing generation of Abraham's family even when there are less than admirable actions on the part of the person involved. Jacob is considered a cheater from birth, and by trickery and falsehood he obtains his brother's inheritance and paternal blessing. This does not make his life easier, as he is sent away and finds himself with a stone for a pillow as he heads toward his uncle's home.

But even after his less-than righteous actions, in his dream he is given a vision and a reminder of God's promises. There are some that are the same promises that were given to his grandfather Abraham, and some that are new just for him and the path set before him. But the one that always stands out for me is the promise in verse 15: "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." God's promise is not only of provision and protection, but presence as well. God is with us from the beginning. God who is faithful. God who is steadfast. God who loves us even when we are not deserving. God who promises Jacob, and us, that all the families of the earth will be blessed through us. Regardless of our faults and failings, may we bless the world with the good news of God's love.

—Pr. Carrie McElfresh
Trinity Lutheran, Kirkwood, MO

FRIDAY

"By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible." (Hebrews 11:3, NRSVUE)

By faith we enter the new year together. Hebrews looks back to Abraham and Sarah, the first parents in our genealogy of faith, and invites us to add names to the end of that list: parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents through whom the Spirit brought us to baptism and belief. Add your own name, too. God is still writing the story. Let's be key players together.

Each witness in Hebrews lived by faith, risking their lives on God's promises, even when they could only greet those promises from a distance. That is how the church has lived. I take courage from verse 12: "Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born..." If God could bring life there, God surely has work for us in this new year.

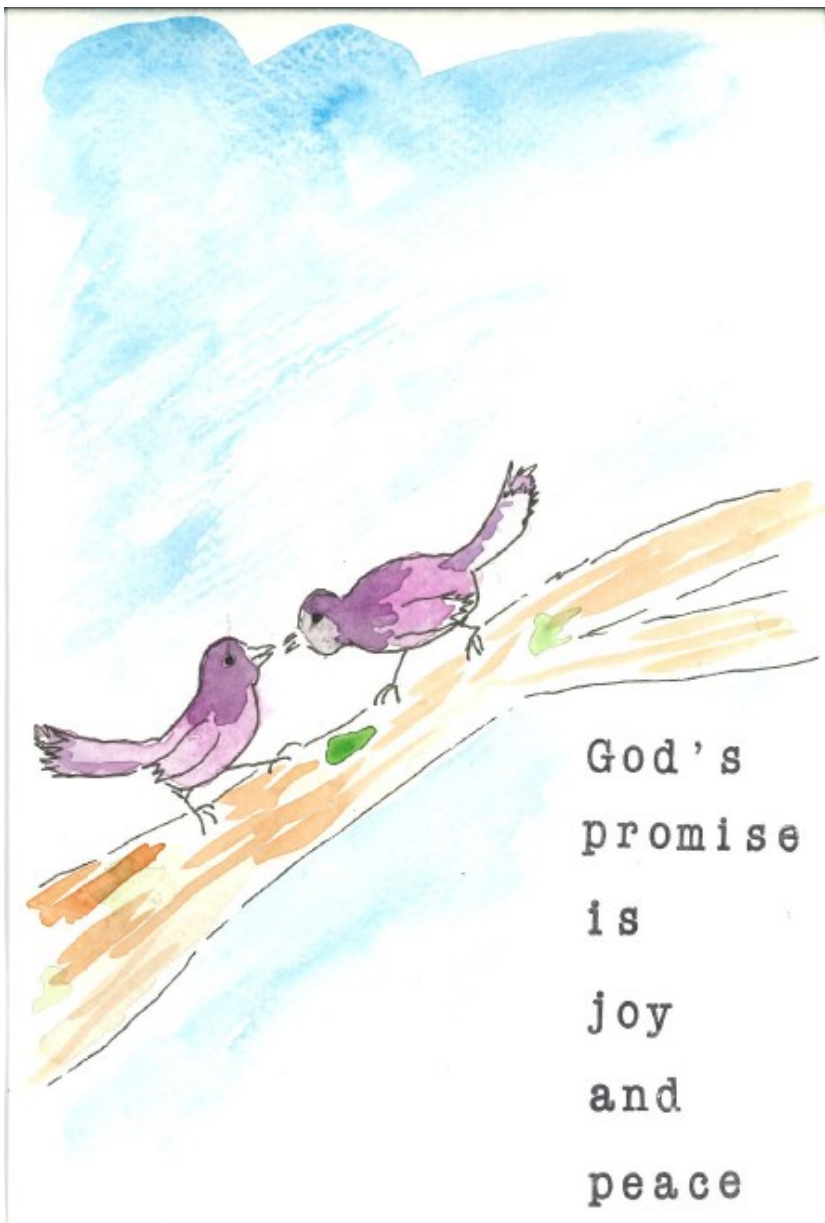
The faithful did not pine for "the good old days." They desired a better country; therefore God was not ashamed to be called their God. We join them, stepping into new years and new lands. We ask not what is safe but what is next in God's mission. This is "the conviction of things not seen." Happy New Year.

Prayer: God of every new year, turn on the light so we may see the path you set before us. Give us strength to bear faithful witness to all creation. Amen.

—Jonathan Heerboth
Christ Lutheran, Webster Groves, MO

SATURDAY

Consider the picture on the next page. What comes to mind when you think of joy and peace?



God's
promise
is
joy
and
peace

—Joy and Peace, watercolor by Janis Dillon, STHS

CHRISTMAS 2

It is the Second Sunday of Christmas. And while on Christmas we focus most closely on the birth of

the baby, the celebration is also about how God is with us. This is echoed in the readings for today from genealogies to stories of the Wisdom of God being rooted in the people from the start. As we sing about Immanuel, God with us, we recall that it is not just in the birth of Christ, but in God's Spirit who moved over the waters and rushes through God's people on Pentecost. In God's promises and covenants, God is always with us. Through centuries and eons and into eternity, God does not abandon God's people. God may work in secret and mysterious ways. God's plans might be rerouted through unusual places and peoples. God may be well beyond plan B or plan C for creation. But God's unfailing love is still with us.

As this new year begins and we move from Christmas into Epiphany and into "ordinary time," I hope that we never forget that even in the hardest of times, the most ordinary of moments, and the most troubling circumstances, we are never without the presence of God. From furnaces and valleys of dry bones, through all generations, and to us here and now, God is with us. In the silence and the stillness, in the chaos and the clutter, may God's wisdom continue to whisper that we are not alone, that God's love is rooted deep within us, and we will always be beloved children of the God who is faithful.



—Pr. Carrie McElfresh
Trinity Lutheran, Kirkwood, MO

MONDAY

Read: Hebrews 11:32–12:2

Advent is a season that draws our hearts toward the past, present, and future all at once. We look back to the faith of those who waited for the coming Messiah. We wait in the present for Christ to come again into our world and our lives. And we look ahead in hope, trusting that God's promises endure for all generations. In Christmas, we find hope in the fulfillment of Christ's birth. Yet, we still await the fullness of time.

In Hebrews 11, we hear about men and women who lived by faith — not because they saw the fulfillment of every promise, but because they trusted the One who promised. Their stories remind us that faith is never lived in isolation. We inherit it from those before us, and we are called to pass it on to those who follow.

When I was growing up, I lived in a home where faith was not something that was discussed. The generations before me did not have much faith, so I made a decision. Something called me to walk over to the neighbor's house and ask them to take me to church with them. They did, and I've been a devoted and faithful member since I was 9 (I'm 37 now!). And now, my kids go to that same church, and I share my faith with them to continue on the tradition and to not live our faith in isolation.

When we light the candles of Advent — hope, peace, joy, and love — we do so in the company of that great "cloud of witnesses." When we gather to proclaim that love has come, a babe in the manger, we do so with the same company of saints. Their faith encourages us to keep going, even when the world feels weary or uncertain. We are part of a much larger story: a story of God's steadfast love that

began long before us and continues beyond us.

This is what it means to share love for all generations. It is not only the love we feel — it is the love we embody, the love we teach, the love we pass on. As we look to Jesus, “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith,” we see love made visible — born in Bethlehem, living among us, dying and rising for all.

In this Christmas season, may we find strength in the witness of those who came before, and courage to share that same love with those who come after.

Prayer

Eternal God,

From generation to generation, your love endures.

As we celebrate in this Christmas season, help us to remember those who carried faith before us, and inspire us to live your love for those who will come after. Keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, in whose name we pray. Amen

—Kristen Kinney

Zion Lutheran Church, Ferguson

EPIPHANY

Read: Matthew 2:1-12

Herod the Great was a brutal despot whose speech and actions were littered with violence. Two thousand years after his reign, his legacy is still visible in the monuments he built to himself all over what is now Israel and Palestine. The best known of his building projects is now Masada National Park,



the well-preserved fortress atop a plateau 1300 feet above everything around. Herod built it to protect himself from his enemies, and he considered all but the most sycophantic to be his enemies. As his reign wore on and his paranoia deepened, Herod became suspicious of members of his immediate family, and he had several put to death for perceived treachery.

Herod provides the stark contrast in the second half of the Christmas story. He is the embodiment of the evil that seems to overtake the world, despite God's best efforts to steer us well. Since the flood, God has been unwilling to abandon us, even when we appear to be making all of our decisions with a Ouija board. God loves us entirely, with mercy and forgiveness that do not end. The Hebrew word for that kind of love is *chesed*, which describes the love God offers and the love God expects us to show in return. *Chesed* feeds the hungry and lifts up the brokenhearted and ensures that we are all working together for the good of all. We all do better when we all do better, as the late senator Paul Wellstone once said.

Herod seems devoid of *chesed*, which makes him a terrible choice as leader. (Of course, the people didn't actually choose him, so you can't blame them.) A leader whose only concern is for their own power is going to make all of their decisions based on what is good for them, not for the people. This is the opposite of *chesed*.

Fear not, dear reader! Despite the presence of a wholly unsuited and dangerous leader, there's lots of *chesed* in the story of incarnation! The "wise men" coming to pay homage to God's greatest *chesed* gesture ever (that's Jesus) become their own embodiment of goodness and kindness when they sneak out of town without telling Herod where the child is. This simple act of quiet espionage

likely saved the life of Jesus, and perhaps his parents.

Small gestures—daily acts of chesed toward our neighbors, and particularly our vulnerable neighbors—bring chesed into the world. When we feed those who are hungry, or offer a kind word to a neighbor having a tough day, we become a living embodiment of God’s chesed, and thus the one whose birth we celebrate with these stories of stalwart shepherds and angels and deviously wise persons. Jesus introduced a love into the world which would change everything around it, unless we chose to act from other impulses.

We do still have choices, as much as it may feel as if the trajectory of our experience is out of our hands. We can still choose love, kindness: chesed. Every day. We can choose to work in opposition to forces of evil in our midst, overtly, or as those wise astrologers have shown us, a bit subversively. We can choose to be forces of incarnation in a world struggling to see Jesus, to see kindness, to see love. Let us choose wisely.

*—Bishop Donna Simon
Central States Synod, ELCA*

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