

ADVENT DEVOTIONS 2023
Indiana-Kentucky Synod, ELCA
Inspire. Ignite. Invite.

These Advent Devotions are provided to you as a gift from the participants of the IN-KY Synod Spiritual Renewal Process – Inspire. Ignite. Invite. Siblings in Christ from seven Lutheran congregations and one Episcopal congregation began meeting in April 2023 with a focus on the theme “Inspire.” During the monthly ZOOM meetings, participants learned a variety of spiritual practices, created their own descriptions of spirituality, expanded their awareness of the Holy Spirit, developed relationships with others across the synod, and deepened their own spirituality.

Thank you to the leadership team for Inspire. Ignite. Invite. – Jon Dahl, Cross of Grace Lutheran Church, New Palestine, IN; Pr. Sharon Walker, Christ Lutheran Church, Kokomo, IN; and Pr. Nancy Nyland, Director for Evangelical Mission. An immense thank you to Carol Ann Webb, Administrative Assistant, who edited and formatted this devotional collection and to Susie Swenson, IN-KY Synod Storyteller, for sharing this collection via social media, the website and the weekly synod e-news.

ADVENT 1 – HOPE

Sunday, December 3: *We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. May your unfailing love be with us, LORD, even as we put our hope in you.* Psalm 33:20-22 (NRSV)

I hope for a lot of things. I hope my team wins. I hope my flight is on time. I hope it snows on Christmas. Then there are bigger things that I hope AND pray for – that those I care about are safe and healthy, that wars end, that lost souls find a path home. In these things I am so invested that I also have to give them to God. My hope alone is not enough.

In reality, God knows all I hope for, whether or not I deem the hope important enough for additional prayer. Sometimes He even makes things I barely even dare to hope for possible, and in this I rejoice. As we enter Advent, we wait in hope for the coming of the Lord. Having lost my father the day after Christmas, I understand that the holidays may be difficult. However, my father’s love of Christmas and his joy in the promise of Emmanuel, God among us, showed me how to move forward with hope and joy, in spite of loss.

Prayer: Dear God, we hope and pray for your peace and joy this Advent season, and that we all may find a way to rejoice in the coming of the Lord. Amen.

Anne – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Trinity Lutheran Church, Lebanon, IN

Monday, December 4: *For You are my hope; O Lord God, You are my confidence from my youth.* Psalm 71:5 (NASB)

Last Christmas, our son and daughter-in-law made the long trip from Pflugerville, TX to Kokomo, IN. It was wonderful to have family at home. They surprised us with the joyful announcement that our first grandchild would be born in the summer. It brought back thoughts of our own babies and the joy each brought - and the sadness too. Our first, Abby, was a cheerful little sprite always on the move. Our next two came as a set. Tyler first, with Jenny a minute later. Tyler was wide-eyed and curious; Jenny’s eyes were calm and full of knowledge. At three months old, Jenny succumbed to a heart defect. And we were crushed. Then, 2 years later, another bright ray was Mary. She was the child who always wanted to

cuddle And so, life was busy with school, activities, and jobs. But Jenny was always in our thoughts. What if she had lived? What would she have accomplished?

And now, our grandson Lucas is here with his quirky little smile. I wove a basket bassinet for him. A friend from our congregation made a liner and created one of her beautiful quilts. He sleeps well in his little bed surrounded by love.

Children and the cycle of life are indeed full of hope. God is with us always, in our joys and sorrows. He gives us hope for our future in the lives of our blessed children.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for the blessings of children and the hope you give us for our lives.

Amy – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.

Christ Lutheran Church, Kokomo, IN

Tuesday, December 5: *You are my hiding place and my shield; I hope in your word.* Psalm 119:114 (NRSV)

“Everybody get out, a tornado’s coming,” shouted a man running down the auditorium aisle. The timing was as surreal as it was awful. It was late June, and my daughter’s dance school recital had just wrapped up its finale. Performers were taking bows.

Dozens of children, from tots to teens, and an audience full of their parents and relatives, faced sudden confusion. A security guard took the stage and yelled for everyone to head toward one of the adjacent hallways.

The urgency of the call-to-action left no time for families to reunite. Fearful and tearful, the crowd waited for the vortex to pass. It came within a mile of the school. Although the tornado was not especially strong, a clip later posted to social media showed the ease with which it hurled debris.

In that half hour of waiting for the unknown, it hit me that I might not see my daughter again. It’s easy to be dismissive of people making hasty pleadings with God in their darkest moments until the darkness descends on you. It was a humbling moment for me.

Experience tells us there are no promises of a trouble-free life. Still, Jesus’ words to his disciples remind us that he will always be with us. God’s Word provides a shield of refuge and comfort at all times, good or bad. Our hope is renewed, and we find the strength to carry on. We encounter what Paul describes as “the peace that surpasses all understanding.”

Prayer: Holy Spirit, be an ever-present reminder that I can take refuge in your Word, wherever life leads. Amen.

P.J. – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.

Gethsemane Lutheran Church, Indianapolis, IN

Wednesday, December 6: *For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”* Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV)

A few months after my husband left me and I was struggling to provide for myself and my two children, my mother gave me a gift. It was a simple frame in which she painted some flowers along with today’s scripture verse. I remember at the time being surprised at the gift because of its simplicity.

Being very talented, my mother could have created a beautiful landscape, but this is what she chose to paint. Obviously, the gift was in the message of the verse. Mom knew I was struggling and that I needed this simple message of hope.

When Jesus was born in a manger, to a virgin and a carpenter, I would imagine many would have thought it was a crazy plan. “There has to be a better way,” they might have thought. But God was not

surprised at anything that happened in the story; God could have made a huge spectacle of sending his son to earth. But he knew what the people needed... a message of hope.

The next time it feels like things are falling apart, look for that simple message of hope. You just might find that, instead of falling apart, things are falling into place.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for your gift of hope. Help me to trust your plans for my future.

Laurel – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.

Resurrection Lutheran Church, Marion, IN

Thursday, December 7: *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.* Romans 15:13 (NRSVUE)

One of my favorite Christmas hymns is *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, a hymn that is sung in our Christmas Eve services. The first verse concludes, “the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

Hope is wanting something better; fear is the feeling that things will get worse. Hope is our way of coping with things over which we have no control: we hope our children will grow up strong and healthy and do well in life. We hope our favorite team wins; we hope that when the temperature drops during the night our car will start in the morning. We hope that we are living as Jesus wants us to live and that eventually those who do not follow his teachings will change for the better.

There are so many things in our world that we cannot control: we want a world where there is no suffering, no war, no hatred, no injustice. But we lack the ability to make those changes; we can only petition Jesus through prayer, and we hope – that is – we trust Jesus to help us and guide us. We trust and hope because we know God listens to us, looks out for us, and helps us to make the world a better place to live through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer: Gracious Heavenly God, I bare my heart to you in this prayer for hope. Remind me daily to walk in spirit with you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

John – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Merrillville, IN

Friday, December 8: *I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people.* Ephesians 1:18 (NIV)

I wonder why many people are not returning to in-person church gatherings now that the pandemic has been brought to a manageable level. Is staying home more comfortable? There are the pajamas and fuzzy slippers. Or maybe “comfortable” means something different. For example, maybe it’s more comfortable because I don’t have the stress of putting on appearances to mask how I’m really feeling on Sunday morning. Maybe I’m not feeling joyful and am too weary to pretend anymore.

I’ve been reading about “spiritual refugees” - people who experience doubts about God and question their faith. By staying in church, they feel they are betraying the faith community and feel they may be dangerous to the faith of others. In other words, they can no longer be authentic. They would be more comfortable experiencing their crisis of faith alone.

This beautiful Ephesians prayer is one way to bring hope to spiritual refugees, appealing to God for their enlightenment. However, spiritual refugees may also need to see something more tangible.

Recently I heard a 20-something person tell a group of us that the result of her spiritual transformation has allowed her to focus on what other people need from church rather than her own needs. How hopeful! Maybe what spiritual refugees need is a safe harbor where doubts and questions

can find full expression without judgment, without condemnation, without a defensive counterargument. Maybe my congregation could become such a safe harbor for spiritual refugees. Maybe my faith community could become more comfortable.

Prayer: God of grace and hope, transform our communities of faith to become safe harbors for spiritual refugees to explore what faith in you can be. Enlighten all of us to your calling.

Jon – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Leadership Team, Indianapolis, IN

Saturday, December 9: *And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.* Romans 5:3-5 (NRSV)

As I ponder these verses, divergent thoughts occur. First, the random part of my brain is reminded of the modern idiom, "fear is the path to the dark side," which makes me suspect that Yoda must have understood what it means to be a Christian. Secondly, I hear the voice of my father's generation, where hard work and effort were recognized to produce character. This causes me to reflect that everything that I had to work hard for in life meant so much more to me than things gained by little to no effort.

We live in a fast-paced society, with five second sound bites, 10 second TikTok videos, and have become a culture where a microwave oven is just too slow. Slow is good – and sometimes when things are tough, the best recourse is to pause and contemplate. I pray we have the wisdom to reflect that when things become tough, we remember God's abundant love for us, which is all the hope we need.

Prayer: Dear God, please give us hope in times of uncertainty and despair. Help us to trust in your plan for our lives and to have faith that everything will work out for good. Amen.

Jeff – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Trinity Lutheran Church, Lebanon, IN

ADVENT 2 – PEACE

Sunday, December 10: *Lord, you establish peace for us; all that we have accomplished you have done for us.* Isaiah 26:12 (NIV)

This is a saga of our son Marty who has Down Syndrome.

Until the onset of Covid 19, Marty had meaningful activity in his life, including music therapy, eating out, and working in a day care with preschool children. All of this was curtailed when Covid 19 hit and Marty didn't understand why, resulting in his mental health issues.

Competent mental health care is difficult to find. He became critically ill and was sent to the emergency room in Merrillville, IN. We almost lost him, and he then laid in nursing homes for a long period of time, but we prayed a lot and found new hope.

The Lord provided us with the resources we needed to allow him to function at a better level. We moved him to a private home with a high functioning roommate. He still has some issues but has a much better quality of life.

Whether God does it directly or through other humans, it is by his works that Marty has the quality of life he deserves. At my low point, God gave me the strength and peace to carry on and see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for guiding our family through what seemed to be a hopeless situation. Through your love and grace and peace, we put our hope in you. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Dan – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Christ Lutheran Church, Kokomo, IN

Monday, 11 December: *Because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.* Luke 1:78-79 (NIV)

In October 1999, I found myself unemployed from a job I loved dearly. I was young, believing I'd easily find another job, but I was mistaken. My days and months were filled with growing worry as bills and overdue mortgage notices began to pile up. Despite the uncertainty, I made a brave decision to venture back to graduate school, working side jobs to keep afloat, walking a path I hadn't planned for. At the time, it felt like wandering in the shadow of financial and emotional despair. I didn't see it then, but God was shining his light on me, guiding my footsteps toward peace.

We often find ourselves struggling in the darkness of despair, confusion, or pain, feeling isolated. However, God, sends his glorious light, like the rising sun, to illuminate our path – a light of hope, a beacon guiding us to peace.

This divine light breaks through our darkest moments, casting away shadows of doubt, anxiety and fear. God's rising sun is his son, Jesus Christ, who brings hope, forgiveness, salvation and peace into our lives. Jesus is a reminder of his empathetic love, compassion and mercy toward his creation.

Reflecting on Luke's words, let's welcome this divine guidance into our lives. Let's not become consumed by the world's darkness, instead allowing God's light to guide us through challenging times, toward a path of peace. In his mercy, God has sent us the ultimate gift of love, hope, and redemption. Hold on to this truth and step forward into his radiant light.

Prayer: Lord, let your tender mercy shine on us, guiding us from darkness to your peace.

Christopher – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Lebanon, IN

Tuesday, December 12: *I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety.* Psalm 4:8 (NRSV)

It seems there are many who have trouble sleeping, including myself. This is apparent as we look in the stores and see all the sleep aids available on the shelves. I recently found out that some of my grandchildren are taking sleep aids. I don't remember ever having trouble sleeping when I was a child. However, I did not have the internet and cell phones constantly telling me all the bad things happening in the world. Now there are so many terrible things going on that cause us to worry and keep us up at night.

In verses 4 and 5 of this same psalm we are encouraged to trust in the Lord as we lay awake at night engulfed in worry. It is tempting to trust ourselves instead of the Lord. As we put all our worries in the Lord's hand, then as the scriptures say; "I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety."

Prayer: Gracious God, please take all my troubling worries from me and let me sleep in peace, knowing you are always watching over me.

Ginny – Inspire. Invite. Ignite.
St. Paul Lutheran Church, Batesville, IN

Wednesday, December 13: *Do not be anxious about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.* Philippians 4:6-7 (NRSV)

Three years ago, my life was turned upside down and many life-changing experiences happened in a short period of time. The Lord called my husband home after almost forty-one years of marriage. Suddenly I was alone and not sure about anything except I trusted my Lord. He gave me a calmness and an inner peace. I knew He was holding me while I made the decision to sell my home and move closer to my family. My home sold within days, and I was able to move to a new home very quickly. This all happened during Covid. I am truly blessed to receive the gift of peace.

I am so thankful to God that He carried, and still carries, my worries and concerns. What a comfort and joy it is knowing that my Lord has my back at all times. When we talk to God, he listens and provides a quietness and a peace that radiates throughout our whole being.

We all can receive the same gift as we turn our concerns and worries over to God. As the verse states, "It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life." (MSG) Remember that God loves each one of us and he does not want us to carry our burdens alone. God wants us to be whole and to share his peace with others.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for taking our worries and concerns and replacing them with a sense of peace and calmness. Thank you for the gift of peace. Amen.

Nancy – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
St. John's Lutheran Church, Fort Wayne, IN

Thursday, December 14: *For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders, and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.* Isaiah 9:6 (NRSVUE)

When I was fourteen my father died. It was devastating and sent my mom into a deep depression. My older brother tried to help, but he had moved out of the family home, was married and with his wife raising a young family of his own. Fourteen is a very vulnerable age. I quickly had to learn adult responsibilities, but I was very fortunate and blessed that, realizing the loss to my family, parents in my neighborhood, school teachers, and sports coaches stepped up and took me under their wing.

That's what God did in the divine and mortal birth of Jesus. Humankind was hurting, devastated by all that was happening around them, and needed some guidance, some grace, some peace. God's goodness and loving kindness arrived in the baby Jesus, in plain sight for all to see. As he matured, he would grow up to experience all that we have experienced and, along the way, provide instruction to those who lived 2,000 years ago as well as to us today.

Each Advent season I better understand how God sent those parents, teachers, and coaches to me, to give me guidance, encouragement and love just at the time I needed it most. They came with the same compassion and love as God sent us in Jesus, the Word made flesh. In a life of generous mercy richly poured out for all, this child "born for us," this son "given to us," continues to be our "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

Prayer: Gracious God, you place people in our lives to look after us, to love us, to give us encouragement, to lead us to the Prince of Peace. Thank you for giving us your Son, in the form of that little baby who did the same. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Marc – Inspire. Invite. Ignite.
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Merrillville, IN

Friday, December 15: *Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.* 2 Thessalonians 3:16 (NIV)

As a small child at bedtime, I sometimes rested my head on my mom or dad's shoulder after a busy day. Listening to the quiet beat of their hearts and the soft hush of their breaths, I felt sheltered and peaceful in the growing darkness as I drifted off to sleep.

During Advent, winter deepens into its longest nights. Nature withdraws further into dormancy as the Earth leans away from the warming sun. Perhaps as an antidote to the increasing cold and darkness, we create festive activities that keep us distracted from these fast-falling nights; yet Advent *is* meant to be a time of early darkness, of mystery and waiting...waiting for peace.

Peace is the heartbeat of God. Hear God's promise in the resurrected Jesus for whom we wait; *"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you. He breathed on them and said..., 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'*" (John 20:21-22 NRSVUE) In prayer we connect to God's own breath – the Holy Spirit. Despite war and worldwide conflicts casting deeper shadows on our world, prayer helps light a way; in the growing darkness, prayer can shelter a troubled spirit and bring comfort.

In prayer, rest your head on God's shoulder. Listen and pray, breathe and rest. As you wait, preparing for Christ's birth in the darkness of winter, may the peace of God, steady and as assuring as a heartbeat, bring you comfort and rest. May the Lord of peace give you peace and be with you all.

Prayer: God of peace, as the days shorten and our winter evenings lengthen, keep us focused on peace. Bring your peace to our lives and bring light and peace to all peoples over the world. Amen.

Lette – Inspire. Invite. Ignite.
Resurrection Lutheran Church, Marion, IN

Saturday, December 16: *How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who proclaims peace, who brings glad tidings of good things, who proclaims salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns!"* Isaiah 52:7 (NKJV)

I've always loved this verse from Isaiah. It makes me think of happy feet which leads me to picturing Snoopy doing his happy dance. What joy and peace that brings to my heart!

Isaiah is talking about Jesus here. Jesus brought the good news (Gospel), proclaimed peace and salvation, and encouraged his followers with glad tidings. The Gospel is a beautiful thing. Jesus opened a new avenue for us to come to God. We can live for eternity because of the salvation he brought.

Joy and peace make my feet speak of activity, motion, and progress and of those who are active and moving in the work of preaching the Gospel of Jesus. I have a friend who is always eager to proclaim the Good News to anyone who will listen, and the world desperately needs good news. Just like my friend, we can share the good news that God sent his son to pay the price for our sins and that we have been made right in God's eyes. The Gospel is heard only if we go with our feet and tell people. Put feet – our feet – to the Gospel.

This message of good news brings peace to those who believe. It settles those souls that are desperately seeking to fill that void in their hearts. It brings encouragement to those who have been beaten down by disappointment. Proclaim to those around you that Jesus saves. We could all use a little more peace today!

Prayer: Lord, help us to be the feet that bring your Good News to a world hungry for peace. Amen.

Sharon – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Leadership Team, Kokomo, IN

ADVENT 3 – LOVE

Sunday, December 17: *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.* John 13:34-35 (NRSVUE)

As I read the above Bible passage, I was reminded how complicated the Bible can be to understand. This new commandment from Jesus doesn't seem, at first, to be all that complicated. Jesus could command his disciples to wear deep purple shirts with the words "I Love Jesus" written boldly across the front/back of the shirts in red ink with a pair of holey jeans so people would know and recognize that they were disciples. However, if this new commandment ranks up there with the Ten Commandments, then wearing an imprinted shirt and holey jeans is too simple. Jesus expected his disciples to be examples of what it means to love one another.

Loving one another, or being a loving and kind person, doesn't have to be difficult. If we stop to think about it, there are many easy and simple ways to be a loving person. For example, writing a short note to a shut-in member of the congregation or perhaps sending a Christmas card. Sometimes just a smile and saying "Good morning" can convey a loving feeling. On occasion, my husband will surprise me with a bouquet of flowers, or I will make his favorite meal for dinner. It doesn't have to be hard or expensive to be kind and loving. Others will take notice of the difference in us when we make a conscious effort to honor Jesus by following His commandment to love one another in the same way that He has loved us!

Prayer: Dear gracious God, I pray that you will be with me every day and help me to be conscious of loving others as you have loved us. Please help all of us to be more aware of the opportunities that surround us every day to love one another as you have loved us. In your name I pray. Amen.

Kathy – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Merrillville, IN

Monday, December 18, 2023: *There is no greater way to love than to give your life for your friends.* John 15:13 (VOICE)

Jesus is speaking these words to his disciples to teach them and us about love. Jesus expresses his radical love for us as he gives his very life in his death on the cross. Through this sacrifice Jesus gives us (his friends) life, both eternal life in the future and an abundant life in the present. Not many of us will have the occasion to literally die or give our life for someone or have another give their life for us.

But there are ways that I have received life from others through their acts of kindness, care and concern, especially last year when I encountered breast cancer. I received life from my son, who came home from college to care for me during and after my surgery; from my neighbor, who brought me meals and called or texted me daily; from the prayer shawls I received from congregations; and from the multitude of people whose prayers for healing, notes, and phone calls lifted and encouraged me. All these people, and more, gave me a piece of their life, bringing life and sustenance to me through my cancer journey. When have you given life to someone else through acts of kindness, care, concern, or a time of listening?

Prayer: Dear Jesus, thank you for the opportunities the Spirit offers us to show your love and our love as we give our life for others.

Nancy – Inspire, Ignite. Invite.
Leadership Team, Fishers, IN

Tuesday, December 19: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.* John 3:16-17 (NRSV)

When my 26-year-old grandson, Connor, died in a motorcycle accident, my son Scott, his wife Maureen, their other son Grant, and I fell apart. We felt very distant from God and were angry at God. We were all very angry at the time. My son is still angry with God. We know Connor is with God and yet we selfishly want him here with us.

A couple of months before Connor died, both of my grandsons spent a week together with me in Florida. Little did we know it would be the last time they saw each other. I wonder if this was a “God thing” and we were allowed to have this last special time together. Grant was in college on break and Connor was there for a week before driving me home. The last photo of the three of us was taken that week on the balcony with the ocean and beach in the background.

After Connor’s death, my church family and friends showed me God’s love by sending thoughtful cards, caring phone calls, compassionate heart-hugs, and taking time to sit and listen to the grief in my heart. We need to always remember this verse – God gave His only Son so that by believing in him we have eternal life. I am assured that because of Connor’s deep faith he is in the arms of Jesus now.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, my prayer during this season is for peace and love with our fellow human beings. Help us remember the reason we celebrate the birth of Christ.

Elaine – Inspire. Invite. Ignite.
Christ Lutheran Church, Kokomo, IN

Wednesday, December 20: *But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.* Romans 5:8 (NRSVUE)

As a child growing up in the mid 1950’s and 1960’s, like many families back then, church was an important part of life. Sunday was a day of worship and rest. And for my family that was very true. Sunday mornings my siblings and I would go off to Sunday School. After Sunday School we headed up for Sunday Service. Later on, we’d go to the evening service. To a kid, that took up the whole day with not much time left to play. Reluctantly, we kids would go. I remember my father telling us that all God expects from us was one hour of our time a week. But the way I looked at it, it did not quite add up correctly (one hour for Sunday School, two hours for church services). But he was our father and what he said went.

We believe that Christ died for us so we might be saved. We heard it in our childhood in Sunday School stories. We sing hymns about it. We say it when we recite the Apostle’s Creed. Easter is one of the biggest celebrations in the Christian faith because Christ died and rose again so we might be saved. We’re all sinners; we were born to sin. But by faith and believing in Christ we are saved.

So, with all that being said, that hour a week my father talked about didn’t really compare to what our Heavenly Father asked of His Son.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, we want to thank you for sending your Son to die for us so we might be saved. Continue to watch over us and guide us so we might find our way home to be with you and our loved ones. In your name we pray, Amen.

Dennis – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Merrillville, IN

Thursday, December 21:

Your love, GOD, is my song, and I'll sing it!

I'm forever telling everyone how faithful you are.

I'll never quit telling the story of your love—

how you built the cosmos

and guaranteed everything in it.

Your love has always been our lives' foundation,

your fidelity has been the roof over our world.

Psalm 89:1-2 (MSG)

I love music and it has been an integral part of my life as long as I can remember – from a 45-rpm record of “*Feudin', Fussin' and A-Fightin'!*” to classical Bach, Handel, the Beatles and beyond. I began piano lessons in fourth grade and then, when I was a junior in high school, the organist at my church approached my parents, asking if she could give me organ lessons – for free. Mrs. Brown taught me organ for four incredible years, and because of her generosity, I have been the organist at my congregation for 50 some years. Thank you, Mrs. Brown, for sharing the amazing gift of your love of music.

I see God's love revealed in music – the music of the songbirds in my yard, the music of my granddaughter's laughter, the music of my purring cats, the music of the moon in the nighttime sky, the music of a spirited gypsy dance, the silent music of a sunset in the middle of a western prairie – ah, I could go on and on naming how God's faithfulness and love are revealed.

The psalmist in today's scripture declares that God's love has always been the foundation of our lives. Reflecting on those two verses, I'm reminded of the hymn, *I love to tell the story*. Telling “the old, old story of Jesus and his love” is the foundation of our call to mission and ministry. What a joy to share the love of Jesus with friends and neighbors – and strangers.

Prayer: “Your love, God, is my song, and I'll sing it!” Following Jesus on our journey, may we sing your love song forever. Amen.

Carol – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.

St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Lebanon, IN

Friday, December 22: *See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called Children of God.* 1 John 3:1 (NIV)

A few days ago, my wife and I conversed about what we are grateful for. I, personally, think about this often. Thinking of the verse above, it reminds me of all that I am grateful for: the gifts God has given me and lavished upon all of us, the beauty of God's world and the beauty that surrounds us; the nourishment, hope, faith, support and guidance we receive through the Holy Spirit; God's commandments to guide us; the wonderful people that surround us and come and go in our busy lives; the spirit of loving, and so much more. I think love and gratefulness go hand in hand.

There are two passages that come to my mind that help me reflect on this: “The peace of God that surpasses understanding will guard and guide our hearts and minds.” And the second passage: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, (his *only* child – think about that) not to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Ponder those words and how powerful they are.

As I reflect on the coming of Christ's birth, I think of the numerous things I am so grateful for and the things that have made my life what it has become. And I am grateful for the Holy Spirit who has guided me through prayer for so long, for so many years.

Prayer: Holy Father, our creator and father of us all, we thank you for all you have given us, for all you have done for us. We pray that you will forgive us for our shortcomings and for falling short of your wishes, asking that you continue to guide us in your loving ways. Amen.

Gordon – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Merrillville, IN

Saturday, December 23:

*LORD, your constant love reaches the heavens;
your faithfulness extends to the skies.
Your righteousness is towering like the mountains;
your justice is like the depths of the sea.
People and animals are in your care.*
Psalm 36:5-6 (GNT)

What do you value? I was asked this question by my boss over 30 years ago. I expect he wanted me to list my job at the top. When I said God first, then family, with my job as third, he was taken aback. Although this was not a career-ending move, God above family remained a sticking point between us.

What does it mean to say I value God above everything else?

The Psalmist in these verses tells us that God values love, faithfulness, righteousness, and justice...in a BIG way. Perhaps I value God by valuing love, faithfulness, righteousness, and justice. That's a tall order!

How can I incorporate love, faithfulness, righteousness, and justice into my daily life? Three thoughts come to my mind:

1. Scripture certainly gives me guidance. The Bible is full of stories about how God and God's people live out these values. Spiritual practices that involve reading scripture, such as Lectio Divina or I Notice/I Wonder, help me notice what the Holy Spirit is trying to tell me in the verses I'm reading.
2. Love, faithfulness, righteousness, and justice are all values Jesus demonstrated during his life. If I value God above all else, then Jesus is my role model. The Advent and Christmas seasons are a good time to ponder Jesus' life.
3. I become aware of the ways other Jesus-followers live out love, faithfulness, righteousness, and justice. They also become role models for me.

How do you live out God's values of love, faithfulness, righteousness, and justice?

Prayer: Thank you, God, for your constant and far-reaching love.

Jon – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Leadership Team, Indianapolis, IN

ADVENT 4 – JOY

Sunday, December 24: *Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. Luke 2:9-11 (NRSVUE)*

It feels like there is a lot of turmoil in the world right now, so moving into the Christmas season feels especially complicated. Maybe this is why, when reading this familiar Christmas passage, the juxtaposition of ideas resonated with me.

There is the tension of the “you” to whom the angel is speaking and “all the people” which is larger than the group of shepherds. The shepherds are “terrified,” but the angel promises “great joy” will come. And this happens against the backdrop of the baby Jesus’ humble birth in conjunction with him being “the Lord.” All these tensions exist in this passage simultaneously.

But sometimes living in the world feels this way. We live in a world where there is the joy of the holidays while many places are facing violence and war. We are sometimes terrified by what God asks of us, even if it ultimately brings us great joy. And we are trusted with the good news, which is for all people – encouraging us to think beyond ourselves in a way that can be challenging.

These tensions exist, and this passage seems to highlight that Christ’s birth doesn’t eliminate them, but instead illuminates them. How this season, among the terror and joy, among the individual and the communal, might we embrace both the baby in the manger and the Lord? What might the “good news” look like for a world (and in our lives) where these tensions exist?

Prayer: Lord, help us to see you in the tensions that exist and to bring your good news and great joy to all.

Jeanette – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Calvary Lutheran Church, Angola, IN

Monday, December 25, 2023: *And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. Luke 2:4-7 (KJV)*

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. ~Chinese proverb

Joseph and Mary’s journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem began with the single steps of a donkey. It would take them approximately four to five days.

The journey of three days from Florida to Nebraska always seemed endless to me, as a child. To top it off, when we reached the Kansas-Nebraska state line, my father stopped using road maps and started following section lines. I was absolutely sure we would never get there! We always arrived safely and joyously at Grandma’s house.

Mary and Joseph must have been feeling something similar. There were no road maps, much less GPS. There would have been few places to get food and shelter along the way. And where could a pregnant woman get help if she needed it? How joyous they must have felt when the hill topped by Bethlehem finally appeared.

However, there was no place to stay in town! What to do now? Finally, they found a place – a stable! What a joy just to have a roof over their heads.

And then, the joyous birth of the child! The birth of every child is a joyous occasion, but this journey was special – the Savior was born. The nine-month journey and the long trip to Bethlehem were completed according to the prophecy of the Old Testament. Or was it just beginning?

Prayer: “O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie.” Be with us, Lord, as we continue our journey to Bethlehem. Amen.

Dee Ann – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Christ Lutheran Church, Kokomo, IN

A Blessed and Joyous Christmas Season to You.