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FOR FAITH AND ACTION

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2024



Bible study:

Receiving grace

What fig trees teach us about Advent

God pitched a tent among us

Christmas at Kigiqtaq



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Redeeming grace

BY ELIZABETH HUNTER

COUPONS, RAINCHECKS AND REBATES were my dad’s way of saving money on groceries and other household items. Because of this, even as a young child I understood what “redeeming” meant.

Dad redeemed coupons a little like he played cards. He knew just what coupon to play, when to use it, and whether to request a raincheck or a rebate. Dad could get a box of corn-flakes for 25 cents. He could buy a huge bunch of grapes for \$1. And he might bring you along to go through the line separately, if two “Limit one” coupons were about to expire.

All of this didn’t just benefit our family. Sometimes Dad, who also served as a scout-master, would redeem aluminum cans for 5 cents each, helping to fund my brothers’ scout troop. Once he had two or three trash bags of crushed cans from the scouts’ (and our family’s) community cleanup efforts, off he’d go to the recycling center.

Later, when we went away to school, we would sometimes receive a thin envelope in the mail. Inside would be a rebate check that might amount to as little as \$2 or as much as \$20. Nowhere on

those envelopes did Dad’s name or address appear. But we knew those gifts of love did not originate with Johnson & Johnson, Unilever or General Mills. Dad was thinking of us and having a little fun as well. (I’m sure he got a kick out of not having to pay postage to send us a little spending money.)

Like those recycled cans, we have been redeemed, taken away from a place where we were distant from God, made new, forgiven, and freed to follow Christ in loving all people. Christ, our Redeemer, like an “all are welcome” coupon, like a raincheck of love, reconciles us with God. As those who are reconciled in Christ, we recognize God’s grace for us and extend that grace to others.

As Bible study author the Rev. Heidi Haverkamp says, “The practice of grace is what keeps us strong, keeps us truly safe, and teaches us the peace and abundance of God, for ourselves and for all people” (p. 23).

We all need grace. There is no earning our way into being enough. We are more than enough simply because we are made worthy through the dawn of redeeming grace—the birth of the Christ child.



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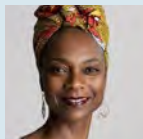
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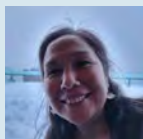
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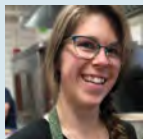
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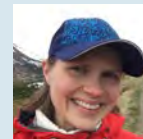
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ness near her Northwest U.S. home. She blogs at pastorlisawrites.com.

Redeeming grace

BY CHRISTINE MANGALE

I WAS BORN AT HOME on the southeast coast of Kenya, the second child in a family of six girls and two boys. My family included many paternal and maternal grandmothers. My forward-thinking parents valued education and gender equality. They sacrificed to transcend gender norms that were inherited after decades of colonial patriarchy, ensuring that all their children received the gift of an early education.

My sisters and I were among a small minority of girls of my generation who graduated from secondary school. Unwavering support from my mother and grandmothers made a tremendous impact on our lives. We had time to study without the worries of caring for children, early marriage or forced marriage, unlike many of our peers.

Growing up, I was surrounded by strong women. They exemplified ethical, intelligent strength and leadership. One of my grandmothers, for example, was a respected traditional healer—a deeply revered role in our culture. My late mother overcame the limited resources and education of her childhood to become an intrepid leader, active in the women's group of our church. She led trainings, livelihood projects, and seminars at local and national levels. Navigating challenges with grace, she fulfilled her educational dreams by enrolling in adult literacy classes and studying business management.

The women's department of the Kenya Evangelical Lutheran Church supported education for women and girls, ran livelihood programs, and operated a rescue center for girls living on the streets in Nairobi (Pangani Lutheran Children Center).

Through leaders like the Rev. Dr. Margaret Obaga, Rev. Alice Mwaringa and Ms. Mary Mshana, I saw the transformative power of women who inspire and improve the lives of women and girls.

Today I live in the U.S., where I have benefited from the work of women-led organizations like Women of the ELCA. WELCA has offered me space to lift women's voices from the margins, and to showcase the strength that comes from our diversity and our communities.

In my work as the ELCA's main representative for the Lutheran World Federation with the United Nations, I listen to the stories of women and girls from around the world. I create space for them to harness their agency and speak their truths to governments, impacting policy creation and the implementation of existing UN agreements. The voices of women and girls, often silenced by patriarchal powers, are essential. I also serve as a board member and volunteer for Mpanzi, a grassroots group promoting education, peace and development in rural African communities.

As one who was mentored and encouraged by other women, I take seriously my responsibility to mentor young women, and to open doors for them whenever possible. When women prosper, the entire community flourishes. Let us use our space as a faith-driven collective of women to ensure that future generations of women and girls benefit from our efforts. Let's ensure that they begin their life journeys by standing on our shoulders and benefiting from the gains we've made together. 🌿





Beginning with rest

Following the
Shepherd's roadmap

BY JENNIFER GINN

*“The Lord is my shepherd,
I shall not want...”*

SOMEWHERE ALONG MY WAY as a pastor, I fell out of love with the 23rd Psalm. Maybe it was that year of leading so many memorial services for which families requested this well-known psalm. But in recent months, hoping to recapture its wonder and beauty, I've read this psalm regularly during my morning quiet time. Once it eased its way into my morning rhythm, I began noticing a pattern of holy accompaniment—one that filled me with energy and hope. Psalm 23 has come back to life for me!

When have you experienced a “coming back to life” moment? Some people are blessed with a refreshing feeling when they spend time with Jesus' words in the gospels, listen warmly to a friend's expression of faith, or wake up well-rested after a good night's sleep. A good night's sleep, however, is no guarantee for any of us, despite compelling offers from mattress companies. In the 23rd Psalm, the Shepherd offers not a perfect mattress, but a different kind of rest: one that will renew us on the inside, no matter how well we've slept the night before.

Though I often don't (sleep well, that is), still my body clock wakes me early. Yours may alarm even earlier than mine, reminding you to make breakfast and pack lunch for kids about to catch an early school bus or carpool. After they're off and you've poured your morning coffee, maybe you'll find a moment to

sit and breathe deeply, turning your heart to the Shepherd. Not an early riser? Whenever your day begins, take a few minutes to be still. Read a devotion and journal your response, recall a favorite scripture story, or sit in silence with a candle lit, open to the Spirit.

That's when I turn to the 23rd Psalm. Even if rest hasn't found me through the night, in these early morning times God does, breathing a calming rhythm into my spirit—a different sort of rest.

HE MAKES ME LIE DOWN

First thing in the morning? Really? After a night of rest or, for some, frustrating hours of tossing and turning? What sense does it make at the day's beginning to focus on MORE rest? Honestly, none! But God is forever upsetting my logic! Logical or not, according to the psalmist green pastures and still waters are in fact where the Shepherd leads first. Can I trust that this is the place I need most to be in the morning, no matter how well I've slept in the night? Believe it or not, 'God rest' is indeed better than bed rest.

HE LEADS ME IN RIGHT PATHS

Psalm 23 next assures us of a fruitful day and a reliable roadmap for it. Once refreshed and restored, we're ready to follow that roadmap. From rest, the Shepherd leads us to right pathways or, as an alternate translation of this verse reads, “paths

of righteousness.” What those paths are to be, we may not know. But the psalmist invites us to rely on the Shepherd's wisdom. Challenging or comforting, joyful or pain-filled, those paths carry the promise of the Shepherd's presence.

THROUGH THE DARKEST VALLEY

These next words may serve as a steady rudder for families feeling the turbulence of death and grief. They remind those in danger that though enemies might pursue, still the Shepherd provides a table of rich food, a full cup and an anointing that affirms his love and presence—blessings all along the way. In every path, whether certain or uncertain of the way and the danger, the psalmist gives thanks for the Shepherd's comfort and provision. We can, too.

GOODNESS AND MERCY

Continuing to follow the roadmap builds our awareness of the Holy Shepherd's presence. Each step—of a day or a life—is enabled and strengthened by the very first one—resting in the Shepherd's goodness and mercy. Finally, the psalmist, confident and joyful, claims the promise of “forever rest” in God's arms, at home with the Lord.

WILL YOU TRUST THE ROADMAP?

Try following this roadmap for a few days, paying attention to the changes in your patterns and attitude. As you follow it, do you feel closer to the divine Shepherd?

1. Rest with the Shepherd—not nightly rest, but a “beginning of the day” rest.
2. Follow the Shepherd into “right paths,” confident in his guidance.
3. Notice the Shepherd’s comfort and abundant blessings, despite your fear.
4. Rest once more in the Shepherd’s promise—goodness, mercy and a place in God’s house.

BUT WHAT IF?

What if you stop following? What if you stray? You won’t be alone in those detours—I take them too. Even God’s earliest faithful followers strayed. The prophet Isaiah describes God’s grief when the ancient Hebrews choose to seek protection from Egypt’s Pharaoh against the enemies pursuing them. God lets them go their own way, while warning

that their choice will backfire. Your strength, God insists, is not in seeking allies likely to betray you; rather, “in returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and trust shall be your strength” (Isaiah 30:15). They will suffer mightily in turning away from God’s provision. But still the Lord will be gracious when they cry out. God will call them back, saying, “This is the way; walk in it” (v. 21). And God the Shepherd will once again lead them to safe rest, in green pastures and beside still waters.

You and I may never face such dangers, but we may well struggle with resting in God. If we listen with our hearts, however, we will hear the Shepherd’s call—back to rest and refreshment.

Will we hear it? Will we listen with our hearts? Will we accept the challenge to begin every day resting in the Shepherd? Despite

the rush of morning routines and daily schedules, will we dare to pause and honor the God who at the beginning of all things gave us life, who even now promises to lead us and love us through every step we take?

Child of God, will you dare to begin with holy rest? 🌿

WANT TO DIG DEEPER?

- Read Psalm 23 in several different versions of the Bible. Note the differences. How does seeing the various translations enrich the psalm’s meaning for you? What questions does it raise?
- Read Isaiah, chapter 30. In verse 15, how does God’s promise remind you of the psalmist’s words in Psalm 23? Despite the Hebrew people’s fear and failure, what is God’s ultimate action toward them? How is that action good news for you?
- Read John 15: 1-11, where Jesus invites his disciples to abide in him. The Greek word translated as “abide” carries the same meaning as the Hebrew word for “dwell,” found in the final line of Psalm 23. It seems that the psalmist, writing many generations before Jesus spoke, feels confident of that very bond Jesus later describes. What does the psalmist’s confidence mean for your life?



God pitched a tent among us

Can we see what the shepherds first saw?

BY VIOLET CUCCINIELLO LITTLE

IT'S 10:45 A.M., AND ALMOST TIME to open the heavy red doors. Folks are waiting on the steps and along the narrow street near the church's side entrance. We are in day five of a heat wave with today's temperature reaching, not a "feels like," but an actual 100 degrees. These "Code Red" days

are marked by life-threatening heat, especially to the people of The Welcome Church, most of whom are unhoused and living on the street.

The day is Monday. Yesterday, we gathered for worship at our usual spot in the park. The Welcome Church is a "church

without walls.” We have no building, and we work hard to knock down the many walls that divide us.

Our congregation relies on the hospitality and generosity of others. This day we gather in a community meeting room at a Lutheran church in Philadelphia’s Center City. A single window air conditioner noisily trickles cool air into a space that is too large for this small unit, but we are grateful for the space. We are even more grateful for the welcome offered to our congregation—a congregation that is not always welcomed, even when there are vacant “rooms at the inn.”

At first glance, this reaction is understandable. Steve is in the midst of D.T.s (delirium tremens), also known as alcohol withdrawal. Visibly shaking, he admits to feeling confused. He came today to help “clear his head,” he says.

Maryann, whose fair skin has been burned by the relentless sun, sleeps in a nearby alley. She doesn’t have the quarters this week to wash her sweat-soaked clothes. Instead, she hand-washed a few things in the train-station bathroom, hoping to find a discreet place where her clothes might dry before someone tosses them. Neighborhood folks stand clear of Maryann, especially when she responds to voices that only she can hear. Today Maryann will be our greeter, welcoming each person by name and offering

extra lunches to those she knows will need them later.

And there is Sharon. The first thing most people note about Sharon is how many bags she carries. Her face, beautiful, but hardened, offers a “dare-you-to mess-with-me” kind of shield.

When Sharon was a young child, her mother, rooted in the despair and hopelessness she felt in her own life, tried to drown Sharon in a bathtub. Sharon survived, only to be abused by the foster family that took her in. Later, Sharon would leave her abusive partner, choosing the street over another black eye.

I walk over to Sharon. I tell her that I’m concerned about how much she is carrying. She knows I mean more than the bags. “Yeah, I have to stop picking up stuff,” she says.

Sharon pulls out some finds from the dollar store: a giant bag of popcorn and some peanut butter crackers. “I know everybody likes these, and I brought them to share today,” she offers.

I tell her that this is so kind of her. When she responds: “It’s what I learned here,” my heart breaks open, for what seems like the millionth time.

At 11 a.m., we’re ready for our weekly Bible study. The room is set up with tables, chairs, socks, Bibles, coffee, water and snacks. On one table, there are masks, hand sanitizer, and COVID tests. Near a chair, there’s a basket filled with individual cups that hold

tiny bits of bread and grape juice that will become the body and blood of Christ.

Someone jokes: “Jesus on the menu; my main meal of the day!”

But today, there are also boxes of wrapped gifts, stockings filled with treats, plates of star-shaped cookies, nuts and chocolates. As people walk in, Handel’s *Messiah* plays on a phone somewhere in the background. On this hot Monday, we come together as a community of faith to celebrate Christmas in July.

Each week’s Bible study is led by someone in our ever-changing group. As it turns out, this week’s leader has tested positive for COVID. So today the whole group will lead the study.

We read the story of Christmas, as Luke tells it. I ask: “Where have you seen the light of Christ? Where have you been the light of Christ for others?” Testimony—hope spoken into existence—is a crucial part of our time together.

After we pray, we have communion. Then we play a game—one modeled after a TV show where one family, pitted against another family, tries to guess the most popular answers to simple questions. However, The Welcome Church plays games a little differently. Here we encourage cooperation, rather than competition. This can happen only because the group knows everyone will get a prize. There will be enough, and no one will be

left out. A feeling of abundance like that is rare on the street.

I ask the first question in the list that came with a Christmas game I purchased over the internet: “Name something you associate with Christmas.”

In unison, almost everyone says, “Jesus.”

Then I look at the top six answers, where Jesus didn’t make the cut.

I make a buzzer-like sound, and say, “Wrong!” Then I share the top answers in order of their popularity: tree, Santa Claus, presents, snow, ice skating and turkey.

The group looks at me like I have completely lost my mind.

“Ya lyin’, Pastor, right?” someone shouts out. Another person says, “She’s just teasing us. We know that Jesus had to be the number one answer for Christmas.”

I look around the room at this group, so hungry for the Good News of what this Christ Child will bring. I put the answer sheet down.

“You are right!” I tell everybody. “Jesus is the correct answer!”

My mind wanders to the story we read a little earlier in the Gospel of Luke. Luke says that after the shepherds encountered Jesus, they “returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen...”

What exactly did the shepherds hear and see? I wonder.

We know they saw Mary and Joseph, a teenaged mother and her newly-wed husband, dirty and tired from their long trip and the birth of their child.

We think there were animals—sheep, cows, and maybe a donkey that carried Mary.

And in that barn, in the place where those animals ate their food, there was a newborn baby wrapped in rags that probably were not too clean.

But, as the story goes, “the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen.” Surely they saw more than a camped-out family surrounded by smelly animals! Somehow the shepherds saw a God who loved us so much that this God became flesh and even “pitched a tent” among us. A God who took everything that is most precious to God’s being and wrapped this gift of pure love into a tiny baby. A God who came to us in a nowhere little town. A God who was born to parents who were nobodies, turned into precious somebodies, like those of us in the room.

Looking out at the room, I also think about how, days before our Christmas in July celebration, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that “localities may impose criminal penalties” for acts like public camping and public sleeping. According to the court, arresting someone for being homeless doesn’t violate the Constitution’s eighth

amendment of “cruel and unusual punishment.”

According to this ruling, Jesus, Mary and Joseph could have been arrested for sleeping in that stable, even though there were no rooms at any of those Bethlehem inns.

Imagine.

COLD DECEMBER

As we move towards December, the threat to our congregation is no longer the sun, but the brutal cold. As the nights grow longer, Code Red has become Code Blue.

Soon I will take out our very old Italian crèche and place it on our fireplace mantle, with the tiny baby, now slightly chipped and very worn. Thinking of our tiny congregation on the street, with whom I will celebrate yet another Christmas, I pray: “Please, God, help me to see past my beautifully decorated tree, the presents, and even the dancing Santa Claus that will be on my table. Please, God, help me and each of us to see what the shepherds first saw on that night when all heaven broke loose.”

Please, God, open our hearts to the gift of Love, made flesh and living among us. 🌿

The recording

On Dec. 1, I remember my friend and all others affected by HIV/AIDs.

BY ADRAINNE GRAY

THE RECORDING SEEMS LIKE a macabre keepsake. I hadn't watched it since September 2021, when I'd baptized my childhood friend before she died. But I played it again before writing this reflection. I needed to remember the details of the miracle I witnessed. I needed to see Renee's face. I needed to hear her respond, "That's it? I'm baptized?" after I made the sign of the cross on her forehead. "Yes, that's it," I said that day. "You are baptized."

I remember the absurdity behind recording the baptism of my dying friend. It was not for me, not for Renee, but to satisfy her mother's fear of Renee's pending eternal damnation.

Her mother's fear that her daughter, my friend, would be eternally disconnected from God, was heartbreaking. Her Apostolic/Holiness church's doctrine of "baptism in the name of Jesus" wasn't that far from what church reformer Martin Luther



had written: “The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned” (*The Book of Concord*, Fortress Press, 2000, p. 457).

Each day, Renee’s mom would anxiously visit, afraid it would be too late, afraid that her daughter would be forever condemned.

For 50 years, Renee rejected the holiness tradition and its teachings, including the forgiveness of sins and everlasting life through baptism. The promise of an afterlife never attracted her. What she really wanted, I suspected, was wellness and life in this world.

MY BEAUTIFUL FRIEND

In October 1999, Renee was my bridesmaid. She was beautiful, tall and healthy in the dress I’d chosen to compliment her rich brown complexion.

That same year, she later told me that “the only man who’d ever really loved her” infected her with HIV. She had given her body to her one-and-only love. But drug abuse doesn’t love anybody. She was just 27 years old. Suddenly, the afterlife was a real concern, but not as much of a concern as Renee’s desire to live whole, with dignity and health, in this world.

In Scripture, the Greek word that means “saved” can also be translated as “well.” When I replace the word “saved” in many Bible verses with either “well” or “wellness,” the Word expands, liberates and reframes restrictive condemnation.

In 1982, when Renee and I were in middle school, the R&B group DeBarge’s single “I Like It” was on the U.S. and U.K. charts. (I can’t remember the class in which I first noticed her, but I still remember every line

of “I Like It”). Renee was quiet, reticent and always alone. On the off chance that someone could see her eyes and acne-pocked face under the Jheri Curl hairstyle she wore, her expression said it all: “Don’t mess with me.”

That didn’t stop me.

We spent hours together. Over our lunch breaks, we’d write DeBarge song lyrics on lined notebook paper. Renee was still protective—of herself, and now of me. The only way she felt safe was to fight. Yet we could not protect each other from premature sexual exposure. As author Alice Walker wrote in her book, *The Color Purple*, “A girl child ain’t safe in a family [or a world] of men.”

We were in middle school when two things happened. I lost my virginity at age 13 because Curtis said it “would feel good.” (It didn’t.) Renee was gang-raped, and I was powerless to

DEC. 1 IS WORLD AIDS DAY

On Dec. 1, World AIDS Day, we remember and honor 40 million people who are living with HIV, as well as more than 42 million people who have died from HIV/AIDS-related illnesses. According to the US Department of Health and Human Services, African American women are 15.3 times more likely to die from HIV infection than white women. As a church, let us never forget

those who are living and dying with HIV/AIDS. Let’s advocate not only for their dignity, but for greater access to treatment and research.

For me, sharing these memories of my friend and releasing the stigma of her status has been healing. While parts of my story may read like a raw memoir, our sexuality is a part of our physical and spiritual well-being. Nothing

can separate us from God. Being with God, and the people of God, should not require a dismemberment of our humanity. Let’s learn to speak honestly about sexuality in our communities. In doing so, as a church, we can work to prevent HIV, end stigma and discrimination against those who are HIV-positive, and reduce the conditions of poverty that contribute to the spread of HIV.

help. We couldn't find an adult that we trusted to tell—someone who would care about what had happened to a Black girl's body; someone who would know that even *if* she had given consent to one guy, *five was rape*. By the time Renee's daughter, my goddaughter, was born years later during our 10th-grade year, I had become used to intercourse; it no longer took a lot of convincing.

BAPTISM DAY

Sitting at Renee's bedside, as she drifted in and out of sleep, her body preparing to shut down, Renee's mom began to reminisce. "You never know who the Lord is gonna call to do his work," she said, laughing. "You and Renee were *trouble!*"

Thankfully, the hands that hold the sacraments don't contaminate it.

After Renee's stroke in 2006, her daughter found a drawer full of unopened medications—antivirals used to treat HIV/AIDS.

African American AIDS activist and longtime HIV/AIDS survivor Rev. Rae Lewis Thornton talks openly about coping with depression and maintaining her medicine regime. "As a longtime survivor, while a blessing and a testament to the advancements in HIV treatments, it is still a struggle," she writes. In 2024, she shares, her friend, childhood AIDS activist Hydeia Broadbent, died of AIDS complications. Hydeia, like my friend Renee, had stopped taking her antiviral medication.

"Medicine fatigue" affects most survivors, Lewis Thornton says.

When my goddaughter called to say, "Mommy told me to tell you to come," I packed quickly. In the rush of throwing everything in my luggage, I circled back to my office to grab my *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)* book, as well as a clerical shirt and collar.

I never wear my clericals in the U.S. I've only ever worn them when visiting churches abroad. There, it is more common for rostered church deacons to wear clerics. But that day, I heard the Spirit saying, "Take these things. Don't worry about what is customary."

I arrived to find a "baptism dilemma."

For three years now, I've kept the recording on my phone. Today, I watch it. The recording shows the morning light and nursing staff busy making rounds. Renee reclines in the hospital bed, wearing a black bonnet and the scarf I sent her from Jerusalem. The curtain by the bed is closed. When a nurse comes in to do vitals, I ask if she can wait.

In one hand, I hold a clear cup, typically used for swishing water in one's mouth. The cup is full of water from the hospital room's sink. My other hand holds the ELW worship book. I read aloud: "By water and the Word, God delivers us from sin and death..." (*ELW*, p. 227)

To be delivered is to be saved. To be saved is to be brought to wellness. Baptism offers us

salvation and wellness.

SALVATION AND WELLNESS

Understandably, Renee had a problem with salvation—perhaps because most of her life was lived outside of the morality laws of the church and of society. Salvation (wellness), she'd been told, was outside of her reach without this ritual.

When she reviewed parts of her life with me, she shared that she felt a lot of guilt for some of her actions. Some she wasn't so sure she could be forgiven for. She felt that her eternal salvation was questionable if it was going to be solely based on her "sins."

I won't recount our entire conversation about our understanding of Jesus and his life, ministry and resurrection for all. However, at some point, she decided that baptism was something she wanted. I, as her friend, administered pastoral care. At the time, I wasn't exactly sure why she had agreed. But we'd talked enough, so that I knew it wasn't out of fear or coercion.

DO YOU BELIEVE IN GOD?

During her lifetime, Renee fought a constant barrage of domestic abuse. Eventually, she gave birth to two more "girl childs" without the loving support of a partner. I left to attend community college in Miami, where I discovered that "educated" men weren't always safe either.

Today, as I watch the recording, I notice that during the Profession of Faith, she stumbles

over the words, “I believe in God the Father,” initially answering, “No, I don’t.” It looks like cognitive confusion. I watch myself giving her space to think about it. I ask again: “Do you believe in God, Renee?” This time, she responds, “I do.”

It’s telling that, for my friend, the language of God as “father” seemed stifling. Was she hesitant to trust a male image of the Divine Creator? After all, males had not protected her in this life; why would a male protect her in the next?

Womanist theology is a theological approach by African American women that focuses not only on ending oppression based on sex and gender, but also oppression based on race, class, sexual preference, physical ability and caste.

Theologian Monica Coleman, author of *Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Fortress Press 2008), quotes womanist theologian Jacquelyn Grant, who says it is not about “a sin that Black women commit. Rather, it is a sin of humanity,

the sin committed against Black women from which they must be saved [returned to wellness]” (Coleman, p. 424).

Grant’s words stood out to me. Had we, perhaps, missed the gravity of the sins committed against Renee’s body? Had we expected her to carry the burden of sin alone?

UNCONDITIONAL, FREEING LOVE

Renee died before the release of Beyoncé’s song, “Church Girl.” The song’s lyrics felt like an homage to my friend—a Black woman who refused to accept the religious rhetoric of purity and sinful women. Some might think that Renee’s decision to accept baptism was a final-hour change of heart. It wasn’t. Renee received baptism on her own terms. Renee was finally able to stop fighting for love and wellness, and at long last, able to simply receive it, unconditionally.

Beyoncé’s lyrics speak to Renee’s lived experience:

*I’ve been up, I been down
Feel like I move mountains*

*Got friends that cried fountains, oh
I’m warning everybody, soon as I
get in this party
I’m gon’ let go of this body, I’m
gonna love on me
Nobody can judge me but me,
I was born free*
—from “Church Girl,” by Beyoncé

Renee was released from her body on October 16, 2021—two weeks after her baptism—with her three daughters and six grandchildren surrounding her. 🌿

Read: “Unprotected: A Memoir,” by Rae Lewis-Thornton

Check out: The HVTN (HIV Vaccine Trials Network) Faith Initiative, a national program that includes Faith Ambassadors who provide information on HIV prevention, treatment and more to faith communities: www.hvtn.org/community/community-overview/hvtn-faith-initiative.html

Download free worship resources for World AIDS Day at www.elca.org/hiv

A virtual Blue Christmas Service December 21 at 7pm CST

This virtual Blue Christmas service offers a safe place to bring your grief, fear and loss.

Register at welca.org/events



Building Advent traditions

BY LISA A. SMITH

EVERY ADVENT, MOM WOULD DRAG THE YULE LOG out of storage and place it on the kitchen table. She'd made the dusty birch centerpiece herself, complete with greenery and holes to anchor the Advent candles. Although I can no longer remember if we lit one or all the candles each week, the yule log is a core memory of my childhood.

Now, with my own family, I use an Advent wreath on my table (which I like better than the log). Each week, we light one new candle. Each night at dinner, we sing "He Came Down" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 253). It's a reminder that yule logs, Advent wreaths and Christmas trees announce the love of God, who longs to be near us.

I can't remember the number of Christmas presents I received while growing up, but I do remember the traditions our family shared together. While some traditions seemed insignificant at the time, I now appreciate how those practices weave a tapestry of memorable lessons I can pass along to my children. Advent is a wonderful time for parents and caregivers to build traditions children will remember long after the gadgets under the tree have been cast away.

Caregivers (moms in particular) already face a lot of pressure to create holiday magic. Advertisers push us to buy everything from cookie dough to expensive toys to create "the best Christmas ever." We're expected to spend money, attend events and parties. We may even feel as though we should buy everyone—teachers, babysitters, letter carriers, dog

walkers—gifts. Suddenly, Advent feels not contemplative and peaceful, but overwhelming and stressful.

In addition to all of this, we're supposed to build meaningful, faithful, Advent traditions. We don't need *any* more pressure this season, yet we—adults and children alike—do need meaning. What if, instead of carrying out complicated projects or going broke, we simply spent Advent focusing on connecting with God and each other?

One way to begin building or expanding our Advent traditions is to share holiday foods. A cherished recipe or tradition that has been passed down can connect us not only to each other, but to our ancestors. Why not try a recipe from your or your family's heritage? Consider: saffron buns, candied yams, buñuelos, lefse, a Christmas cake, tamales or pierogi. A baking project can also help families to practice generosity. Cookies and other treats can be shared with people who are lonely, grieving or in need. Baking doesn't even have to be complicated. Many stores sell pre-made cookie dough and pie crusts. Even a takeout meal can have meaning. Ordering sushi on Christmas Eve has become a favorite tradition for my children.

Decorating for Advent is another tradition that my family enjoys. While we trim the Christmas tree, we share stories about our family's Christmas ornaments, from the stuffed turtle wearing a wreath to the sticker-covered train engine my kids made on a "holiday train" adventure. When I was a child, my mother constructed colorful paper chains and used

these to decorate our tree and our house. Each day in Advent we'd tear a link off a garland as a count-down to Christmas.

What kind of decorations could you use with family or friends, beyond decorating a Christmas tree? Is there a family heirloom or family-made decoration you could set out? What about a nativity set or an Advent calendar? It's great when decorations involve not only set-up activities, but ongoing engagement during the days of Advent. With Advent calendars, we get a daily reminder (and maybe even a treat). Nativity scenes can be playful. A friend of mine adds a character to her nativity scene each week. On Christmas Eve, she asks her kids to hunt around the house for the hidden baby Jesus. After Christmas, the magi slowly "move" closer to her nativity scene for 12 days of Christmas.

Generosity and sharing are good ways to help children create meaningful memories and connect to the world around them. Some families go Christmas caroling. Others purchase a gift for a child from an "angel tree." Still others, especially those with older children, may volunteer

distributing toys or helping at a shelter. Children of any age can sort through their own gently used toys and books, to find things to donate. Older children and teens can help to choose family Advent activities. What kind of sharing or volunteering would be meaningful for them, based on their interests?

Family Advent traditions can be new. They also don't have to last forever. Our sushi Christmas Eve tradition began during the pandemic when we couldn't attend a decade-long gathering of friends.

For years, I bought (expensive) LEGO Advent calendars, but last year, my older son agreed that we could do a different kind of Advent calendar this year. That sounded good to me!

As Christians, we know that Advent traditions don't exist for themselves. Whether simple or elaborate, Advent traditions are intended to point us to the One for whom we have been waiting: Jesus Christ the Lord. The best Advent traditions will orient us toward God, who comes down and offers us the hope, peace, joy and love we need—not just during Advent, but throughout the year. 🌿

OPENING HYMN

“Amazing Grace,”
(ELW 779)

OPENING PRAYER

Gracious God, you invite us to walk as children of light because you have made us in your own image. Teach us to believe that we are whole, beautiful and strong—not because of anything we have done, but because we are loved by you. Teach us to submit to one another with love and dignity, because you have made each one of us worthy, with your love and grace, in Jesus Christ. Amen.

FOCUS VERSE

“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” (Ephesians 5:1-2)

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW)
- Scrap paper and pens or pencils

Receiving grace: a study of Ephesians

Session three

Grace-filled living, ancient and new

BY HEIDI HAVERKAMP

THE OLD LIFE AND THE NEW LIFE

■ **Read:** Ephesians 4:17-5:2

“Clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” (Ephesians 4:24)

What is this new life? Early Christians believed that, through baptism, the old, sinful self was dead, and the new self was alive in Christ. This is grace. In baptism, we are set free. We can let go of death—in other words, the past, our sins and our fear of our mortality. We can embrace goodness, community with all creation, and the eternal possibility of new life.

In the earliest baptismal rituals, people acted out this belief quite seriously. Entering a darkened room inside the church, the catechumens—men and women—would go separately, taking off their clothes to walk, naked, down a few steps into a pool of water. Imagine being dunked, naked, under water, then hearing: “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit!” Walking out of the water, the newly baptized would be clothed in white robes. They entered a sanctuary filled with people, ready to receive communion for the first time. It must have truly felt like being born into a new life!

Today, most baptisms are not so dramatic. Some clergy do immerse infants naked in a pool of water

during evening Easter vigils. Many others sprinkle a little water onto fully clothed adults and children in the full light of day. Still, I wonder if people in the early church had just as much trouble as us in believing that grace is real.

The terms “grace” and “new life” can sound abstract. But Ephesians provides some help, reminding readers to focus not on “corruptions” or sin, but on being created in the image and likeness of God. Ephesians also gives us a concrete list of things to do, so we know what “new life behavior” looks like. Although some of the language sounds ancient, the list’s meaning is still relevant for us today.

If you’re like me, criticism, judgment and worry can masquerade as constructive ways to improve yourself and the world around you, to live your best life. However, according to the writer of Ephesians, showing grace, mercy and kindness to ourselves and others—“walking in love, as Christ loved us”—is a much more effective way to live a life of love and joy.

LECTIO DIVINA

 **Read:** Ephesians 4:25-32

Read these verses slowly to yourself. Or take turns reading, as a group. If you have time, read them twice. Hear the words spoken to you. Notice if a particular verse or phrase catches your attention.

Reader 1: So then, putting away falsehood, let each of you speak the truth with your neighbor, for we are members of one another. (v. 25)

Reader 2: Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. (v. 26-27)

Reader 3: Those who steal must give up stealing; rather, let them labor, doing good work with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. (v. 28)

Reader 4: Let no evil talk come out of your mouths but only what is good for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. (v. 29)

Reader 5: And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. (v. 30)

Reader 6: Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice. (v. 31)

Reader 7: Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. (v. 32)

Share aloud or reflect:

1. Instead of thinking about these as more rules to follow, ask: How can these instructions increase grace in my life? What stands out as I read them? What feels most relevant to my life this week?
2. In your opinion, which instruction sounds easiest to follow? Which sounds most difficult?
3. No need to share this with the group, but is there one you’d like to work on personally? Journal later, at home, about how following this instruction could bring more grace into your life.

LIVING AS CHILDREN OF THE LIGHT

 **Read:** Ephesians 5:3-21

Walk as children of light, for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord.
(Ephesians 5:8b-10)

Ephesians makes the Gentiles sound like pretty terrible people. Unlike Christians, or so the writer tells us, pagans are dumb, nasty, lustful, and greedy and he wants his readers to stay away from them. While it's helpful to be aware of the effect the people we surround ourselves with may be having on our hearts and minds, "us vs. them" language is reaching dangerous levels in our world today. So, let's turn our focus away from judging our neighbor and towards a deeper understanding of what it might mean to "walk in the light," instead.

Ephesians tells us that "the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true" (5:9). What does "good and right and true" mean exactly? We can take a lesson from the words of Jesus in Matthew 7 (quoted above): we can know goodness by the fruit it produces. We can know the "fruit of the light" by whether it grows into more goodness, more love, and more grace.

But this "light" does not mean we force ourselves to shine constantly only with happiness and optimism, or that we are wearing a sunshine mask to hide our shadow feelings like sadness, fear, jealousy, or anger. Some call this "toxic positivity": when a positive attitude starts to feel poisonous rather than life-giving for us and the people around us.

Denying our difficult feelings or pretending we never make any mistakes is not the way receive God's grace. Grace is about accepting and loving ourselves, whole, as God does. Being whole means being honest: "Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness; rather, expose them... everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light." When we expose our whole selves to the light of Christ, we can be truly whole and free - because in him we do not need to be afraid of condemnation or shame. Not that we never need to grow or repent; as my bishop used to say, "God loves you just the way you are, and God loves you too much to let you stay that way!" But the most lasting change in any person happens when

we feel love and belonging, first.

Ephesians points out some ways that we may try to hide from difficult feelings or experiences: sexual promiscuity, greed, harmful words, secrecy and drinking too much. These mask emotion and fill the holes in our hearts with things other than seeking truth and healing. Ephesians encourages us to not fear bringing our feelings into "the light" with God or another person. The writer offers other concrete practices as well, including thanksgiving, gratitude, being wise, choosing our words carefully, letting ourselves be filled with the Spirit, and singing and making music together!

This does not mean pretending to be happy. There is a difference between forcing yourself to seem happy or positive, and truly trying to live a new life of grace each day, so that "Christ will shine on you."

Share aloud or reflect:

4. In Ephesians, which ways of walking in the light speak most to you: practicing thanksgiving and gratitude, being wise, choosing your words carefully, letting yourself be filled with the Spirit, or singing and making music together? What else might you add to this list, from your own life experience?
5. Think of a strong emotion, perhaps a mistake, a wrong or a worry that has been bothering you lately. What would it be like to offer this before God? What if you talked about it with someone you trust? How might the Holy Spirit be inviting you to bring this "into the light of Christ" and move towards healing?

SUBMIT TO ONE ANOTHER

📖 **Read:** Ephesians 5:21-6:9

“Submit to each other out of respect for Christ.”
(v. 21, Common English Bible)

As you read these next chapters, keep in mind that Ephesians was teaching a way of love for its own time—a time when women, children and enslaved people were almost always considered the property of a man. The *pater familias* or “family father” was the oldest man in a family. He had authority and legal power over everyone in the household from newborn babies to grown men, servants and slaves.

Jesus acted in a very different way from this patriarchal model. We see this difference in Jesus’ behavior toward and teachings about children (Mark 10:13-16, Matthew 19:13-14), women (Luke 10:38-42, John 20:11-18), family (Matthew 12:48-50, Luke 9:59-62), and authority (Matthew 5:1-12, Matthew 23:9-12). But by the time Ephesians was written, Christians did not see themselves as revolutionaries anymore. Instead, Christians were trying to find acceptance in their wider society.

The letters of Paul and his followers try to teach the love of Jesus within this patriarchal framework. And so, the instructions of obedience for women, children and slaves can sound confusing, harsh or abusive to us today. These verses have often been used, not to increase love, but to continue cruel and abusive behaviors. Some readers may decide to skip these chapters because they are too painful. That’s okay.

If you are going to grapple with these challenging verses, take a deep breath and a step back. You may notice that all three sections—about husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves—are built around the teaching of mutual submission, or “being subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (5:21).

Mutual submission is actually a radical teaching. A *pater familias* never did anything that was submissive! Even today, most of us don’t consider submissiveness, humility or obedience to be admirable traits. We teach our children to stand up for themselves. We reward celebrities with strong personalities, politicians who never compromise, and leaders who fight for what they want with no regard for who or what who might get in their way. In a society like ours, what could it mean to submit to one another in love?

It does not mean always giving in, being a doormat, or ignoring our own needs and pain. As human beings, we all can remember an experience we’ve had of assault, discrimination or cruelty. We would never want to practice mutual submission in a situation like that.

But in healthy relationships, mutuality means honoring the dignity and integrity of the other person. Reading between the lines, Ephesians, in the context of its hierarchical, patriarchal culture, is trying to teach this. In our own time, spouses, romantic partners and even close (non-romantic) friends, could read this passage (with some tweaking of the words, below) and reflect on what it means to respect and love another:

Spouses should love one another as they love their own bodies. Someone who loves their spouse loves themselves as well.

How do you and your spouse/partner/friend nourish and care for one another? How are we members of one another’s bodies? How does how well you love yourself affect how well you love the person who is most dear to you?

Parents, grandparents, caregivers and children can also consider their relationships (with some tweaking of the words from Ephesians 6:1-4, below):

Children, obey your parents and caregivers in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor the caregivers who

raised you” ... And, parents and caregivers, do not provoke your children to anger, but nurture them in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

“Obey” comes from the Latin word meaning “to listen.” What does it mean to really listen to and honor someone, especially if this is someone we take for granted or even resent at times? How can we see our parents as full people, with their own joys and sorrows? How can we see our children, our siblings and other extended family members in this same way—not as people who owe us something, but as people who have their own journey and struggles?

I do not have any wisdom to offer about how modern people might consider the parts of Ephesians that deal with relationships between enslaved people and their enslavers. These verses are perhaps best left in the trash bin of history.

The best way to love someone else is to let them be themselves. We often want or expect the people we love to change, to live up to a standard or idea we have of who they should be. Usually, we want people to be more like us, not like themselves. But as Catholic monk Thomas Merton wrote:

The beginning of love is the will to let those we love be perfectly themselves, the resolution not to twist them to fit our own image. If in loving them we do not love what they are, but only their potential likeness to ourselves, then we do not love them: we only love the reflection of ourselves we find in them. (No Man Is an Island, 1955).

Mutual submission means asking others to love us as we are too! If someone else is always trying to change, control or criticize us, this is not a mutual love that can help us grow into the fullness of who God made us to be.

Share aloud or reflect:

6. When do you find comfort in having rules to follow? When do you feel suffocated or irritated by having to follow the rules?

7. Talk about a time when following a rule helped you love someone else or yourself better.
8. Share a story about a time when breaking a rule helped you love someone else or yourself better.
9. Think about your relationship with your spouse, romantic partner, dear friend, parent or another important person who raised you? In what ways do you “submit to one another in love” well? In what ways could you both be better?

PUTTING ON THE ARMOR OF GOD

📖 **Read:** Ephesians 6:10–24

“When I am weak, then I am strong.”
(2 Corinthians 12:10b)

When someone says, “Be strong!” what do you imagine? When the writer of Ephesians encourages readers to “be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power,” does this mean to be strong like a *pater familias*, a Roman centurion or an athlete? Or like “apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers”? What about a prisoner, a servant or a child? The Bible describes different kinds of strength, many of which turn our ordinary ideas of strength upside-down.

This passage is often used to encourage Christians to engage in “spiritual warfare”—in other words, to stand up to the devil or other strong-armed, cruel powers of our world. However, the gospel imagines strength in a different way than we do in politics, war or sports. The armor of God is not like the armor of a soldier. We do not wear battle armor as Christians. We wear the armor of grace.

As you read this passage, notice what the armor is made of. The writer does not point to a belt of

bravery or a breastplate of domination, but a belt of what is true and a breastplate of doing what is right. These shoes are not for marching or stomping. The shoes make us ready to proclaim peace. God's shield is not a shield of defensiveness or expertise, but of faith. We are not given a helmet of outrage and a sword of snappy comebacks, but a helmet of saving grace and a sword of the Word of God (which, we read in the first chapter of John, is also the name for Jesus). Sometimes the things we imagine will make us strong and keep us safe are, according to the gospel, not reliable, nor "the things that make for [true] peace."

To truly find peace and "stand firm" in our faith, we don't need to be strong like a soldier, an emperor or a wrestler. To fight the powers of evil, we must use God's armor and weapons, not those of humans. If we follow the gospel and the words of Ephesians, we will find our armor in growing loving relationships, telling the truth in love, choosing goodness, showing mercy, being peacemakers, praying, worshiping and having faith in God's power rather than in our own.

To the world, behavior like this will seem weak, sentimental and even useless. But the power of grace is the power of the cross—the power of submitting in love to one another to show that in God's great plan of salvation, violence, cruelty and bullying cannot win. The practice of grace is what keeps us strong, keeps us truly safe, and teaches us the peace and abundance of God, for ourselves and for all people.

PUTTING ON THE ARMOR OF GOD

 **Read:** Ephesians 6:11-17


Read these verses to yourself, or with one or two other participants, each read the verses aloud once. As you listen, imagine putting on each of these pieces of armor. Notice whether a certain verse,

image or word catches your attention.

Share aloud or reflect:

10. Name a celebrity, politician, athlete or other famous person whose strength and power you have admired. What do you admire about them? What is the difference between their particular strength and the strength that Jesus models, according to Ephesians?
11. Share a few things you are afraid of in this life. What are some ways that God's grace and love could help you release or make your peace with some of these fears?
12. How might God be inviting you, right now, to live your life more fully in grace?

CLOSING PRAYER

Gracious God, you bring us into the light. In thanksgiving and gratitude, help us to submit to one another with love and dignity. Fill us with your Spirit and teach us to pursue the strength you model in Christ. Remind us to bring our mistakes and fears into the light, so we can embrace your grace. In Jesus' name, Amen. 

Receiving grace

Session three

Grace-filled living, ancient and new

BY HEIDI HAVERKAMP

Welcome to the third and final session of Gather's fall Bible study series on the Letter to the Ephesians. This leader guide offers helpful tips related to session three's exploration of grace-filled living. Leaders might choose to share "What toxic positivity says to us" vs. "What the Light of Christ says to us" with participants. Or leaders might offer some of this information as examples.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO WALK IN THE LIGHT?

Living and walking in the light of Christ does not mean the same thing as being happy or positive all the time. It is a Christian practice to acknowledge that life is hard and difficult sometimes. Healing requires honesty, as well as allowing painful emotions to be heard.

What toxic positivity says to us:

- Look on the bright side!
- Everything happens for a reason; God has a plan.
- If you look for the good in life, you will always find it.
- There's always someone worse off than you, you know.
- Don't be so negative./Don't whine./Don't complain so much.

What the Light of Christ says to us:

- What you are feeling is worth listening to. Just as Jesus listened to the people he met, Jesus listens to you too.
- With the help and love of God and other people, we can do hard things.

- God can bring new life out of death.
- We all struggle in this human life; you are not alone. Even Jesus struggled sometimes.
- If you need to talk or vent about something, it's healing to share your feelings with someone you trust.

WHAT WAS THE "PATER FAMILIAS" ROLE?

The *pater familias* was the oldest male member of a family. He was considered the protector, authority and legal guardian of all women, children, slaves and other adult males in the household, and their property, land, belongings and wealth. Knowing this helps us understand the otherwise confusing meaning of a phrase found in Ephesians 3:14-15: "before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name." The *pater familias* was the single, all-powerful head of a household, just as God was the single, all-powerful father and head of heaven and earth.

According to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, in Roman family law *patria potestas* (Latin for "power of a father") was the power that a male head of a family had over his children, as well as more distant relatives in the male line, regardless of their age or whether they were brought into the family by adoption. It is shocking for us today to understand that this control included bodily control, as well as a right to inflict capital punishment. Only the male head of the family had any rights in private law. Any acquisitions of children became the property of the father. The father might allow a child to treat certain property as their own, but in the eyes of the law, that property belonged to the father.

Over time this absolute authority lessened, according to *Wikipedia*. The male head's power over life and death was abolished and the sale of children was restricted to extreme necessity. Under Emperor Hadrian, for example, a father who killed his son would lose his citizenship, his property and face permanent exile.

WHAT DOES HEALTHY MUTUAL SUBMISSION LOOK LIKE?

Mutual submission means loving and caring for one another. It does not mean to take on the needs of other people as if they were our own. When we are “responsible to someone,” rather than “responsible for someone,” we offer sympathy, listening and support, while letting the person live their own life. Here is the explanation I was given in seminary:

When I feel responsible FOR others (this becomes unhealthy):

I fix, protect, rescue, control and carry their feelings.
I feel tired, anxious, fearful and obligated.
I am concerned with solutions, answers, circumstances, being right, details and performance.
I manipulate.
I expect the person to live up to my expectations.

When I feel responsible TO others (this is the ideal):

- I am sensitive and show empathy. I listen, encourage, confront and share.
- I feel relaxed, free, aware and have high self-esteem.
- I am concerned with people, feelings and relating person to person.
- I believe that I just need to share myself; the other person has enough to make it.
- I am a helper-guide.
- I expect the person to be responsible for themselves and their own actions.
- I can trust and let go.

OPTIONAL EXERCISE FOR THE ARMOR OF GOD

If you have time, and if participants are having difficulty imagining the armor of God, you can help them imagine it by considering the words of Brené Brown. Brown is an author and researcher who encourages people to have:

- a strong back,
- a soft front, and

- a wild heart.

She explains that the “strong back is grounded confidence and boundaries. The soft front is staying vulnerable and curious. The mark of a wild heart is living out these paradoxes in our lives and not giving into the either/or [thinking] that reduces us. It’s showing up in our vulnerability and our courage, and, above all else, being both fierce and kind” (*Dare to Lead*, 2018).

SHORTEN THIS STUDY (30–45 MINUTES)

Option 1

- Sing the opening hymn.
- Do “Living as children of the light.”
- Skip all the lectio divina exercises.
- Read “Submit to one another.”
- Do Q1 and Q2.
- Read “The grace of belonging to one another.”
- Do Q6 and Q7.
- Close with prayer.

Option 2

- Sing the opening hymn.
- Read “Submit to one another.”
- Skip all the lectio divina exercises.
- Read “Putting on the armor of God” and do its lectio divina exercises.
- Close with prayer. 🌿

A simple *and* immense *task*

Lutherans share food,
show God's love

BY ABBY ACCETTURA



JESUS CALLS US TO FEED EACH OTHER. God's Word makes this call clear. It's a simple, yet immense task—as natural as packing a lunch box for a child, and as nuanced as serving an entire community. This wide scope can sometimes make food ministries feel unapproachable. Yet from the smallest snack to the largest feast, food is fundamental for human beings and for the Christian faith.

From meal programs created to foster fellowship within a congregation to projects designed to serve whole neighborhoods, leaders in Lutheran-related food ministries across the U.S. share the same abiding refrain: that when it comes to food ministry, the smallest efforts can have a transformative impact on both givers and receivers.

FROM THE FREEZER, FROM THE HEART

A freezer meal ministry emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic as a response to two needs—the need for food and the need for community.

“We have a really service-minded community; but during COVID, we were all stuck at home,” said Amanda Floy, associate pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church in Owatonna, Minnesota.

The ministry grew out of a specific situation. “A member of our community [was] in the last stages of cancer and struggling for basic meals,” Floy said. “When we were doing our check-in calls during COVID [for] our

members, she mentioned that [preparing meals] was becoming very burdensome for her. At the same time, we had another member who said they felt empty because they couldn't do anything for anybody.” That gave Floy an idea. “I asked that member if they would make some meals,” she explained. “And that's how the ministry came about!”

Although Trinity's Freezer Meal Ministry began as an exchange of meals between a few members, it soon expanded to include everyone in the 4,000-member congregation. Now the congregation's weekly bulletin publicizes the meals program as open to all. The meals offer support for anyone dealing with illness, injury, grief or loneliness.

“For the friends who have received meals, they feel cared for and not forgotten,” Floy said. “Especially in grief, you feel really alone. This is a reminder that you aren't alone.”

Meal recipients aren't the only ones drawing comfort and community from the ministry. According to Floy, volunteer meal-makers have found real joy in the work, including some widowed members who are celebrating the opportunity to cook for more than one person, as well as past recipients who want to return the favor.

“Jesus tells us [that] we're always going to have people who need food and who feel lonely,” Floy says. “One of the most basic

ways we can show people they're loved is to bring food—with a person attached to it.”

THE NEIGHBORHOOD FRIDGE

Similar sentiments were shared by Leah Lind and Marianne Liston of St. Mark Lutheran Church in West Des Moines, Iowa, about the impact their new neighborhood fridge ministry has had on their community. The neighborhood fridge has already proven to be incredibly valuable for neighborhood residents and congregation members.

Liston says food has been “flying off the shelves” since the fridge opened in June 2024. “People in our congregation and our community love this ministry,” she adds. “When people are dropping off items for the pantry, fridge or freezer, they're interacting with [other] members of the community. ...I think that surprised all of us, that we have an opportunity [to] get to know them. ...Our congregation is realizing that St. Mark's can have more of an impact on the people around us than we knew.”

Lind, a retired ELCA deacon and volunteer, oversaw the launch of the fridge. She insists that the provision of donations is equal to the need. “This group is so good about providing,” Lind says. “We get nervous when things get low. Then we're inundated with donated food. So God really shows us that he provides for his people! This has been a lesson for us in trusting God.”

Food donors, “who are people of faith...feel that this is a ministry for them as well,” Lind says.

While food ministries have always been part of their congregation’s culture, Linda says an exploratory group in the congregation discovered that the Des Moines area didn’t have an existing neighborhood fridge.

“In today’s world, we’re hearing more stories, in the media and amongst friends, that there is a greater need [for food],” Liston said. “We need to look beyond ourselves and do our part for our area.” Liston said that some of the increased demand for food was caused by the misallocation of federal funds intended for summer food programs in the state of Iowa. Across the U.S., food ministries face hurdles like insurmountable needs, limited resources and societal circumstances beyond control, to name a few. But to Lind, trusting in God to accomplish the work of the neighborhood fridge is part of its power.

“The mission statement of St. Mark’s is ‘Grow in faith, share Jesus Christ, and serve others,’” Lind explains. “I think people have grown in faith by having to trust that Jesus is going to show up and be with us in this ministry and provide donors at just the right times.”

DINNER TOGETHER

Trust in God and in each other helped “Dinner Together,” an ecumenical program in Front Royal,

Virginia, to grow dramatically in size and scope since its inception in 2020. Developed from a collective of dedicated pastors from congregations that include Calvary Episcopal, First Baptist, Good Shepherd Lutheran, Front Royal Presbyterian and Front Royal United Methodist churches, Dinner Together has gone from serving 40 meals a day to nearly 120.

Created as a response to growing hunger in their community, Dinner Together provides hot meals for anyone in need, four nights a week at an accessible location. The group decided to serve the meals out of First Baptist, which is centrally located and has the largest commercial kitchen. The church partners rotate responsibility for providing meals each night. Now they’re distributing about 600 meals each week.

Ingrid Chenoweth, pastor of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, says that when the Front Royal churches began working together in 2020, it was due in part to the fact that each of the participating congregations had recently called female pastors—women who saw each other as community.

“We all kind of banded together as a resource, because we see each other as allies. We’re serving the same God,” Chenoweth says. “So we [said], ‘What can we do together? What can we accomplish?’”

According to Chenoweth, the

ministerial association in Front Royal wasn’t very active prior to the collaboration that led to Dinner Together. But from this meals ministry, they have grown a thriving, collaborative ministerial association that has taken on many other projects, including community activism against a local book ban.

Chenoweth calls it “a total God thing,” adding: “That partnership made us into a team.”

Food ministries are significant contributions to our communities, as evidenced by stories like these. Programs like the ones in Minnesota, Iowa and Virginia can grow from serving a few to serving many. Sometimes they transform our efforts into something entirely new. We experience God’s love when we share that love with others. This blessed alchemy can make the simplest, most human ministry—the sharing of a meal—one of the most powerful. 🌿



Shobi's Table

Hospitality in the wilderness

BY KARI ALICE OLSEN

WHO IS SHOBI? As I've had to clarify on multiple occasions, it's not me. Shobi is a character with a very brief story in the Old Testament. In 2 Samuel 17: 27-29, Shobi provides hospitality to King David and his troops within the much larger narrative of King David's rather violent troubles.

David, most of his household, and many troops were "hungry and weary and thirsty in the wilderness." They were in the wilderness because David was hiding out from his own son, Absalom, who had usurped the throne and wanted to kill him. (Intense

family drama can be a wilderness of its own.)

Seemingly out of nowhere, Shobi and his friends pop onto the scene with beds for sleeping, basins for washing, and food to rejuvenate them. They did not bring typical wilderness fare. No, they brought a feast of wheat, barley, beans and lentils, honey and curds, sheep and cheese. This was lavish hospitality in the middle of the wilderness.

GOD'S STORY OF HOSPITALITY

Why did the author take the time to put this into writing for all



the ages? In the middle of such a messy, dramatic story, it feels like a tangent—almost jarringly brief and unrelated. But in taking a wider view of the Bible, we can see that this is a recurring theme. Sustenance and comfort often appear unexpectedly, at just the right moment.

Joseph saves Egypt and Canaan from famine during a drought with wise crop management. Leaving behind slavery under the Egyptians, the Israelites are led into the wilderness for 40 years and sustained by manna, bread that comes from heaven. Elijah meets a widow and her son preparing to die of starvation, asks what he can do for her, and miraculously her jars of oil and flour do not run out, and they live. As we read on, eventually, we almost expect someone to show up with food and lead folks out of danger.

In the New Testament, we read about a time with its own challenges. People found themselves deep in the wilderness of life. They were ruled by a Roman emperor who made people worship him as a god, oppressed by

a deeply ingrained class system characterized by prejudice against foreigners and the marginalized, and often had only corrupt religious leaders to look to for help.

Jesus, who came into this world as a human being—humble and poor, willing to be subjected to all the mess of this world—appeared and offered a feast of his own. As Jesus broke bread with his disciples, submitted himself to the cross, and rose victorious over the grave, he became the bread that nourished the body and soul of all of his beloved community. This meal was the ultimate plot twist—the game changer that turned everything upside down.

FEEDING EACH OTHER

Shobi, the almost insignificant and forgettable host, is our St. Paul, Minnesota-based food truck ministry's namesake. Each week, staff and volunteers use rescued produce and ingredients bought with generous donations to lay a feast on the table. Out of what others give or throw away, we create lunches like savory burritos with a chipotle crema, creamy

chicken pesto pasta bake, ginger and soy chicken salad wraps, and crunchy coleslaw or green salad with raspberry vinaigrette. No feast is complete without a sweet treat, so for dessert we offer fresh fruit parfaits with our house granola, banana bread or a freshly baked chocolate chip cookie.

During the week, this feast rolls into neighborhoods full of beautiful people who know the mess and the struggle of the wilderness of life. This “from scratch” meal feeds bodies and souls and is available on a pay-as-you-can basis to anyone who comes to the food truck. Without the barrier of cost, this feast honors the Creator from whom it came, delivering dignity to those who come to the table. Entering the lives of God’s beloved who are hungry, weary and thirsty, this feast becomes the hand of God to renew and refresh.

The Shobi’s Table community grows each day. First-time customers become regulars. As faces become more familiar, we learn people’s names and stories. We know that when Stephanie pulls up in her silver minivan, we need to prepare an order for eight. We know when Adam walks up, it’s time to make up a bag of four to feed the grandchildren he watches during the day. We tell jokes, give hugs and share recipes. We are becoming a community of people who love and need one another.

A high point in the last year was the Gratitude Feast we held



Thanksgiving Day. We invited the whole community. It was a joy to see so many of our regulars there! I know we provided much more than a meal for the many who needed food that day. At the Gratitude Feast, we were part of a bigger family, offering a community table and a true refuge from the wilderness.

Once everyone had eaten, we gave folks an opportunity to share what they were grateful for. It was kind of chaotic, but really beautiful. Many shared their gratitude for Shobi’s Table. As I looked around, I also felt grateful. This was exactly the community I’d needed. I have seen Shobi’s Table become a necessary part of the ecology of hunger response in our neighborhood. I have also been amazed by the ways this ministry has fed my own hunger for connection and growth as a leader and person of faith. It’s not always easy to lead this ministry.

The staff, volunteers and community have been my constant teachers, supporters and friends. They have tended and supported me in the wilderness. I need Shobi’s Table as much as anyone else does.

Shobi has only three verses in the Bible. Yet the feast he prepared proclaimed the Good News of God’s love made manifest, sustaining all who come to the table. Each meal is shared with a stranger who becomes a friend—a neighbor who becomes family. This matters. This is love made edible. Our table may be called Shobi’s Table, but it is truly God’s Table. It belongs to the One who makes the Good News known to us now and forever. 🌿

In God's garden

What fig trees teach us about Advent.

BY HANNAH HAWKINSON

WEEK 1: IMPOSSIBLE POSSIBILITIES

📖 **Read:** Matthew 21:18-22; Mark 11:12-25

Happy New Year! The new church year begins with this season of Advent. It's quite a season for the beginning of our journey. During Advent, we wait and watch together, keeping our eyes, ears, hearts and minds open for God's presence and activity in the world. Together, we anticipate and get ready for the coming of our Lord Jesus, the one we call Emmanuel or "God with us." Advent is a season of planting and sowing; a time of expectation and excitement. During Advent, we wait and prepare for God's promises to be fulfilled in our midst.

As we journey through this devotional study, we will be led by a surprising group of teachers: fig trees. These trees and the fruit they bear have a great deal to teach us about what it means to watch, wait and prepare.

Figs are thought to be among the world's first cultivated fruits, thanks to fig trees' elaborate root systems and low-maintenance care. Native to the Mediterranean and the Middle East, fig trees thrive in warm and dry climates. They grow sturdy, rapid-spreading roots that can stretch out more than 50 feet, in search of water and nutrients to help them flourish and bear fruit. Fig trees are vivacious and spirited, with resilient roots. They can make a home alongside anything and everything, spreading like ivy across houses and fences, wrapping around rivers and ponds, even bursting through pipes.

This is what makes our first fig tree story in this season of Advent both remarkable and surprising. As the gospels of Matthew and Mark tell us, after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus encounters one of these resilient, sturdy fig trees along a road, and curses it. "May no fruit ever come from you again!" Jesus says (Matthew 21:19). If you're thinking this is odd, I guarantee you're not alone. We don't often think of Jesus as one who curses, do we? Perhaps the strangest part is that Jesus proclaims this grim fate for a healthy, thriving member of the fig tree family—a tree more resilient than almost any other. Then we're told that the fig tree not only remains fruitless, but withers away and dies altogether—either on the spot (according to Matthew) or in one short day (according to Mark).

And the lesson in all this? Jesus tells his disciples: "Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and if you do not doubt in your heart but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you" (Mark 11:22-23). Faith makes the impossible possible, Jesus says. Faith can move mountains, tame seas or wither even the liveliest fig tree. I'm reminded of Yoda's words in the movie, *Star Wars*, as he instructs young Luke Skywalker to lift an impossibly heavy, waterlogged starfighter: "Do or do not. There is no try."

We tend to think of faith as a "head" word, don't we? We tell ourselves that faith is a matter of doctrine and theology, and of believing the right things. Jesus uses the fig tree to teach us that faith is a "hands and feet" word. Our faith is fully realized when we put that faith into action in our broken, beautiful world. Even when the world seems broken beyond repair, even when we feel broken beyond repair, even when wholeness, justice and peace feel impossible, we wait for the fulfillment of God's promise to make all things new, knowing that God is present and active among us, calling us to love and serve our neighbors with our lives.

Share aloud or reflect:

1. What differences do you notice between Matthew and Mark in the telling of this story? What new possibilities and thoughts do these differences bring to mind?
2. This Advent, what are some ways that you can make faith a “hands and feet” word?

WEEK 2: BEARING FRUIT

📖 **Read:** Luke 13:1-9

When I was growing up, one of my favorite CDs was Simon and Garfunkel’s Greatest Hits. It included, “I Am a Rock,” where Paul Simon sings:

*I won’t disturb the slumber of feelings
that have died*

If I never loved, I never would have cried

I am a rock. I am an island

...And a rock feels no pain

And an island never cries.

As a kid, I didn’t really understand these words. But if I’m being honest, being a rock and an island doesn’t sound all that bad, right about now. On difficult days, there’s just so much (too much!) to care about. When faced with so much suffering, it seems easier to uproot ourselves and choose apathy. We may trick ourselves into believing that it’s better to become rocks that feel no pain or islands that never cry. Psychologists call this “compassion fatigue.”

And that’s where Jesus meets us this week—in our compassion fatigue and

our rootlessness. Jesus speaks to a crowd about two recent disasters in his community: a massacre in a nearby town and the fall of the Tower of Siloam. He tells those gathered that these tragedies don’t have a meaning or a purpose. He says that tragedies like these are simply part of what it means to be human in this broken, beautiful world. In the words of our Buddhist neighbors, “life is suffering” and we cannot escape that reality, no matter how hard we try.

But then, seeming to turn 180 degrees, Jesus tells us this strange little parable





about a fig tree that just won't bear fruit. It's on the brink of being cut down...until the gardener steps in, saying: "Let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."

When a fig tree starts growing, it's nearly impossible to stop it. But sometimes even the most vibrant fig trees stop bearing fruit. Almost always, the problem comes down to the root system. Either the roots aren't wide or deep enough, or they may have been broken or spread too thin, preventing the fig tree from flourishing. A fig tree can't bear fruit if it doesn't have solid roots.

And like the fig tree of Jesus' parable, we can't bear fruit if we don't have solid roots. When we isolate ourselves and turn away from the suffering of the world, we're like that fruitless fig tree. Yet try as we might, we're not rocks or islands. We belong to each other and to all the other trees in God's garden. That's the way in which we bear fruit. In Jesus' parable, God's judgment looms large at our failures: "Cut this tree down! Why should it be wasting the soil?"

Thanks be to God, God's grace is there too—always in conversation with God's judgment. Judgment isn't the end. We're never told the fate of that fig tree. Jesus leaves the ending of the parable as a mystery...a call...an invitation. Even a fig tree on the brink of death can be brought back to a flourishing, fruit-bearing life, with just a little tender care. God—our vineyard owner and our gardener—doesn't give up on us. God tends us, cares for us, and leads us back to our true home, back to who we are

and whose we are, back to God, back to one another. We're not rocks or islands. We're fig trees. We belong to the garden and to each other.

Share aloud or reflect:

3. Have you experienced compassion fatigue in the past? Are you experiencing it now? If so, how does it make you feel?
4. How can you and other members of your congregation and/or Bible study group nurture and tend one another's roots? What support do you need? What support can you offer?

WEEK 3: "I SAW YOU"

 **Read:** John 1:43-51

As we journey through our third week of Advent, we find ourselves sitting with Nathanael in the shade of a fig tree, waiting and watching for God. Like Nathanael, we might be a little skeptical when God arrives in unexpected places, in unexpected ways, through unexpected people. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" we ask. "Can anything good come out of that place? Can anything good come from those people?"

Sure enough, God is present and active.

Alongside Nathanael, we learn not only how surprising God's work in the world is—but that all along God has been at work in our midst. "I saw you," Jesus says to Nathanael and us. "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you."

The fig tree may seem like an unimportant detail. It is not. The fig tree is at the center of this story. Together, we've learned some of the physical attributes of fig trees and what makes them so remarkable: their vibrant growth, resilience and zest for life, even in the most precarious situations. But did you know that fig trees are also an important

symbol in the Bible for God's relationship with God's people?

For example, after eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve sewed fig leaves together in their shame to make clothes for themselves (Genesis 3:7). After the Israelites escape from Egypt, during their long journey through the wilderness, they complain that there are no figs for them to enjoy. Amid their wandering, it feels like God's sustaining love is far from them (Numbers 20:5). But Moses reminds them of God's holy promise to lead them to the land of milk and honey—"a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates" (Deuteronomy 8:8, emphasis mine). During the reign of the good King Solomon, we are told that this promise was fulfilled, and that God's people lived "under their vines and fig trees" (1 Kings 4:25). Later on, when God's relationship with God's people is strained nearly to the point of breaking, the people of God in exile are described as a withering fig tree (Jeremiah 8:13). But as the prophets Joel and Micah proclaim, God is faithful. God will heal God's people and nurture that withering fig tree back to flourishing life (Joel 2:22, Micah 4:4).

Let these stories and images surround you, as you encounter Nathanael's story. Nathanael isn't sitting under just any tree. He is sitting under a fig tree. That is no accident. This biblical imagery reminds us that Nathanael (like all of our human family) is part of God's holy garden, and someone God created and planted. God has known Nathanael and us from seed and sapling. God will continue to lovingly tend us forever, in withering times when the harvest is fruitless, and in joyful times when life flourishes.

We give thanks for God our gardener and for our lives as fig trees in God's holy garden. Just as God knows and calls Nathanael, God knows and calls us to life in abundance. Sometimes surprising, but more expansive than we can possibly imagine, God's garden is a place where we are seen and



known, from the very beginning. God will continue to journey with us and tend us throughout our lives.

Share aloud or reflect:

7. Have you been surprised, like Nathanael, by God’s work in the world? How so?
8. How do we sit under fig trees, too, in our time? How does sitting under the fig trees help us not to miss seeing the holy reminders of God’s work in the world?

WEEK 4: LEARN ITS LESSON

■ **Read:** Mark 13:24–37; Luke 21:25–36

“Be alert at all times” (Luke 21:36).

“And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake” (Mark 13:37).

As the birth of our Lord Jesus draws closer with each new day, Jesus’s message is clear: Keep awake. Remain alert. Be ready for anything. As any good Scout would say, “Be prepared.”

Nowhere, Jesus tells us, will we learn this lesson better than from—you guessed it!—fig trees! Fig trees are resilient, powerful, lively symbols of God’s relationship with God’s people. In the past week, we’ve learned a lot from fig trees. We’ve learned that we are called to believe in impossible possibilities. We are to trust in God, not just in our hearts and minds, but with our whole selves and our whole lives. We’ve learned that we are planted in God’s holy garden, and that we belong to our gardener and to one another. We’ve also seen that God’s garden is bigger and more inclusive than we could possibly imagine. We have heard that God, our gardener, will never abandon us.

Today, we learn one more critical lesson: We are called, not simply to exist, but to flourish and to bear fruit. Jesus explains: “From the fig tree learn its lesson: As soon as its branch becomes tender and

puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that [God] is near, at the very gates” (Mark 13:28-29). Jesus tells us that this is what it means to keep awake, remain alert and be prepared: We are to bear fruit.

In these final days of Advent, we wait, watch and prepare for Jesus’ coming. This is not a passive vocation, but an active and proactive one. As we wait, we are to bear the fruit of love and justice and peace and joy in our broken, beautiful world. When we do this, we discover that God has been working all around us and is even nearer to us than we thought was possible. Jesus says God is “at the very gates.”

As fig trees in God’s holy garden, we wait for Jesus’s coming at Christmas, but we also wait for Jesus’s return to our broken, beautiful world, to set all things right and make all things new. This week, Jesus uses lots of apocalyptic imagery to describe his eventual return—darkening suns and moons, falling stars, the heavens themselves shaking, the triumphal return of the Son of Man in clouds, and angels sent on holy missions to the ends of the earth. It’s overwhelming, and even a little scary. Yet in the face of it all, Jesus tells us to learn from the fig trees in our midst—to keep bearing fruit, remain vigilant and prepare for his coming.

CLOSING ACTIVITIES

O God, our gardener, as we prepare to celebrate Christmas, may we rejoice in the ways you have already come among us! May we continue to keep awake and bear fruit as we anticipate Jesus’s return to our broken, beautiful world, when all things will be made new. May we learn from the fig trees in our midst, this Advent and always. Amen. 🌿





Christmas at Kigiqtaq

An Alaskan community celebrates
with fellowship, food and fun

BY ROBEN ITCHOAK

MY COMMUNITY HAS THE BEST

Christmas celebration, beginning with the school's Christmas program. Sometimes the only Christmas trees people in our community experience are at school (until winter break starts) and at church.

At the school, we spend the evening listening as children, dressed in their best clothes, sing songs they've practiced with their teachers. After the program, there is a visit with Santa and a gift of candy canes, followed by cookies.

A few days later, the festivities continue with Christmas Eve and Christmas Day worship services. We do not always have a pastor available for worship services, so our church council plans and prepares the Christmas Eve program. This event includes children from preschool to middle school. They recite a "piece" or verses from poems and stories. They share the story of Jesus' birth with us. Everyone in the community is invited to place gifts under the tree for friends and family. The gifts are distributed at the end of the program. We often give and receive greeting cards, baked goods, and sweet or savory treats before heading home.

CHRISTMAS FEAST

On Christmas Day, we have a modest morning worship service. After worship, an announcement is made with the time that reindeer or caribou meat can be picked up at the school for our community feast.

People pick up bags that include all the ingredients necessary to make a pot of caribou or reindeer soup for the Christmas meal. Each bag includes meat that has been cut into a family serving pack, half a cup of rice or elbow macaroni, a can of stewed tomatoes, tomato paste, and sometimes a can of broth. Usually, the Tribal Council arranges for hunters to get caribou for distribution. However, due to unpredictable weather and ice conditions, they may arrange with a neighboring community to share reindeer from one of their semi-domestic herds.

Living in an extremely remote, rural Alaskan community means that we do not have a fully stocked grocery store. We have a small store that cannot always keep up with demand. Pantry staples, such as onions, rice, pasta, and canned vegetables, are not always accessible. So the food that the Tribe provides is a special, much-appreciated gift.

After cooking the soup, families return to the school gym around 6 p.m., each bringing their pot of soup, bowls, spoons, salt and pepper, and hot sauce. For community members who are unable to cook, the Tribal Council has a group of bachelors who cook two to four 15-gallon pots of soup for anyone to enjoy! The Tribe sets up tables and chairs for every family, and provides bread, butter, peanut butter, jam, and paper towels. Families that are able to do so, will bring buckets of



cooked greens, frozen berries or large bowls of agutuk (a dessert made with berries, reindeer tallow, seal oil and sometimes sugar). Others will bake rolls to share. Besides the wonderful opportunity to spend time with fellow community members, it is fun to visit other tables to taste their soups. It's also a real treat to taste the traditional desserts that women walk around serving. Everyone is welcome—whether they have cooked or not. Although there are family tables, these tables are open for anyone to join. After the feast, the gym is cleared as we prepare for

a community basketball game. That kicks off a full week of games—including traditional games.

GAME TIME

The day after Christmas, our community follows a game schedule. It includes fun and silly games for men and women like pass the orange, mukluk scramble, “men who don't play basketball,” snowshoe races, and foot races for all ages.

The real heart of these community games are the men's traditional games. Every man in attendance is encouraged to participate in these games, which have been passed down, generation to generation, to teach and practice the essential skills, strength and endurance necessary for Arctic survival. Games include: a complex, one-on-one, rawhide tug of war with a loop of hide that is less than 12 inches in diameter; the pinky finger pull, which tests strength and pain endurance; leg wrestling; wrists carry, where competitors suspend themselves by clenching one wrist around a stick (similar to a broomstick) while being carried around the gym; and other challenging, important events.

Every evening, there is an award ceremony for the competitive games, foot races, and snowshoe races. Competitors are awarded prizes and presented

with gifts from the Tribe and the entire community.

When the Tribal Council announces the winners, they provide little ribbons that are pinned on by the competitors' loved ones. Then the winners are presented with a 30-gallon trash bag that may be filled with household necessities like a roll of toilet paper, paper towels, soap, a can of soup, a can of pop, and a piece of clothing that was donated, collected and sorted by other community members.

Next, the competitors get a “hip, hip, hip, hooray” and applause, before being flooded with gifts from the community. While the competitors hold their 30-gallon bags open, community members descend from the bleachers to place additional practical gifts into the trash-turned-gift-bags. Gifts range from candy canes and juice boxes to homemade cookies, treats, cocoa, socks, washcloths or other useful items. Wrapping up each evening is a community basketball game. At the end of the week, on New Year's Day, there is a men's football game on the ice. The losing team serves cookies, coffee or punch to community members sitting in the school bleachers. Christmas at Kigiqtaq is truly spectacular. 🌿



A sacred season

Advent disciplines
prepare us for Christ's
coming

BY LINDA POST BUSHKOFKY

LONG AGO, I MADE PEACE with the notion that for most Americans, Christmas passes as a secular holiday, not a sacred holy day. That's why decorated trees and holiday music appear in October, Santa brings up the rear of many Thanksgiving Day parades, and people count the 12 days of Christmas as leading up to, not following, December 25. If that's

what others want, who am I to disagree?

I still observe the four weeks of Advent, preparing for Jesus' second coming as well as remembering Jesus' birth. The quiet, contemplative focus on Advent appeals far more to me than the consumer frenzy that marks a secular Christmas.

Observing Advent is what Christians do.

If you're like me, you might mark the days of Advent with greater intentionality, focusing your prayers, lighting candles on an Advent wreath, reading special devotions. Perhaps you have an Advent calendar, too, that offers up a Bible verse, a daily sweet or a small ornament.

Little is demanded of us if our primary Advent focus is on remembering Jesus' birth. Advent does not call for idle waiting, watching and wondering. No, Advent is a time for active preparation for the coming of the reign of God.

We make efforts to realign ourselves with God. We focus more intently on prayer, devotion and service. Each Sunday, we gather around Word and Sacrament, experiencing anew the breaking in of the reign of God. Advent makes us look for God – in our communities, in people around us, in all creation. We are to see and acknowledge the image of God in all we encounter. We are learning our lines, rehearsing our moves, practicing the interactions, so

that when Christ comes again, we will be ready to live fully into the reign of God.

ADVENT LECTONARY

We play a role in birthing that new creation. Throughout the Advent lectionary, we are reminded of this.

This year, on the first Sunday in Advent, we encounter Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, calling Jesus' followers to "increase and abound in love for one another and for all..." (1 Thessalonians 3:12). By identifying and meeting needs in our communities, we are doing just that: increasing and abounding in love for one another and for all.

On the second Sunday in Advent, we hear Paul's words to the Philippians: "And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best..." (Philippians 1: 9-10) Because we know what God calls us to do for our neighbors and all creation, we live out that just love, allowing it to overflow in our lives.

If we're still not sure of what we're being called to do, on the third Sunday in Advent this year, John makes it clear. "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise" (Luke 3:11).

Mary caps it all off on the fourth Sunday in Advent when, in her song of praise, she describes the reign of God to which we all

aspire. The proud and the powerful are not in charge, and the rich are sent away empty. The lowly are lifted up, understood as equal citizens in the new creation. The hungry are filled with good things (Luke 1:46-55).

ADVENT DISCIPLINES

What will you do this Advent to bring about the reign of God? Here are some suggestions. Adapt them for your own context. Be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, which may take you in new directions. Reflect each evening on how you served God that day. Perhaps you'll want to keep a journal during this holy season. While we practice these disciplines, may we realize our work is not limited to Advent. We can continue the sacred work of bringing about the reign of God long after the season ends.

DECEMBER 1: Fast from social media (or anything else that distracts you from God) for the season of Advent.

DECEMBER 2: It's Cyber Monday. Locate a wish list for a local non-profit agency and purchase items on that list.

DECEMBER 3: It's Giving Tuesday. Give to Women of the ELCA's Katie's Fund (welca.org/donate), so that future generations will have their ministries supported.

December 4: Prepare care packages for college students and

those in the military. Hold them in prayer, especially those who will be separated from family during the holidays.

December 5: Contact the chaplain of your local prison, asking for ways to share the Christmas message with those who are incarcerated. Enlist others to help make Christmas cards for those involved in the criminal justice system.

DECEMBER 6: It's St. Nicholas Day. Research your own community to learn why and where poverty exists. Follow Nicholas's lead and donate to an agency supporting those living in poverty.

DECEMBER 7: Provide seeds, suet and fruits for your local birds. Invite a young person to join you, introducing them to caring for creation in this way.

DECEMBER 8: Shop ELCA Good Gifts (goodgifts.elca.org) for those on your Christmas list.

DECEMBER 9: Focus on eating simpler, lighter meals. Explore vegan options, minimizing your impact on the environment.

DECEMBER 10: After each encounter today, pause to pray for the person you've met or spent time with. Or jot their names down and include them in your bedtime prayers.

DECEMBER 10: Join the Hope for

the Holidays program of Global Refuge (formerly Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service). Go to globalrefuge.com/hope to learn how you can share holiday hope and joy with immigrant families through greeting cards.

DECEMBER 12: Collect non-perishable food items and donate them to your congregation's or community's food pantry. Commit to doing this weekly.

DECEMBER 13: It's St. Lucia's Day. Get creative and think of ways you can bring the light of Christ to those in your community.

DECEMBER 14: Reach out to those who are homebound in your congregation. When visiting, spend time listening to them and sharing a snack that you bring. Explore this ministry of presence.

DECEMBER 15: Volunteer with a local conservation or nature group, learning how to care for God's creation in your community.

DECEMBER 16: Dig into your closet, giving away anything you haven't worn yet in 2024.

DECEMBER 17: Knit or crochet hats, scarves and mittens for a local agency helping those who are experiencing housing insecurity.

DECEMBER 18: Contact your local animal shelter to learn about its needs. Provide food, volunteer to

walk the dogs or fundraise for the shelter.

DECEMBER 19: Reach out to one or two people you know who are grieving. Visit with them, bringing tea and cookies. Listen to their stories. Pray with them.

DECEMBER 20: It's the Winter Solstice and the anniversary of the death of Katharina von Bora Luther. Make a gift to Women of the ELCA's Katie's Fund (welca.org/donate), an endowment that supports leadership development, among other things.

DECEMBER 21: Begin planning to assemble care kits for Lutheran World Relief (lwr.org/kits) during Lent 2025.

DECEMBER 22: What are the signs of women's oppression in your community? Who can you partner with to bring about freedom for all?

DECEMBER 23: Work with a local feeding group to provide meals on Christmas Day. 🌿

Advent and Christmas traditions

Gather readers share
faith-filled ways to celebrate.



ADVENT NATIVITY TOUR

The “Advent Tour of Nativities” is a growing tradition at Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer in Watertown, South Dakota. Each year, we invite congregation members to bring their own Nativity scenes to be set up for display in our church’s Great Hall. Each one is accompanied by a short-written description of the origin of that particular Nativity scene.

No matter if the Holy Family is made of hand-carved olive wood from the Holy Land—or hand-built with LEGO bricks—the message conveyed is ultimately the same: Jesus the Savior was born for us all!

Our Advent Tour of Nativities is open for viewing starting on the Friday after Thanksgiving through the following Monday. This past year, we featured more than 100 unique Nativity scenes from around the world.

Twila Schmitt

Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer
Watertown, South Dakota

THE ANGEL TREE

Just as families have holiday traditions, so do our places of worship. Here at St. Paul’s Lutheran Church in Aberdeen, Maryland, we have an Angel Tree at Christmas time. The “Angel Tree” is a highlight at our church. In November, people begin asking how soon the Angel Tree will go up. This tradition started sometime in the mid-1980s. In

the beginning, the event was sponsored by our youth ministry, under the guidance of Assistant Pastor Robert Stevens. We would sponsor three families through various social service organizations. Pastor Bob would contact the families to find out their needs and wants. Parents would always say they wanted nothing for themselves, just presents for their children. We would gently remind them that CHRIST-mas is for everyone. They would receive gifts too.

The event has evolved over the years. A volunteer chair now oversees the program since Pastor Bob now serves another church. The outreach ministry (not the youth ministry) now sponsors this event. Gifts are now placed wrapped (instead of unwrapped) under the tree in the narthex, with the gift tag attached. (We still protect the identities of the families by a coding system, just in case children in the congregation go to school with any of the Angel Tree/Christmas family children. We still switch out the coded tag, replacing it with a name tag on the day of delivery.)

The greatest change is that we have increased from serving three families to as many as nine families. Sometimes we also deliver groceries with the gifts. While we are blessing others, we in turn are being blessed in the spirit of giving!

E. Fuentes

St. Paul Lutheran Church
Aberdeen, Maryland

SYMBOLS OF CHRIST’S BIRTH

Christmas has always been my favorite holiday, as evidenced by the nativity scenes I display in my home all year. Christmas in our home has always been about the joyous season of Christ’s birth and the beautiful story that surrounds it. Very few overt secular Christmas symbols are displayed in our home during this sacred time.

Preparation for Christmas begins the day after Thanksgiving, when many are out shopping for “deals.” I climb up to the storage loft in the garage and hand down the bins containing our Christmas decorations. My daughter and I sort through them to see what we will need this year for our predetermined “decoration theme.” Although it varies year to year, it always centers on Christ’s birth and the joy and hope that special event brought into the world.

As we look through the decorations, we reminisce about where and when we got them, and even how old some of them are. It takes most of the day. When the decorations are up and all the messiness has been cleared away, we reflect on the birth of that one child and the effect he had on this world. And we feel blessed.

Ruby Kelley

Santa Rosa County, Florida

CIRCLE SPONSORS CONCERT

For about eight years, on the first Monday in December, the Martha Circle of Advent Lutheran Church in Uniontown, Ohio, has sponsored a concert with music and songs by the Lake High School Choir. After the performance, those attending sing Christmas carols. A social hour follows with Christmas cookies and hot cider punch.

Nancy Roberts

Advent Lutheran Church
Uniontown, Ohio

FAMILY FAITH TRADITIONS

My name is Grace. I was born in Bethlehem, Palestine. Reflecting on memorable Christmas traditions, I get emotional (in a good way). Both my parents are deceased, but their legacy lives on in their seven children and 24 grandchildren. On Christmas Day, we would always get together at my parents' house in Philadelphia. Due to the high number of people in our family, we'd exchange names and do a "Secret Santa" every year. We enjoyed a lavish potluck dinner before sitting down in the living room to read the Christmas story from the Bible. Mom and Dad would joyfully lead us in singing beautiful Christmas carols in both English and Arabic. We then divided the Twelve Days of Christmas song between the families. We sang and laughed until we cried. My mom didn't participate in the secret gift

exchange, so my siblings and I always pooled our money so she could buy something she loved. She always found a less fortunate person or family to gift it to, making their Christmas a little nicer. This was (and remains) my favorite Christmas tradition—one that I hope my children will continue as well.

Grace Kuttub El-Yateem

St. Michael Lutheran Church
Wellington, Florida

COOKIES AND CAROLS

We begin the season of Advent with a fun Cookie Exchange and Social. Women from the Hill Country Conference of the ELCA are invited to join us for an afternoon of worship, singing carols, and playing Christmas Bingo. We invite everyone to bring a "White Elephant" prize. Those who want to participate in the cookie exchange go home with a selection of cookies. As the number of our WELCA units has gotten smaller, we've gotten to know our neighbors better.

Zion Lutheran Church WELCA

Fredericksburg, Texas

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, JESUS

Borrowing from a church tradition I remember from when I was a kid, my son Colin and I make "Happy Birthday, Jesus" cupcakes. Colin, now 7, has been my year-round baking buddy since he

was a toddler. Because we share whatever we make with neighbors, friends, family and/or his teachers, baking has become one of his favorite ways to give. Today, he's a pro mixer, egg-cracker and sprinkles manager.

We bake our "Happy Birthday, Jesus" cupcakes on Christmas Eve or the day before. Usually, they are lemon with lemon buttercream—Colin's favorite. Some of the batch we take to church for friends to enjoy after the 4 p.m. family service; the rest we share at a joyful Christmas Eve dinner with my husband, parents and sister. Colin leads us all in singing Happy Birthday to Jesus after we dim the room lights and light the candles.

I love knowing that one of the things that made Christmas memorable for me as a child—and that impressed upon me Jesus's humanity and the fact that he was once a kid, just as I was—is something that my own son now will remember as one of our Christmas traditions.

Christy LaFave Grace

Naperville, IL 🌿

Just Love in turbulent times

BY JENNIFER HOCKENBERY

GOOGLE THE PHRASE, “BETTER TOGETHER,” and you’ll find it’s become a popular marketing tool. It’s used as a motto for summer camps, marriage counselors, health care organizations and even political campaigns. It’s popular because it’s true.

In 2008, I attended an ELCA conference where women clergy and scholars talked about justice for women. One speaker, Dr. Marit Trelstad of Pacific Lutheran University, gave a speech that changed my entire worldview. When we get to the most basic part of ourselves, Trelstad explained, “it’s relationship all the way down.” We are part of an inter-related web of organisms that breathe in and out the same air, drink and pass the same water, think and speak the same words, use and recreate the same ideas.

What does this mean? It means that my successful self has been created, nurtured and nourished by my relationships. Everything I do affects those in relationship with me. Yet the myth of self-reliance can keep us from acting and living in ways that allow us to flourish.

Let me give an example. Lynne Twist, author of *The Soul of Money*, writes about a woman named Gertrude who told her that “money is a lot like water.” We all need water. We all share the same water. But at times, some of us have a lot more of it stored up than others. When water sits in storage, it becomes stagnant. It loses its use, its place in the ecosystem, and its purity. Water needs to flow for all the Earth to be nourished and for each of us to have life. Likewise, when money is hoarded, Twist explains, the whole economic system is less healthy. Money needs to flow to be useful.



Twist urges us to find ways to channel our money into organizations that help implement our values. She suggests remembering that our money came from others. We have it for a little while before it flows to others again—sometimes to others who sell us things we need, sometimes to others who need things our money can buy. Even in a bank account, our money is quickly loaned out to others. Bankers know that hoarded money does not grow. Money only has value in its use.

Being part of WELCA is acknowledging being part of a WE. Our faith is nourished by others who say “We believe.” We are stronger because of sisters who teach us, care for us and listen to us. We are grateful that our monies provide: clean water in dry lands, scholarships for bright young women and new seminarians, new farm equipment to increase the produce of those who previously farmed by hand, and administration and support for this organization that does so much. This holiday season, I will remember that:

- I am nourished by faith shared with me in relationships.
- It is not my ideas that I created that guide me, but ideas discovered in conversation.
- It is not my money in my pocket that nourishes me, but a web of relationships that allows the flow of money I use to nourish myself and my family.
- I am called to direct some of that money back into those relationships, so they and I will be sustained into the future.
- We are better together, because we are all in this together. 🌿

Comfort now your people

BY JULIA SEYMOUR

WE ENTER THE MONTHS IN OUR CHURCH LIFE when our cry goes up to you, “Come, Lord Jesus.” This refrain, that lives in our hearts throughout the year, rises to our lips during Advent. We sing: “Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free.” (ELW 254)

Amid making our lists—lists of things to do and things to acquire; lists of stuff to clean, to get rid of, to begin or to stop—we also hear and sing the prophet’s urging. “Comfort, comfort now my people; tell of peace!” so says our God.” (ELW 256) Which leads to a question: Who is receiving comfort in this season? Who is giving it?

In the northern hemisphere, these months of reduced daylight are packed with tensions. We remember our faithful departed. We wait for election returns. Holy Scripture urges us to prepare. So do the many advertisers. Songs about peace and joy fill our ears, while stories of war, injustice and grief fill our news and our conversations. Our celebrations are tinged with pain, and we ache in the midst of merriment. Our hearts strain, O God, to have that moment of stillness you granted to Elijah in the midst of sound and fury (1 Kings 19:12).

With a shielded moment of holy rest in our hearts and minds, perhaps we can more fully be both the comforters and the comforted. Through the power of your Holy Spirit, grant us these moments. Reveal the presence of Emmanuel—God

with us—in clear, tangible ways. Help all who feel overwhelmed to relax our shoulders, breathe deeply, and once again, hear the angels sing your good news to all people. Grant that we can hear it and believe it.

Generous God of grace, grant us the fullness of hope, peace, joy and love this Advent. Guide us to speak and live in a way that expresses true hope in your ongoing work of reconciliation and healing in this life, as well as the life to come. Give us the strength to work for peace in our homes, in our faith communities and across the world.

I long for the power of eternal joy within my heart and mind. Such a treasure will sustain me, providing a firm foundation through the difficulties of this season and this life.

The joy that comes from you, deeper than momentary happiness, offers an abiding awareness of your presence and providence in all situations. Make me deeply aware that your arms of love surround and hold me. Help me to see those same arms around others. I want to perceive them as recipients of the same overflowing grace and eternal love that I receive, so I may act accordingly toward them.

O Lord, we know that your day is near. We wait with those who journey through the valley of the shadow. We wait to hail the Son of righteousness—risen with healing in his wings (ELW 270). Support us, Holy Parent of all, so we may gather with all the world to adore in word and in deed, Christ the Lord. Amen. 🌿






Global Refuge

formerly known as
Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service

Emilie Binja is a former refugee from Democratic Republic of Congo who now serves as a Lutheran pastor in Oregon.



“I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

-Matthew 25:35

For 85 years, Global Refuge has helped refugees and immigrants seeking safety, support, and a share in the American dream.

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Growing Katie's Fund for the next 100 years

The campaign to raise \$1 million began in June 2022.

The campaign will end on June 13, 2025 (the 500th anniversary of the wedding of Katharina von Bora and Martin Luther).

We are halfway to our goal, and making a final push to raise the remaining \$500,000!

Generation after generation stands in awe of your work; each one tells stories of your mighty acts. Psalm 145:4 (MSG)