

## Invite 2025 Advent Devotional

These Advent Devotions are a gift from the participants of the Indiana-Kentucky Synod's Spiritual Renewal Process – "Inspire. Ignite. Invite." Siblings in Christ from seven Lutheran congregations and one Episcopal congregation have been meeting monthly by Zoom in the third year of this process – Invite 2025. During the year we have explored through the Biblical themes of "Come and See" and "Go and Tell," how the Holy Spirit empowers us to invite others, and share our faith. These devotions demonstrate the Spirit's work. It's wonderful to connect with people throughout the ELCA Indiana and Kentucky mission territory and with people from The Episcopal Church, share faith experiences, and grow closer to the Holy Spirit.

An added feature this year is a "Wondering While Waiting" question at the end of each reflection. During the Advent season, as we wait and prepare to celebrate the birth of the Christ child, may this question lead you into further wondering about the daily scripture verse.

We are thankful to the 2020-2022 "Inspire. Ignite." Invite. alumni who contributed a reflection to this collection. Also contributing a reflection is the Synod's new Director for Evangelical Mission, Melissa "Missy" Schroeder under whose prayers and oversight Inspire. Ignite. Invite. operates.

Thank you to the Inspire. "Ignite. Invite." leadership team – Pastor Sharon Walker, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Lafayette, IN; Carol Ann Webb, St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Lebanon, IN; and Jon Dahl, Cross of Grace Lutheran Church, New Palestine, IN. We are grateful to Magen Pillar, IN-KY Synod Storyteller, for sharing this collection via social media, the IN-KY Synod website, and the weekly IN-KY Synod e-news.

### Week One (December 1 – December 6) Elizabeth and Zachariah

**Monday, December 1:** *In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was descended from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.* Luke 1:5-7 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

Scripture is silent on Elizabeth's emotions, but we can imagine the years of longing that marked her life. Month after month, prayer after prayer, her hope must have worn thin. Holy women before her—Sarah, Rebekah, Hannah—had walked the same road, yet that knowledge likely brought little comfort. How many times had she faced whispered pity or quiet scorn? How often had she wept unseen, her dreams dissolving into tears?

In ancient times, mourners gathered their tears in small bottles—tokens of grief too sacred to waste. Each drop was treasured, a silent testimony of love and loss.

*You have kept record of my days of wandering. You have stored my tears in your bottle and counted each of them.* Psalm 56:8 (Contemporary English Version)

How comforting that God collects our tears too. None fall unnoticed; none are forgotten. Life's sorrows are real—loved ones die, dreams fade, hearts break—but our tears are never wasted. Through them, God draws near. Even in pain, He is faithful. Even in heartbreak, His love remains.

**Prayer:** Lord, thank You for seeing my tears and holding my sorrow close. Help me to trust Your goodness even when my heart aches. Help me find comfort in Your presence and hope in Your promises. Amen.

**Wondering While Waiting:** What does family mean to you?

Laurel – Resurrection Lutheran Church, Marion, IN

**Tuesday, December 2:** *Once when [Zechariah] was serving as priest before God during his section's turn of duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to offer incense... Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified, and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, "Do*

*not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.* Luke 1:8-9, 11-15a (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

Two weeks after my dad died thirty years ago, I woke up with three words, *Hands of healing*, set to 4 musical notes. Those words and notes ran continuously through my head all day. Although an angel of the Lord hadn't appeared to me, I knew that the words were from the Spirit. When I asked her to tell me the rest of the song, the Spirit was silent. I had to laugh when I realized that this is so like the Spirit at times: she gives me a nudge and in essence says, "You do it."

Completing the words and the melody took about a day. But I didn't want to stop there. I wanted the melody with the accompaniment. Although I've been church organist for many years, I've never had training in musical composition. The next two weeks I toiled at the piano, finally figuring out what kind of accompaniment and chords belonged to this healing song from the Spirit. During the year after my dad's death, this little song continually bubbled up and gave me peace and healing.

This gift of the Spirit has been on a joyous journey as I've shared it with others, eventually, ending up in a specialized ELCA hymnal for life passages, which includes healing services. This is my go-to prayer for others by substituting their name in place of the original *me*: *Hands of healing, Jesus, lay on me. Gentle hands of healing, Jesus, lay on me.*

**Prayer:** Gracious Spirit, thank you for the gift of nudging me to give life to this song. Amen.

**Wondering While Waiting:** When was a time something you thought happened because of chance, turned out to be exactly the path God laid out for you?

Carol – Leadership Team, Lebanon, IN

**Wednesday, December 3:** *Zachariah said to the angel, "Do you expect me to believe this? I'm an old man and my wife is an old woman." But the angel said, "I am Gabriel, the sentinel of God, sent especially to bring you this glad news. But because you won't believe me, you'll be unable to say a word until the day of your son's birth. Every word I've spoken to you will come true on time—God's time."* Luke 1:18-20 (The Message)

Zachariah, I can relate.

"Do you expect me to believe this?" I was perfectly happy in my career and life when God called me to the ministry. That question pretty well sums up my response, with the added, "It's impossible." I fought it for 5 years before finally surrendering. And there have been many times during my ministry when I have asked this question or some form of it. Thankfully, God has never made me mute (though perhaps some would have wished it) but there were some outcomes of my disbelief.

Just prior to these verses, when Gabriel first appears, we're told Zachariah was "paralyzed with fear." And even though Gabriel tells him all about who his son, John will be and that his purpose will be to get the people ready for God, Zachariah can't believe it; he and Elizabeth are old, it's impossible... excuses are often fear talking. We think we have to make something happen and we're afraid we can't. But the promise is there- "*Every word I've spoken to you will come true on time—God's time.*" In God's time and according to God's will. Thank God.

I wish I could say I've learned my lesson- but to tell the truth, God's working with me right now on some fear and disbelief. And again reminds me- I'm not in this alone. It's all in God's time and according to God's will.

**Prayer:** Trustworthy God, calm my fears and help my unbelief. Amen.

**Wondering While Waiting:** When was a time you doubted something someone said to you, but later found out it was true?

Amy – So Much More Ministries; Come2Go Ministries, Ft. Wayne, IN

**Thursday, December 4:** *Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside... Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision [angel] in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak.* Luke 1:10, 21-22 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

The angel Gabriel came to Zechariah with good news, but Zechariah was skeptical. Because he doubted God, he was struck speechless until the time was right. When I was four years old, my three year old sister died of leukemia. She was at the hospital when she died. I was alone in my bedroom. An angel came to tell me that my sister wouldn't hurt any more. Like Zechariah I became speechless in that I forgot about the angel's visit and so couldn't talk about it for over thirty years. Eventually a guided meditation around my sister's birthday jogged my memory of the angel.

Recently a friend's nephew lost his one-year-old son to a rare brain tumor. I felt drawn to attend his funeral. Like my sister, I couldn't help but think that this little boy also no longer hurt. I had the opportunity to share the angel's message to me with the baby's mother. Hopefully it gave her comfort to know God doesn't want His little ones to be in pain.

God communicates with us frequently, through the Holy Spirit, the Bible, His creation and other people. Even today He sends messages through His angels. Not only do we need to talk with God daily through prayer, but we also need to be quiet and listen to hear when He speaks to us. When we pray we should remember to not only ask for what we need, but also thank God for our blessings and praise Him.

**Prayer:** Lord, help us to remember you still speak to us today. Help us to listen for and recognize your voice.

**Wondering While Waiting:** When was a meaningful time you saw people come together to pray?

Lois – Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Crestview Hills, KY

**Friday, December 5:** *After those days [Zechariah's] wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. ...Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.* Luke 1:24, 57-58 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

As a child in Minnesota, I cherished the last bright autumn days before winter. I scoured the yards and sidewalks for the prettiest last leaf I could find. Then almost overnight, the sky would turn dark, the fierce wind would strip the trees bare, and it became bitterly cold. Darkness came too early for a child who loved to play outside. When I saw my breath, it was time to wait out the next 5 months of winter, inside.

Winter crash-lands in Minnesota, ready or not! And it brings my favorite season—Advent. During Advent, we prepare for Christmas by lighting our homes from within. Though cold and dark outside, it was comforting that our home was lit from within by the glow of soft, radiant Christmas lights. As a child I was happy to be confined indoors with my family during Advent. Was Elizabeth happy to be confined five months? (Luke 1:24–25) Was hers a time of uncertainty, pondering her child's future? Was it a time of anxiety or hope?

There are seasons when we feel confined by things not in our control, especially after a season of warmth and light. Perhaps Elizabeth felt confined and restless in her waiting, yet she knew that God is nearest to us in our confinement and stillness. This Advent, may you be filled with His light from within, and may God guide you with soft, radiant light in your darkness, that you may know hope, healing, and comfort.

**Prayer:** Loving God, fill us with light in our darkness and the assurance that you are hope with us, in times of confinement.

**Wondering While Waiting:** When was a time you felt very supported by a friend?

Lette – Resurrection Lutheran Church, Marion, IN

**Saturday, December 6:** *On the eighth day, they came to circumcise the child and were calling him Zachariah after his father. But his mother intervened: "No. He is to be called John." "But," they said, "no one in your family is named that." They used sign language to ask Zachariah what he wanted him named. Asking for a tablet, Zachariah wrote, "His name is to be John." That took everyone by surprise. Surprise followed surprise—*

*Zachariah's mouth was now open, his tongue loose, and he was talking, praising God!* Luke 1:59-64 (The Message)

I once worked in the radio broadcasting industry. The mute switch was our friend. We called it the “cough button” for obvious reasons. I still mute myself when I’m about to cough or clear my throat during an online meeting or phone call. Zachariah’s cough button was activated for nine months. It was as if God was the broadcast studio engineer and merely switched off Zachariah’s microphone!

Although that’s fun to imagine, mutism is a serious physical or psychological disorder. A disability. Zachariah was disabled.

The church has historically labeled those with any kind of disability with stigma and shame. Pastor and author Sarah Griffith Lund in her book *Blessed Minds* says, “Often, Christians have (and some Christians still do) viewed mental illness as resulting from sin, demon possession, a curse from God, or a lack of faith.” We can say the same about physical illnesses.

Bible stories, such as the one for today, can be weaponized against others. I wonder, do we see disabled persons as defective? Do we assume disabled people need to be “fixed?” What does this view say about God and God’s grace?

The lesson in this scripture for me is the community surrounding Zachariah. They didn’t exclude the disabled Zachariah from the community. They treated him with respect. They learned sign language to communicate with him. It makes me wonder how our churches could better embrace differences. How could churches build authentic relationships with and better accommodate disabled people?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, make us ever aware of others and open to being in relationship with them in the same way that you did.

**Wondering While Waiting:** When was a time you saw a promise of God come to fulfillment?

Jon – Leadership Team

## **Week Two (December 8 – December 13)**

### **Mary and Joseph**

**Monday, December 8:** *In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.* Luke 1:26-29 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

When I graduated from seminary, some classmates had already received calls and others soon found theirs. A couple went abroad to serve. I waited. I worked part-time in a food pantry, where I registered the guests, listened to their concerns, and trained volunteers. The position was part-time, short-term—and it lasted 18 months. The few call interviews I had were not the right fit—not for the congregations, not for me.

So I waited some more. I helped my daughter get ready for college. I worked with my sister to care for our mom, after a hospitalization that left her very weak. I worried about paying bills and thought about working elsewhere. I wondered whether I would ever be called. And I prayed.

Meanwhile, God had a plan—a wonderful, gracious, loving plan. It meant leaving my old home and traveling to a new city. It meant packing only the essentials and finding temporary housing. It meant shaking the hands of new people, opening my ears to hear their stories, my heart to love them, and my eyes to see where God was at work.

I see now that waiting was part of God’s plan. If I hadn’t waited, I wouldn’t have served in the food pantry and learned what it means to welcome all God’s people to the table. If I hadn’t waited, I couldn’t have helped my daughter make the transition to college or cared for my mother. If I hadn’t waited, the congregations who called me wouldn’t have been ready to welcome me. As always God’s timing is excellent!

**Prayer:** Loving God, give us patience as we wait for your plans to unfold. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

**Wondering While Waiting:** What is a new beginning you've seen God creating in your life lately?

Alexa – Hilltop Lutheran Church of the Ascension, South Bend, IN

**Tuesday, December 9:** *The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus... Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. Luke 1:30-31, 34-35 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)*

My husband was an ELCA pastor and each time God said "Surprise! I have a new church for you," we knew a new adventure and challenge awaited us. In the meantime that created a lot of questions and wondering. Yet we trusted God and went about packing, saying goodbye to old friends. As we were doing that, we knew in our hearts that God was leading us to new adventures and missions. We had fully trusted God.

It is never easy to start over, but each time we did with the help of the Holy Spirit and trust in our Lord. Mary, too, had great trust in her Lord. She let the Holy Spirit fill her with reassurance that God had all good things planned for her. That is what God does for each of us. He wants the best for each of us, so He gives us guidance and support. When an event or situation is bigger than us, He gives us His strength, courage, and the Holy Spirit. We have no reason to be afraid of the challenges we face each day. God has got us totally in His care.

**Prayer:** Dear Lord. Thank you for giving us Mary's example of complete trust in you. Thank you for filling us up with the power and confidence of the Holy Spirit. So we are able to handle all of your life's surprises. In Jesus Name. Amen.

**Wondering While Waiting:** Describe a time when you felt that you were part of something bigger that God was doing in the world.

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

**Wednesday, December 10:** *[The angel said to her,] For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. Luke 1:35-38 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)*

When I was feeling the call from God to go into ministry, I felt overwhelmed and full of questions. How could I possibly become a pastor? Where would I go to school? How could I support myself and pay for school at the same time? It all seemed impossible to me besides being overwhelming!

God's word in this verse reminds us that the nature of our circumstances does not confine Him. When we find ourselves grappling with challenges, whether they be spiritual, emotional, relational, or financial, it can be all too easy to succumb to the limitations of our understanding. This is where Mary's response encourages us. Here is a woman who recognized her own limits but simultaneously acknowledged God's infinite power.

*"Nothing will be impossible with God"* and it certainly was not. God provided a way for me to be in ministry and prepare for ordination and supplied all my needs. Mary's response of faith became my response to God's call. *"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."*

**Prayer:** Lord, help me respond always to your call with the same faith that Mary had. Amen

**Wondering While Waiting:** Describe a time when you felt something was insurmountable. How did God lead you through it?

Sharon – Leadership Team

**Thursday, December 11:** *At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in Judea's hill country. There she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby inside her*

*jumped. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she called out, "God has blessed you more than other women. And blessed is the child you will have!" Luke 1:39-42 (New International Readers Version)*

Two pregnant women greeting each other is something I've only experienced and will only experience as an observer. Don't get me wrong, we all have experienced pregnancy. We all came from a mother's womb. The memory from that experience has been lost. We don't remember if we jumped or did somersaults or were worryingly silent and still. Only mothers remember.

So, it's no surprise Mary visits Elizabeth. For companionship, empathy, comfort, and support. We look for company in our situation with others who are in a similar condition or state.

And maybe there is another reason. Mary is leaving a tense situation. She is an unmarried pregnant teenager. Her fiancé is considering a divorce for adultery. Under the law, she could be killed by stoning. Hurriedly escaping to the hill country is a reasonable precaution. Yet, our scripture is focused on the relationship. A relationship of solidarity. A relationship between two expectant mothers under unusual circumstances finding refuge in their relationship.

In our own contemporary society, we recognize that relationships are strained. Connecting by technology can give us the feeling of solidarity. It can also polarize competing groups. Our ambition for success makes us distrustful of others. As church, I wonder how we can enable the development of relationships even when the person in the other pew is irritatingly different. And can the church engage the world outside of its building and form relationships with and between people seeking refuge? We can. Jesus asked us to do this. We should.

**Prayer:** Holy Three-in-One, be present to us and guide us on our path towards new and deeper relationships even as we feel vulnerable and helpless ourselves.

**Wondering While Waiting:** Tell about a time in your life when someone's hospitality toward you meant a great deal.

Jon – Leadership Team

**Friday, December 12:** *[Elizabeth said,] And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."... And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home. Luke 1:43-45, 56 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)*

There's something sacred about the people who meet us where we are, not to fix us, but simply to be with us. When I read about Mary and Elizabeth, I imagine the relief Mary must have felt when Elizabeth opened the door. After all, as she had just heard from the angel, she must have carried both wonder and fear. But in Elizabeth's presence, she found understanding. She found someone who believed with her.

I've known moments like that, times when I walked into a friend's kitchen or sat across from someone who truly saw me, and the weight I'd been carrying started to lift. Their encouragement didn't erase the uncertainty, but it reminded me that God's promises were still alive and moving, even when I couldn't see the full picture.

Mary stayed three months. That detail always strikes me. Sometimes faith takes root not in grand miracles but in the quiet, daily presence of those who love us. Their laughter, their prayers, their simple companionship, these can be holy ground.

This Advent, I'm reminded that God often meets me through people who care enough to walk beside me, to listen, to remind me of hope. When I spend time with them, my spirit feels like it *"leaped for joy,"* just as Elizabeth's child did, not because everything is perfect, but because love and faith have drawn near once again.

**Prayer:** Lord, help me recognize and cherish the people who carry me closer to You.

**Wondering While Waiting:** How does spending time with those who care about you impact your life?

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

**Saturday, December 13:**

And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant.  
Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed,  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name...”

Luke 1:46-49 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

Finding out that you are going to be a mother is usually very exciting news, especially if you have been trying for some time. Since Mary was a virgin, I am sure she was totally shocked when angel Gabriel told her she was going to have a son. I know I would have been. Then to find out this baby was to be the Son of God. Wow! Mary responded to the angel, *“I am the Lord’s servant... May your word to me be fulfilled.”* (Luke 1:38 New International Version). I bet Mary had all kinds of thoughts and emotions going through her head but she went ahead and said yes. Her life was to be changed forever because of this and she is remembered until this day as being faithful to God’s call.

God calls all of us to do something but for most of us it is nothing this drastic. A few years ago God called me to serve on church council. If you had asked me before that, I would have said, “No way.” I didn’t feel that was something I would be able to do. Yet I trusted God and said yes. One very significant thing happened when I was on council. On Dec 24, 2021, our very beloved pastor died unexpectedly. His passing caught the entire congregation off guard. We on council had to really step up to get through this trying time but with the help of God we were able to do it. God never asks us to do or go through something that we are not able to do.

**Prayer:** Father God, give me the courage to be as strong as Mary when you ask me to do something in your name.

**Wondering While Waiting:** What is something that causes you to sing praise to the Lord, either aloud or in your heart?

Ginny – St. Paul’s Crossroads Lutheran, Batesville, IN

## **Week Three (December 15 – December 20)**

### **The Birth of Jesus (Part One)**

**Monday, December 15:** *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.* John 1: 1-5 (New Revised Standard Version Anglicised)

It was a time when my life was in chaos. That’s when an unlikely angel stepped in. The local Catholic priest invited me and a friend to a week-end retreat – Christ Renews His Parish. That was surprising, because we were Lutherans, not Catholic. But we accepted. It was a good weekend, full of sharing, love and friendship.

The structure of this retreat is that the participants put on the next week-end. We were sitting in the living room of the parish house discussing who would do what. The priest looked at me, and he said that he’d like me to do a devotion based on John 1. Not knowing the scripture well then, I agreed.

*“In the beginning was the Word.”* That was the key. There are many meanings to the word “Word.” It is capitalized, so that means God to me. But it could also include the written and spoken words we use every day. I used that as my key. My words could help bring the Word, or Jesus, to this group of women.

The Word also brought a beginning. A renewal began in my life. Sometimes the best way to understand something is to teach it. An advent of new understandings began for me. All because a Lutheran was trying to explain the importance of the word and the Word in her life.

**Prayer:** May the light of Advent shine in your life through the Word made flesh. Amen.

**Wondering While Waiting:** Reflect on a time when you've seen light overtake darkness. What new life came out of it?

Dee Ann, Christ Lutheran, Kokomo, IN

**Tuesday, December 16:** *Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife." Matthew 1:18-21,24 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)*

We humans make plans and God laughs. Although that seems to be a bit cliché, the image stays with me each time I think I have life all figured out. When I was fourteen years old I was going to be a professional baseball player, when I was seventeen I was going to be a rock and roll star, when I was twenty-three I was going to be a partner in a prestigious accounting firm. None of those things happened, but it wasn't for lack of effort. God had another idea and slowly I was being encouraged and directed into the ministry. Over time small, subtle signs crept into my mostly secular existence. It wasn't until later in my life that I recognized that these interruptions in my plans were a gentle tug to listen and trust in God.

Those interruptions in my life, however, were nothing compared to what Joseph and Mary experienced in this passage from Matthew. Just imagine what Joseph must have been thinking when confronted by the angel. How could this possibly be – that he was to help raise the little baby who would grow up to save us all from our sins. As we encounter difficult situations in our lives it would do us well to remember the words of Psalm 46, *"Be still and know that I am God."* The quiet courage and trust that Joseph showed in hearing God's voice is something that we can all aspire to.

**Prayer:** Gracious God, help us to slow down the hectic pace of our lives to take time to listen to your voice. In Jesus' name, AMEN.

**Wondering While Waiting:** Reflect on a time when God challenged a belief you held, leading you to something greater.

Marc – Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Merrillville, IN

**Wednesday, December 17:** *In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. Luke 2:1-5 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)*

When I read this passage, I can't help but imagine Mary and Joseph preparing for what they assumed would be a temporary trip — a quick journey to Bethlehem for the census, then back home to Nazareth to settle into life with their new baby. They had no idea this would become a years-long journey that would change everything. They couldn't have imagined how God's plan would unfold — or how much trust it would require.



I resonate with that kind of unexpected faith-journey. When my husband began seminary in 2008, our whole family moved to Columbus, Ohio — the two of us and our three kids — into seminary housing. People tried to tell us what to expect, and we listened, but like Mary and Joseph, we really had no idea what lay ahead. Going to seminary is a little like pregnancy — you can describe it, but you don't truly understand it until you're in it.

There were blessings, challenges, tears, laughter, and a thousand little moments where we wondered what God was doing. And yet, looking back, I can clearly see God's hand guiding us every step of the way. The journey shaped who we are in ways we could never have planned.

Mary and Joseph remind us that God often leads by asking us to take the next faithful step — long before we can see the full road ahead. Advent invites us to trust that God is already at work, even when we don't know the destination.

**Prayer:** God of the journey, help us trust you with every step, especially when the path is uncertain. Amen.

**Wondering While Waiting:** Reflect on a journey you went on that changed your life.

Missy — Leadership Team

**Thursday, December 18:** *Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel.* Isaiah 7:14 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

I often hear others say that God speaks to them, that He sends signs, that they feel His presence. And I have asked - why don't I hear or see or feel that presence? As I thought about this question and looked back over my life, a pattern has emerged. Maybe I am being too literal in my thinking. Maybe my life has happened as it should. I have worried, stressed, and lost sleep over what seemed important or urgent. "Should I marry this man?" We were a team for nearly 50 years. "Should we have children and can we raise them to be responsible adults?" We did and they are now indeed remarkable adults. "Should I take this job?" I've had a good career. "Can we afford the house (car, vacation, big expense) we want?" Sometimes it seemed too much, but we did it.

Then there were the times when I thought I wanted or needed something and I didn't get it. I survived the disappointment and kept moving forward. I realize now that I could not have made those decisions on my own. I was being guided, led, and watched over. And each time God has been quietly speaking to me. He is saying "Don't worry, be quiet, believe, trust me; everything will turn out as it should."

**Prayer:** Dear Lord — Send your Holy Spirit to me so I can let go of the worry; so I can be quiet, believe, trust and know that everything will turn out as it should.

**Wondering While Waiting:** Describe a time in your life that you recognized God presenting you with a sign. How did that impact you?

Amy — Christ Lutheran, Kokomo, IN

**Friday, December 19:** *While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room.* Luke 2:6-7 ((New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

I would guess that if we could go back in time and ask Mary about when her preferred arrival date of Jesus would be, it would not be following a long trip to Bethlehem! We hear in this reading that "*the time came*" for Mary to deliver, but this time was not one that Mary could know in advance, nor was it one she had any control over.

At the same time, we can see that this is preferable to Jesus coming while en route to Bethlehem. They have a (relatively) warm place to lay Jesus and there are others around that they could ask for help, if needed.

In short, the timing certainly could have been worse. On the other hand, from the perspective of the shepherds in the field, the timing is wonderful. Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah, is born and they can go visit him!

Such is often the timing of God. It does not match what we would pick, but we find God provides all we need and discover that the timing is a wondrous gift to others. I know there are years the Christmas season feels like this for me. I wish the Christmas services and family gatherings could be delayed just a little longer so I could feel more rested and more prepared. Yet, they come anyway. And every year I discover that God has already provided all I need in Christ, and these chances to get together to celebrate this truth with others are truly wonderful indeed.

**Prayer:** O God, in this busy season when plans and timelines are often disrupted, help us trust that you continue to give us all we need and can bring great gifts to ourselves and others from such disruptions. Amen.

**Wondering While Waiting:** What practices help you remember that your neighbor is God's beloved child?  
Daryl – Calvary Lutheran Church, Angola, IN

#### **Saturday, December 20:**

*For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders,  
and he is named  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

Isaiah 9:6 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

As a nurse, I endured the required training in the birthing process – the before, during and after parts. I remember my own heart thumping wildly when witnessing the dramatic entrance of a newborn. How fragile! How needy!

In Isaiah, God is making a spectacular birth announcement: a child born for US—me, given to US—me, a son with authority or dominion! God reveals some astonishing baby names/attributes. First, *Wonderful Counselor*: I have had a few human counselors in my life; I know the value of seeking and receiving advice. But a Divine Wonderful Counselor? What could be better? Do I use my own personal, wonderful counselor as a daily guide or for just when I am totally lost? It takes humility to seek counsel, a trait I have in limited supply.

Next, *Mighty God*: How I need to tap into that strength when medical issues pull me down or I cannot bear one more thing. Must I always wait until I am exhausted from exertion before I look to God? *Everlasting Father*: I loved my dad. My dad took care of me, loved me, taught me. I miss him every day. Imagine, we have a Father now, that we will never have to say goodbye to. Finally, *Prince of Peace*: How I long for peace when anxiety, pain or trouble threaten to pull me under. Then I remember my access to the divine source for peace, Prince Jesus Christ our Savior. Thanks be to God!

**Prayer:** Lord, help me remember that you can meet my every need, physical, emotional and spiritual.

**Wondering While Waiting:** Share about a time when divine love caught you completely off guard.

Sue – Trinity Lutheran Church, Terre Haute, IN

### **Week Four (December 22 – December 25) The Birth of Jesus (Part Two)**

**Monday, December 22:** *Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.*  
Luke 2:8-11 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

As a person who grew up on a farm with livestock out in the country without light pollution, I can really relate to the shepherds watching their flocks by night. Oh, the beauty of all the stars, the crisp clean air, the quiet movements of the animals settling in for the night, and the stillness all around. To think about those shepherd and what they must have been thinking when they saw an angel standing before them...now that would be terrifying!! Questions of what is going on, what are we seeing, where can I hide?! Just like them, I too would have been terrified and wondered what this means!

The angel makes known the reason for this great sight. There is great news-“*I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.*” This news is to be available to all people; no exceptions.

The announcement of Jesus’ birth is good news to all people regardless of the circumstances that people find themselves facing. You see, this is not an announcement that everything in the world is going to be made better. Life continues to move on and the world keeps on turning. The angel does not announce a changing of situations in the world and cease our unpleasant circumstances. The Savior is come into the world to be the Lamb of God that takes away our sins and making us righteous so that we are reconciled to God. Those reconciled to God have eternal life. This is the announcement of great news that brings joy to all people.

**Prayer:** Father, we rejoice in the good news that our savior is come and we are reconciled to God through Jesus. Amen

**Wondering While Waiting:** When you feel anxious, worried, or afraid, what practices ground or calm you?  
Sharon – Leadership Team

**Tuesday, December 23:** *When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, and Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them. Luke 2:17-20 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)*

These four verses are packed full of wonder. As we await the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus, we can only wonder how it all transpired and played out. When we hear the Good News of Jesus’ birth there are mainly two things, as Christians, that we can do. One, we can proclaim it to others. And two, we can ponder it in our hearts.

I don’t know which one you are more comfortable with, but being an introvert, I do a lot of pondering. If you are an extrovert, you might spread the word or tell everyone. Pondering consists of thinking about, considering, contemplating or meditating upon. No matter your personality, we can be amazed, marvel and be astonished that Jesus came into our world, as a vulnerable newborn to be our loving Savior.

The shepherds told everyone they met about Jesus’ birth and Mary treasured and kept all that she heard, from the shepherds, in her heart. Which will you do? Or maybe you will do both?

**Prayer:** Like the shepherds, may I tell about Jesus, and like Mary, may I always treasure Jesus in my heart.

**Wondering While Waiting:** Share about someone who helped you become closer in your relationship with God.

Walda – Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Crestview Hills, KY

**Wednesday, December 24:** *In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi<sup>l</sup> from the east came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened [troubled, disturbed], and all Jerusalem with him... Matthew 2:1-3 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)*

I am very future-oriented. While this might seem like a good thing, I often find myself stockpiling food, buying an extra something “just in case,” and preparing for every possible future. Watching prices, hunger, and homelessness rise in my community increases my fear as I think about what the future holds. This year, reading this passage upsets me because I can see my response to the future echoing that of King Herod rather than the wise men.

This passage details two different responses to realizing Jesus' birth may change things; that the future might be different. The wise men travel to bring gifts and worship him. In contrast, King Herod is fearful, and his fear infects all of Jerusalem. Herod's fear ultimately results in violence against innocent children, whereas the wise men get to bask in the presence of Jesus.

While my own fear about the future does not have the impact of King Herod's, I am sure that it also negatively affects those around me. Also, it often prevents me from focusing on Jesus. How many moments of homage have I missed because I am focused on what I fear instead of the promises of God?

What might my life look like if I were fixed on Christ the way the wise men were fixed on the star, following it to the exclusion of all else? This holiday season, I do not want my fear of what might happen to keep me from opportunities to encounter Jesus.

**Prayer:** As the future seems frightening, may God cultivate in me a spirit of worship and drive out the spirit of fear.

**Wondering While Waiting :** Tell about a time when the invitation to 'come and see' sounded frightening or alarming to you.

Jeanette – Calvary Lutheran Church , Angola, IN

**Thursday, December 25:** *And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' ") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, himself God, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. John 1:14, 16-18 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)*

Grace is unmerited favor from God, His divine gift freely given to us which we can never earn. "... *It is by grace you have been saved, through faith ..., by a gift from God; not by anything you have done, ...*" (Ephesians 2:8-9 New Jerusalem Bible). God's grace is the means by which we are saved.

Every day I pray for grace. The word *grace* has been important to me for at least the last twenty years. I am *in awe* that God loves me so much that He sent His son Jesus to save me and others who believe in Him; that He has forgiven my sins and that I will go to Heaven eventually to be with God. In these twenty years I have come to believe these promises with all my heart. When I read Bible passages, listen to prayers, or sing hymns that speak of God's grace, I'm embarrassed to admit that I cry. Something inside me responds to words about God's grace. I feel such gratitude. How could a person not be deeply touched by this most wonderful gift?

Grace comes from God's love for us. He wants to repair and restore our relationship with Him. Through His grace, God forgives our sins removing a barrier between us, changing us, giving us joy and the hope of eternal life.

**Prayer:** God, help us to seek, accept and confidently believe that we have received your grace.

**Wondering While Waiting: Where do you see love flourishing in the world today?**

Lois – Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Crestview Hills, KY