

From the Bishop:**December 2025**

Have you ever paused to consider how the Christmas story includes the very sordid tale of an engaged young woman who, to all appearances, was unfaithful to her fiancé? While we often sing about the hope and joy of this child (we know who this child is after all!), those in the middle of it all, heartache abounded. Joseph wondered who the father of this child truly was. Mary's parents feared for her reputation and her future. And Mary? Mary did not walk through any of this untouched by pain. What a miserable, tangled mess. Poor Joseph. Poor Mary. And what a precarious, almost unthinkable situation for God to choose to be the way of coming into the world.

And perhaps this is why we love this story so deeply. Because God coming to the world as a baby, God becoming flesh – incarnate – becoming human, was never meant to only be miraculous and beautiful and amazing. It was never merely a night where angels sang and shepherds worshiped. It was never simply about a couple who accepted and embraced this new thing without thought or questions or fear.

No. In this story of incarnation we are given truth. The truth that life is sometimes difficult, sometimes hard. The truth that in this world there is confusion and fear and brokenness and messiness. Though no angel has come to interrupt our lives with such extraordinary news, every one of us knows frustration and grief and those heavy, unspoken things that keep us awake at night. And so, this story is not only something we know – it's a story that knows us.

If you have a Bible handy (or a Bible app), I invite you to open it up to Matthew 1 and read the genealogy listed there. At first glance, it reads like a list of heroes. But if we scratch the surface, there is a more complicated truth of who these people were. Abraham nearly sacrificed his son. Jacob cheated his brother out of his birthright. David arranged a man's murder to prevent a scandal. And then there's all those women listed – Bathsheba, Rahab, Ruth – whose stories, or at least the way they have been remembered, are filled with struggle, tragedy, or suspicion.

But here's the thing. We know that God was with every one of those men and women, as broken as they were, as much fear or anxiety they might have had, as messy as their lives were, as complicated as the world was. God worked through their lives in the midst of it all. We know that Abraham's son Isaac was not sacrificed, a ram was provided. Rahab saved God's people. Ruth became the ancestor of kings. And above all these stories, we have the Christmas story – truly the whole Jesus story.

We know, through all these stories, that God comes and is incarnate in the lives of messy, complicated people. We know that the Spirit is always moving through broken places to bring wholeness and new life. Always, always God comes – even when all seems hopeless or chaotic.

So, perhaps now, in this time, when so much seems to be fraught and unknown, so much seems to be uncertain or just plain bad, when we aren't sure what is next or what choice is best, we hear the Christmas story anew. And, in hearing it, may we trust that God is here, always, in our stories and in our lives.

Today we live in expectation. Today, we hope and trust, even in our messiness, that God comes to us, holds us, and loves us. Today we hold onto the promises that God is with us – incarnate in Jesus – and together we have the promise of a world made new through Jesus Christ, bringing true peace to this world. And, until then, we pray, come, Lord Jesus, come!

Blessed Advent and Christmas,
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From the VEEP:

Two days before Halloween, while walking through my neighborhood, I saw a house fully decorated, not for that holiday, but for Christmas. When I went to the store to buy trick-or-treat candy the last week of October, it was already crowded out, not by Thanksgiving decor, but Christmas ornaments. I don't know what it is that makes us want to rush the seasons like this. It feels like once we get to October, it is a downhill race to the Christmas finish line. At least that is how it is in the secular world. In the church world, though, we have a whole season in the liturgical calendar to slow down and ponder and prepare. Welcome to Advent!

Advent is a time to stop and consider the miracle of the birth of Jesus. The miracle is not just that he was born to a virgin, but that he is born at all. This is God coming to us by becoming like us. Jesus is begotten, not made. He isn't some creation from clay into which the Holy Spirit breathed life, but rather a real human being. Jesus is a baby born, not in a palace, but a stable because there is no room for him at the inn. A child whose life is threatened by the king and whose family must take refuge in another country to protect him. Jesus begins life in the margins, not at center stage. This is what our lessons during Advent point us toward - the miracle of God with us - a very present help in time of trouble.

As I write this, the world is feeling chaotic. The government shutdown appears to have no end. SNAP benefits are on the chopping block, health care costs are skyrocketing, our immigrant neighbors are being harassed in the street. Those of us who know we are called to feed the hungry, heal the sick, and welcome the stranger are finding it harder and harder to do so. How do we keep on living as followers of Christ in such trying times? First, as the angel says to Mary, do not be afraid. Fear can prevent us from acting, but if we are not afraid many things are possible. In my neighborhood, one person dared to open her garage to create a free food pantry. Many others started dropping off donations. Her generosity has inspired the rest of us to step up and make sure our neighbors are nourished. I don't know her religious persuasion, but whether she knows it or not, she is God's presence in our neighborhood.

Jesus tells us that how we treat one another is a reflection of how we treat him: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Matthew 25:40). God's work, our hands is more than a motto for the church, it is the role we are called to as the body of Christ. In these turbulent times, we must strive to be the voice that calms the storm, the hands that lift the weary, the arms that welcome the outcast, the feet that stand with the oppressed, and the tongues that publicly and prophetically declare what faith in Jesus truly means and requires of us. During Advent, we are reminded that God not only chose to come to us in human form, but also to be born into a family on the margins. So, let's not be in a rush to get our Christmas *presents* and instead take the time to appreciate God's *presence*. O Come, O Come Emmanuel.

Here's what I or the council have been up to in November:

- LiVE Project Retreat: Practicing Faith in Woven Ways: I attended this retreat on November 8 at Grace Lutheran in Des Moines.
- Synod Council Retreat: The council met at Lutherwood on November 14 and 15.
- Synod DEIB Listening Team: I continue to have 1:1 meetings with leaders throughout the synod.

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