

December 2023



From the Bishop:

We were in a car heading to the Sahara Desert. The weather was changing. I looked out the window and, seeing a dark mass in the distance, said to the driver, "Do you know what a tornado is?" He didn't respond. But in a few short moments, we skidded to a stop on the side of the road. There was no visibility, wind was swirling around us. Rain and sand and rocks were pelting the car. And then the car windows broke from the pressure of the storm. We were suddenly being blown around and all of us in the car were showered with rain and sand and rocks and glass. We huddled in our seats, shocked by the ferociousness of the weather around us and fearful of what was happening.

When I look at our world right now, I confess I feel much the same as I did on that day - like I'm huddling in my seat, shocked by the ferociousness of the wind and fearful of what is happening.

In our world, the climate continues to change and people and the very earth are suffering. We continue to harm this planet that God created for us and for all creatures and plants.

In our Holy Land, as I write this in the middle of November, we hear of Palestinian Christian families fleeing, children crying, hunger and desperation, churches being bombed and hospitals being attacked. In our Holy Land, we hear of violence against the Jewish people, kidnapping of children and old people, and the threat of death.

In our country, there are those who are conflating Christianity with patriotism, those who are moving against Democracy and towards authoritarianism, gun violence continues unabated, legislators refuse to do their work and instead look after their own best interests. There is continued racism in our institutions, polarization, refusal to listen to each other, and more.

In the ELCA, we forget that we are gathering for the sake of Jesus and for those desperate to hear God's Word of forgiveness, love, and grace. We try to prop up institutional ideas rather than living into the Spirit of Christ. We would rather live in the "what once was" rather than the advent of something beyond our imaginations (but not God's).

Truly, the storms seem strong and fierce.

And yet ... and yet ...

In this time, when we not only are living in these swirling squalls, we are called, as people of faith, to remember and trust how God has worked, and continues to work, in this world. We are called to tell the stories of God's faithfulness again. For in the beginning, through God's Word, chaos became the heavens and the earth. Later, Moses saw God in fire. In the story of Job, when Job questioned God's faithfulness, God replied, referring to the stars, 'Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades, or loose the cords of Orion?' When Abraham fought the storm of sacrificing his son, God brought through the darkness a ram. When a country was occupied by Rome, power was held by a few, voices were silenced, and hope seemed fleeting, a young girl became pregnant and sang. A young couple sought shelter far from home.

In a night of storms, one star shone bright. In a world of desolation, a baby's cry was heard.

In this stormy time, in this time of deep shadows and unknowns, in this time of memory and hope, in this Advent and Christmas time, together we lift our voices in and sing:

*O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light;
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*

*O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;
cast out our sin and enter in; be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels, the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!*

Dear Beloveds of God, I wish you Advent and Christmas blessings and hope.

+ Bishop Shelley Bryan Wee / bishop@lutheransnw.org



From the VEEP

“Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you; I will help you.” Isaiah 41:10

I was discussing world events with a friend recently and she remarked that she keeps thinking things can't get any worse, and then the world proves her wrong. Terrorism, war, mass shootings, unparalleled storms, a pandemic that just won't die; everywhere we turn, we are confronted with terrible tidings. Hatred and anger and violence and injustice seem to rule the day. It is no wonder, then, that every report the synod council receives from Bishop Shelley begins with concerns over the anxiety and fear that appear to be seeping into so many aspects of personal and congregational lives. How can we break this downward spiral? How do we stop being afraid? How do we stop doomscrolling?

I suggest we begin love-scrolling instead. God reminds us many times throughout scripture not to fear and we are told, indeed, that that “there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.” (1 John 4:18) Therefore, when I am anxious or afraid, I look for love. I see love in the gentle touch of a parent wiping away a child's tears. I see it in friends bringing meals to someone in crisis. I see it in teachers bringing snacks to class to ensure no student has to learn on an empty stomach. I see it in the hands that knit and crochet and sew warm blankets, hats, and scarves for those who are unhoused in bad weather. I see it in the neighbor who mows the lawn of the elderly couple next door. I see it in a grandchild patiently explaining how to get the Zoom working for the umpteenth time. I see it in the people who regularly give blood. I see it in those risking life and limb to bring humanitarian aid to war zones. I see it in the spouse who learns to make gluten/dairy/egg free chicken and dumplings for their food sensitive partner. I see it in the great-grandparent who moves across the country for six months to help with childcare. I see it in all those who give of their time and talents to serve others. Where do you see love?

During the season of Advent, we prepare to celebrate the fact that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (John 3:16). That makes it the perfect time to be on the lookout for that perfect love that casts out fear. After all, in the words of poet Christina Rossetti:

Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, love divine;
Love was born at Christmas,
Star and angels gave the sign.

Jesus, then, is “love incarnate, love divine.” What love could be more perfect than that? May your Advent season be blessed with love-scrolling and tidings of great joy.

Here's what the Synod Council and/or I have been up to in November:

- Synod Council meet on November 18, 2023. We assisted Mission to Seafarers with the preparation of ditty bags and learned more about this synod supported ministry.
- Coaching: I finished the ELCA Segment One Basic Skills Coach Training.
- I planned and facilitated the monthly ELCA-wide Synod VP Zoom. November's main topic was best practices for synod personnel policies.
- I participated in the Spiritual Sovereignty course through the LiVE project, as well as attending a few of the weekly bible studies.

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