

ADVENT DEVOTIONS 2022

Indiana-Kentucky Synod

Inspire. Ignite. Invite.

These Advent Devotions are provided to you as a gift from the participants of the Indiana-Kentucky Synod Spiritual Renewal Process – Inspire. Ignite. Invite. Siblings in Christ from 8 congregations have been meeting monthly via Zoom in two cohorts to participate in the third year of this process – Invite 2022. During the year we have learned more about the Holy Spirit. How does the Holy Spirit empower us to invite others to “Come and See.” And how are we empowered by the Holy Spirit to “Go and Tell.” The Holy Spirit is at work in our lives, in congregations and in the world. The activity of the Spirit is reflected in these devotions. What a joy to continue to grow relationships with others across the synod, to share our encounters with God through sharing faith stories, and to continue to deepen our relationship with the Holy Spirit.

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

Thank you to the leadership team for Inspire. Ignite. Invite. – Mr. Jon Dahl, Cross of Grace, Indianapolis, IN; Pr. Daryl Emowrey, Calvary, Angola, IN; Pr. Amy Beitelschees-Albers, So Much More Ministries and Calvary, Bluffton (interim); and Pr. Nancy Nyland, Director for Evangelical Mission. And an immense thank you to Carol Ann Webb, Administrative Assistant, who edited and formatted this devotional collection.

Week One (November 28 – December 3)

Elizabeth and Zachariah

Monday, November 28: *During the rule of Herod, King of Judea, there was a priest assigned service in the regiment of Abijah. His name was Zachariah. His wife was descended from the daughters of Aaron. Her name was Elizabeth. Together they lived honorably before God, careful in keeping to the ways of the commandments and enjoying a clear conscience before God. But they were childless because Elizabeth could never conceive, and now they were quite old.* Luke 1: 5-7 (The Message)

God blessed Elizabeth and Zachariah with John the Baptist, who would prepare the way for Christ. This is the first devotion in Advent as we also prepare the way for Christ.

The verses that caught my attention were *Together they lived honorably before God, careful in keeping to the ways the commandments and enjoying a clear conscience before God. But they were childless...*

Family is so important. I am the third of three children being two and five years younger than my sister and brother. I learned a lot of good things from them, but entering high school, I put a lot of pressure on myself since both of my siblings had reached the highest levels of student leadership. I chose to avoid involvement with both student council and class officer positions, and instead focused on after school activities with the FFA and agriculture, which neither of my siblings had done. This worked out for me, but how often do we try to do what we consider right for us in our lives, and things do not work out as we had hoped and prayed?

Both Elizabeth and Zachariah *lived honorably before God*, but they shared the pain of not having children. In Jewish culture, having no children was considered not having God’s blessing. However, even in their old age, God blessed them with a son who, we are told in verse 15, *will be great in the sight of the Lord.*

Prayer: Lord, help us to have patience and understanding as we prepare for your coming.

Wondering While Waiting: What does family mean to you?

Bruce – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Bethany Lutheran Church, Indianapolis, IN

Tuesday, November 29: *Once when he was serving as priest before God during his section's turn of duty, [Zechariah] 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)*

In all of the times I have heard and read this story of the annunciation of John the Baptist's birth, I have never paid much attention to what the angel says in verse 13: "your prayer has been heard." Though Zechariah has an unexpected encounter in the sanctuary of the Lord, the angel tells him that God is granting him something for which he has asked. The challenge Zechariah has is to trust that God will do what he has asked God to do.

This is so often our challenge as well! We ask God for direction, for strength and support, and for a whole host of other things. When God tells us that we have been heard and that God is going to grant our request, we can hardly believe it. For some reason, we expect our lives to continue as they have before, even as we ask for God to do something different. This Advent season, may we begin to actively look for the ways God is showing up in our lives and helping us know that God hears us when we pray. We may even find, as we do, that God has been working for quite a long time, just not in the ways we expected.

Prayer: Dear God, help us listen deeply for your word and your presence in our lives. May we find joy and gladness in the ways you listen, and draw near to us through Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Amen.

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

Daryl – Leadership Team: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Angola, IN

Wednesday, November 30: *Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I know that this will happen? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur." Luke 1:18-20 (New Revised Standard Version)*

I am a practical person. Evaluating the feasibility of the goals I set is an important part of achieving my ambitions. I subscribe to the wisdom of knowing the difference between the things that I can impact and those things which are beyond my reach.

Zechariah's experience with the angel, Gabriel, teaches us that God's power defies all human limitations and expectations. God can accomplish anything and often works through unexpected characters. How often have I given up on hopes and dreams because I didn't think they were possible? What have been the consequences of these crises of faith? Zechariah immediately learns the consequence of his disbelief. He is fortunate that his lack of faith only causes him to become mute and provides further witness to the power of God.

I take comfort in knowing that God's power will not be interfered with. Zechariah's failure to believe Gabriel's message did not stop God's work. Likewise, while my human frailties and weak faith may have

consequences for me, they will not disrupt God's plan. John's birth to Elizabeth and Zechariah was a miracle that God made despite Zechariah's practical understanding. I am encouraged by this story because it demonstrates God's saving power in the face of disbelief.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help me forever to know that in you all things are possible.

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

Greg – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Bethel Lutheran Church, Gary, IN

Thursday, December 1: *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 wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak.* Luke 1:10, 21-22 (New Revised Standard Version)

Praying together as a people is common when we have a joint cause, like someone in our faith community has been involved in an accident, or gets a diagnosis of cancer, or receives word that a member of their family living in another state has died. And yet I have witnessed other times when our faith community has come together to pray for the common everyday stuff of life.

As a community of faith, we often share our prayer concerns and children are the most honest about praying for the everyday kinds of things like their dog hurt its paw this week, or I miss my cousin because they went back home after a week's visit, or I have a test in math next week. We can all learn from the honesty of children and learn to come together about all things in our lives. God wants to hear our prayers about the details of life that are on our hearts, no matter if we think they are not as important as others: they are all important to God.

Prayer: Gracious Father, we thank you for the example of the whole assembly praying. Help us to pray always and trust in your promise to hear us even when we don't understand all that is going on around us. Amen.

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

Sharon – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Shiloh Lutheran Church, Walton, IN

Friday, December 2: *...(Zachariah's) wife, Elizabeth, conceived. She went off by herself for five months, relishing her pregnancy.... When Elizabeth was full-term in her pregnancy, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives, seeing that God had overwhelmed her with mercy, celebrated with her.* Luke 1:24, 57-58 (The Message)

Elizabeth's story reminds me of my story of many, many years ago, although I was pregnant without a husband. As long as I could remember, my mother always called anyone in that situation "a tramp," including the unwed daughter of her best friend from grade school. Unable to face what I perceived would be storming, raving and, perhaps, shunning from my mom, I moved to California to be by myself for the ensuing months.

Even knowing I would release my child for adoption, I relished my pregnancy, the intimacy of the child in my womb kicking, turning and growing. At full-term, I gave birth to a daughter, whom I named, on her

original birth certificate, Sarah Naomi. I rejoiced in her, going to the hospital nursery to hold her and feed her a bottle, until we separated.

I held Sarah Naomi close in my heart for 50 years, unknown to my family, until my niece told me about corresponding with a female cousin through Ancestry.com. My niece rejoices in this new cousin.

In God's time, God's grace reunited me and my daughter Shelley Renae. We corresponded for a year before meeting in San Antonio, getting to know each other more deeply, delighting in the traits we share. We celebrated and rejoiced.

Gradually I broadened the circle of people who knew about Shelley, beginning with my two sons in a joint email. They each responded within ten minutes – both sharing the same message: "I've always wanted a sister!" They continue to rejoice with me.

Prayer: Good and Gracious God, Father and Mother of us all, I give thanks for your deep and abiding commitment to family and for reuniting Shelley and me after a long season apart. We rejoice and celebrate our relationship and friendship, knowing that it is patterned after the loving and always-accepting friendship of Jesus. May your love of family shine through us. Thank you for the gift of the many friends who celebrate and rejoice with us. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

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

Carol – Leadership Team: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Lebanon, IN

Saturday, December 3: *On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Luke 1:59-64 (New Revised Standard Version)*

For as long as people have put their worries to paper, there have been prose and poetry lamenting the awfulness of the present. The writings of Isaiah and Jeremiah are some of the best examples we have from scripture.

I remember back in the 1980s, when the band Genesis' angst anthem "Land of Confusion" was popular. The last verse proclaimed, "My generation will put it right. We're not just making promises that we know we'll never keep." In retrospect, I don't think things quite panned out like the lyricist hoped.

In all fairness, promising big things is a sure path to disappointment. Imagine how Zechariah must have felt in the presence of Gabriel, as the angel promised a son to be born of Elizabeth. This flew in the face of everyday experience. Zechariah was skeptical and asked for a sign to know this was true.

Gabriel answered that Zechariah would lose his voice until what was promised had come to pass. By the time of today's reading, he has been mute for months. When asked if custom should be ignored by naming his son "John," Zechariah affirms his role in fulfilling God's promise and literally puts it into writing.

God's promise of boundless grace and forgiveness extends to all of us and is fulfilled perpetually. Like Zechariah, we are called to fulfill God's promise by becoming agents of grace. In this season of celebrating promises kept, ask what role you can play in promise fulfillment.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, guide me. Help me to find a role to play in fulfilling your promises.

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

PJ – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Gethsemane Lutheran Church, Indianapolis, IN

Week Two (December 5 – December 10) Mary and Joseph

Monday, December 5: *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)

I can't help but notice that the angel Gabriel was sent by God. The angel did not bring this message of his own accord. This message was delivered through the voice of the angel Gabriel, but it was God's message to Mary. When have you received a message from God and who brought the message to you? Does God's voice sometimes sound like a pastor's voice, or a teacher's voice, or a parent's voice, or a friend's voice, or maybe even your voice? How has God spoken to you throughout your life? When Mary received God's message, she was perplexed and then began to ponder this greeting. Did she sense that her life was about to change? Did she realize the new beginning God had in store for her? What a comfort it must have been for Mary to hear the assurance of God's presence. That same assurance is still true today each time we receive a message from God today – "The Lord is with you." In this ever-changing world of new beginnings, there is no better place to be than in God's presence.

Prayer: O God, let me sink myself into your presence as I navigate life today.

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

Nancy – Leadership Team: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Indianapolis, IN

Tuesday, December 6: *The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 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)

Afraid: filled with concern or regret over an unwanted situation.

We are all God's hands here on this earth and we are asked to trust God while joyfully doing His kingdom work. We should also want to do this work and participate in this work. We will not be called to do same thing that Mary did, but we will be invited to do something. We will be directed into places and situations to do God's work and, like Mary, we should not be afraid.

Mary brought forth Jesus into this world. We can bring forth God's love. Let us not be afraid. Let us not have concern or regret for showing God's love in whatever situation we are in.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for loving us and sending us Your Son, Jesus. With Your help and guidance, send us forth to fearlessly show Your love to the world.

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

Cara – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Risen Lord Lutheran Church, Bargersville, IN

Wednesday, December 7: *[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 1:37-38 (New Revised Standard Version)

“All things are possible with God.” Growing up in and around church all my life, I have heard this statement often. I believe in the statement. But we pray for things, stuff, all the time and may never receive. Example; we pray for a new car and not receive, but the neighbor gets a new car. Who is God listening to?

One year, I spent wastefully over the Christmas holidays. Soon after the holidays, I realized I did not have sufficient funds left to complete college registration for the second semester. I talked to friends, professors, counselors, school employees and others with knowledge of financing education without a solution. I was preparing to stay home and get a job during the first semester. “My” plans included going to summer school and carrying 18 hours in the fall to catch up with my class.

With prayer, and God’s directions, things turned out differently. While explaining my dilemma to a friend, he suggested I could register with a promise to pay tuition with my income tax refund check in April. It wasn’t that simple but true. God walked with me thru the process while I registered successfully. I received my income tax check timely and paid my outstanding balance with the administration.

Prayer: Father, thank you for always being there for me. Thank you for a wonderful family, church, and friends. Bless us with your peace and love.

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

Florzell – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Bethel Lutheran Church, Gary, IN

Thursday, December 8: *At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!”* Luke 1:39-42 (New International Version)

Have you ever leapt for joy? Was there ever a moment so joyful that your very heart and soul leapt?

The birth of my sons was such a moment. I was overwhelmed by the miracle and by the love I was given in my life. But I wonder, have I ever leapt with joy at the very thought of Jesus and all He has done for me?

When John the Baptist leapt in Elizabeth’s womb, he recognized the joy of salvation that was coming to the world through the life and death of Jesus, who was just a baby waiting to be born into this world to fulfill His father’s mission on earth. Let us leap for joy this glorious season and every day recognizing that Jesus will bring us joy, salvation, and grace. Welcome our Lord and Savior by leaping for joy!

Prayer: Father God, thank You for Your Son, Jesus Christ, our precious Lord and Savior. May we leap for joy at the very thought of Your love and the Son You gave us. Amen.

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

Mary Pat – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Shiloh Lutheran Church, Walton, IN

Friday, December 9: *[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)

My folks moved to Kentucky away from our extended family before I was born. Even though, we did not live close, spending time with family was essential. Every year, we traveled by car at least twice, summer and Christmas to see family.

Time spent in the car on these trips taught me the importance of uninterrupted presence. My dad and I would talk for hours about faith, life, family, hopes, and dreams. Sometimes mom would read aloud. Other times, we would get lost in our thoughts.

Our trips gave me a fresh perspective, a time away from routines, and an opportunity to remember the most important things in life: faith, family, and presence.

Now that I have teenagers of my own, we travel to see family, spend time together, and enjoy uninterrupted time. The travel allows me to listen carefully, ask questions, share life, and have fun with them. These times can never be taken away or replaced; they are and will be memories to cherish.

Mary understood the value of traveling to visit with family. Sharing precious moments with loved ones during transition times, she traveled while newly pregnant to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, so they could enjoy time together as they both were expecting babies who would break into this world with new life, not only for them, but for us!

Prayer: God, join us with your presence this season, as we gather with our loved ones. Remind us, again, how important presence versus presents is for us as we wait for your son to break into the world. Amen.

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

Joy – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Bethel Lutheran Church, Gary, IN

Saturday, December 10:

*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)

Despite my lack of musical skills, I can’t read this passage without singing, out loud or in my head, the *Magnificat* from Marty Haugen’s *Holden Evening Prayer*. And when I do, I hear the voices from our two shared ministry churches, combined with friends and family from neighboring churches, and see sunlight streaming through the church windows as we gather for evening worship. That music is a Lenten tradition at the churches where I serve. The experience of singing it with them has given me fresh eyes and a new love for this well-known passage.

Mary is often known for pondering things quietly in her heart. Yet she makes what may be one of the best and strongest verbal declarations of all time: the *Magnificat*. Her song of praise is named after the Latin word for “magnify.” Like Hannah before her, Mary can’t help but sing.

She can’t help but extol God’s greatness as she responds to her cousin Elizabeth’s blessing and greeting as the mother of her Lord. Mary recognizes the awesomeness, not only of God’s saving power for her and for all people, but also the privilege of being God’s chosen instrument to bring this about.

In Mary, we see an example of proclamation and contemplation, action and reflection. She embodies our call to live as faithful disciples.

Her praiseworthy good news is our good news, the world's good news, now and for all time.

Prayer: Mighty One, in your power we can proclaim boldly and ponder quietly in our hearts. Give us the strength and wisdom to know when to speak and when to be silent. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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

Kristen – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.

Faith Lutheran Church, Logansport, IN and St. Peter's Lutheran Church, Camden, IN

Week Three (December 12 – December 17) **The Birth of Jesus (Part One)**

Monday, December 12: *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 overcome it.* John 1:1-5 (New Revised Standard Version)

This begins one of my favorite Scriptures, especially on Christmas Eve.

In the beginning... it seems like there are so many beginnings and endings and beginnings in life. It can get exhausting. And yet, here we are anchored in any beginning – *In the beginning was the Word...with God and...was God.* Jesus, the Word. And coming into being in him was Life and Light – of all people, of the family of God, of community. A Light so powerful that no darkness can overcome it. No endings, no exhaustion can overcome it. Our Triune God – God the Creator, Jesus the Word, Spirit the community.

Last night I spoke to a man who wanted to die – his circumstance felt so dire, so hopeless. He didn't want to be a burden. He wanted an ending; back to Jesus by his own hand looked the best option. I couldn't answer why. I couldn't change his circumstances, his health, his finances. All I could offer was God's love and my care, Jesus' powerful Life and Light, and the Spirit's sense of belonging. I could offer a hope which the darkness couldn't overcome. Another beginning...and for last night, it was enough. Light and Life prevailed.

Prayer: Holy Three, remind us that you are enough, that you are our Hope. In all our beginnings and endings, in our exhaustion and despair, you are the Life that sustains us and the Light that shines the way, for ourselves and for others. Thank you. Amen.

Wondering While Waiting: When have you witnessed the Light overcoming the darkness? What new beginning or new life came forth?

Amy – Leadership Team: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.

Elkhart, IN

Tuesday, December 13: *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).*

Joseph's world was turned upside down when he found Mary was with child. He knew he wasn't the father. How relieved and overjoyed he must have felt when the angel told him in a dream that the child Mary carried in her womb was the Son of God and would be the Savior of the World!

All doubts and fears melted away as Joseph trusted and obeyed the will of God. Like Joseph, we live in troubling times and have challenges. Sometimes we are in despair, but God knows the perils we face. Through prayer and reading His Word we are guided by the Holy Spirit to make good choices and come through these challenging times.

Early on in life, I lived in a fantasy world thinking all my dreams were going to happen. When troubles came, disappointments happened, I began to face the reality that life isn't easy. I had to let God be in control, but still work hard, keep focused, and do my best.

God is like a gardener, planting seeds in our hearts. He knows us better than we know ourselves. Our Heavenly Father watches over us, hears our prayers, and, being the good gardener He is, never abandons us.

The trials we encounter strengthen our faith. The Holy Spirit not only guides us but also is a comforting spirit. Drawing nearer to God's will for our lives should be our constant prayer. Like Joseph, when you hear God's voice, listen, trust, and obey.

Prayer: Lord, show us Your way as we live through challenging times. Strengthen our faith to put our trust in You.

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

Judy – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
St. Mark Lutheran Church, Batesville, IN

Wednesday December 14: *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)*

All of us have been on a journey we would rather not have taken. Maybe it was due to illness, divorce, loss of a job or a loved one. The journey through life is a personal one and is uniquely our own. Personally, I know that life has taken me on many journeys and the path I have been called to follow may not have always seemed clear to me nor the end visible. So why was I on that path? Because I am obedient and trusting of God's invitation.

At times I have found myself walking down various paths in life, uncertain of the outcome and hoping eventually I end up in the right place. My eyes have a tendency to follow my feet. The good news is I know I don't have to live by trial and error. Should I go this way or that way? I remind myself that God has not hidden Himself from me and I always have His guidance through the Holy Spirit. So instead of looking down at my feet, I reach out and let God's hand lead me.

Mary surely felt like this on her journey to Bethlehem. It was a long road of travel, cold and uncomfortable. This situation is emblematic of what often happens in our lives. God promises to sustain us if we turn our burdens over to Him. May He always speak to us, guide us, and keep us on the journey He has planned.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, may you always be with us during our life's journeys.

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

Becky – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Faith Lutheran Church, Logansport, IN

Thursday, December 15: *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 (NRSV Update Edition).

In an earlier verse the Lord spoke to Ahaz and told him to ask for a sign. But Ahaz said he would not ask and put the Lord to test. Then Isaiah said the Lord himself will give you a sign. What was the sign? It was Mary, a young virgin woman, who was with child. She was to have a son and he was to be called Immanuel.

Do you ever ask for a sign? Sometimes I have a hard time deciding what I should do on any random day. I will offer up a little prayer to God and ask him what I should do. I would love it if God would just say “this is what you need to do.” However, that does not happen. I guess it has to do with free will. I think my answer usually comes from the Holy Spirit. I will have a little thought pop into my head that I should do this or that, but it is up to me what I choose to do.

I often wonder if I am just plain dense. Am I missing the signs that God is sending me? I have concluded that God knows me better than anyone. I just need to do my best and God will keep trying to reach me.

Prayer: Dear God, please open my eyes and ears to the signs you are giving me. I know you only want what is best for me.

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

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

Friday, December 16: *An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son David, the son of Abraham...So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.* Matthew 1:1,17 (New Revised Standard Version).

When I was young, my family spent a lot of time at my maternal grandparent’s home. My dad was in the Army Reserve and always went to summer training for two weeks in August. My mom and we three kids would always spend that time at Grandpa and Grandma’s house. Oh, the fond memories. My mom’s family had lived in the small town and surrounding area for many generations, so there were many distant relatives in the area. I was related to at least 4 prominent families in the area, and since my mom had grown up there, she still had friends living there. Going to the IGA grocery with Mom and Grandma was always an adventure, because we were bound to run into someone that we were either related to or was a family friend of Mom or Grandma. For a long time, I thought I was related to everyone in that town.

I remember going to the local cemetery with my grandparents to lay flowers on the graves of my great grandparents and listening to stories about the lives of my grandparents as young people, and of their parents as well. My genealogy has always been intriguing to me, but it wasn’t until after my parents had passed that I realized I hadn’t paid close enough attention and learned more history about my family. For that, I have deep regret.

I have learned from past generations that family is what makes you who you are, and you should cherish the family you have.

Prayer: O LORD, I ask that you bless my family members, be they near or far. Be with them, always. Let them know that family ties are never broken, just as our faith in Christ is unbroken.

Wondering While Waiting: How have your relationships with people from other generations shaped you?

Alice – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Gethsemane Lutheran Church, Indianapolis, IN

Saturday, December 17: *While [Mary & Joseph] were [in Bethlehem], 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)*

If you are like me, you have been preparing for the holidays for a while – making sure that you have food, a clean house, and everything else you might need. This approach is diametrically opposed to Mary’s situation in Luke’s Gospel.

Mary did not have standard shelter, was using a manger as a baby bed, and wrapped her newborn in cloth (that she couldn’t have had delivered to her door within two days). And yet, regardless of her circumstances, “the time came.” It didn’t matter that not everything was ready: the time came anyway.

In some ways, putting everything on a to-do list that I can methodically tick off helps me feel in control of situations. But I sometimes miss opportunities and precious moments because I am so focused on my to-do list.

During this season it is so easy to get caught up in “ideal” preparations and worry about everything being just right. How might I change my posture from frantic worrying, planning, and doing to being present when the time comes – the time with family, friends, and for celebrating Christ’s birth? How might I cultivate a spirit that trusts that things will be fine, even if not everything is checked off the to-do list? What miracles might I be witness to then?

Prayer: During preparations for the holiday season, may we trust God to provide what is needed so that we can fully celebrate Christ’s birth rather than having our attention on our to-do lists.

Wondering While Waiting: What practice help you remember that your neighbor is God’s beloved child?

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

Week Four (December 19 – December 25) The Birth of Jesus (Part Two)

Monday, December 19: *In that 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 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)*

In these fields near Bethlehem, where suddenly the Lord’s glorious and extraordinary light shines with awesome blinding brilliance, the shepherds see an *angel* standing in their presence. Perhaps it was Gabriel, who had brought his good news earlier to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Concerning this, though, we can only speculate. The only thing Luke tells us is that this anonymous angel, standing before the shepherds, was glowing with and surrounded in God’s glory.

What we *do* know is that the shepherds were terribly afraid. Putting ourselves in that same field, witnesses to this phenomenal event, how might we have reacted? We probably would have been filled with numbing terror too, and maybe even fainted!? Or, at the very least, struck silent! It's not every day we hear about angels suddenly appearing in the midst of people's ordinary lives; while shepherding, teaching, firefighting, supervising or farming.

But have no fear, for God speaks Good News-always. The angel tells the shepherds, "Do not be afraid..." This is something we can take into ourselves, tucking the messenger's powerful words into our own hearts. When we're fearful, doubtful, confused, worried, or anxious we can be assured by these words, proclaimed through God's angel.

Don't be afraid. —Because to us the Savior will be born, the Savior will be given, who is the Messiah, the Lord! This is God's glorious message of joy, hope, and peace for all people. Advent blessings be yours!

Prayer: O Holy One of peace, free me from fear, and let me find comfort apart from anxiety. Invite me to where you'll have me go; into the unknown as well as the known. Though I may be fearful, worried, or anxious, I know I can put my trust in you. In Christ Jesus, I pray. Amen.

Wondering While Waiting: When you feel anxious, worried, or afraid, what faith practices ground or calm you?

Jill — Inspire. Ignite. Invite.

St. Mark Evangelical Lutheran Church; Batesville IN

Tuesday, December 20: *When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. Luke 2:15-16 (New Revised Standard Version)*

I walked a labyrinth the other day. It's a winding, circular path to the center rather than a direct point-to-point line that I might prefer. Sometimes the path took me close to the center and then farther away from it, ultimately depositing me in the center. My pilgrimage was a success! I could rest and feel God's presence and peace.

But I can't stay in the labyrinth's center forever. A time must come when I venture back out of the center and walk the circular path back into the world. It's a winding, circular path away from the center, too. Sometimes the path took me close to the center and then farther away from it, ultimately depositing me at the labyrinth's entry/exit. And here is my personal spiritual challenge. Having contemplated God's love for me and the world, having heard God's invitation to action, I am slow to respond. Even resistant at times.

The shepherds' haste in taking action is what impresses me in these verses from Luke. Their group discernment led them to action. They found "the child lying in the manger." The shepherds teach me that immediate action, my immediate response to God's invitation, will also result in seeing God, seeing God at work in the world, feeling God's presence.

Unlike the shepherds, we don't typically get the full-on "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" invitation from God. Still, the labyrinth continues to invite me.

Prayer: Let Your invitation to discernment lead us to respond to Your work in the world, O LORD.

Wondering while waiting: How do our invitations to others to experience God change the paths they had laid out for themselves?

Jon — Leadership Team: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.

Indianapolis, IN

Wednesday, December 21: *When [the shepherds] saw [Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger], 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)

In the shepherds' story, I see themes surfacing that we have talked about throughout the year of *Invite*. The shepherds were invited by angels to experience the power and presence of God in their midst. As they respond to this invitation, they cannot help but share this good news with others. These in turn are also amazed by this message, and likely spread it further.

As we heard when the angels showed up, the shepherds received no command to share this message of good news and salvation. The angels who told them could not contain their excitement about what God was up to in the world, and could only tell them where to encounter this good news. That encounter was all that was needed for the shepherds to tell others the amazing and wonderful things God had done.

We, too, continue to be invited to experience this power and presence of God in our lives. We, too, are invited to know this good news of great joy. And this good news grips us in such a way that we cannot help but glorify and praise God, we cannot help but share this message with others. As we encounter Christ in the manger and at the table this Christmas season, may we do just that.

Prayer: Dear God, help us recognize those times we have encountered your good news of great joy, and having recognized such an encounter, give us the courage, strength, and words to share this good news with all whom we meet. Amen.

Wondering While Waiting: Think about someone who helped you become closer in your relationship with God and give thanks for them.

Daryl – Leadership Team: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Angola, IN

Thursday, December 22: *In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi 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, and all Jerusalem with him... Matthew 2:1-3 (New Revised Standard Version)*

Of course they're frightened!

"For the world is about to turn." *The Canticle of the Turning (Evangelical Lutheran Worship, p. 723)*

I wonder why Herod was surprised by this news. Didn't his own experts tell him about this prophecy? Were they afraid to share this bad news with the king? It makes me think of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Emperor's New Clothes* where everyone goes along with the pretense that the emperor is wearing new clothes when, in fact, (spoiler alert!) he is naked.

Regardless, foreigners made Herod aware. And these magi ignited a firestorm! When the reigning power feels threatened it can, and usually does, react violently. King Herod did. Matthew 2 recounts that he ordered the killing of Bethlehem's baby boys under the age of two. We remember their sacrifice on the first Sunday after Christmas.

And I wonder what this story can teach me. Fear flares when the political situation seems threatening. I feel anxious when watching the evening news. Then I am invited to see that the magi were seeking Jesus. The threat to Herod, and to any other earthly power, is the kingdom launched by Jesus. It's already here and yet it's not. When my faith reminds me that God's kingdom is already here, a reality beyond what I can see, I get a sense of peace back. I am comforted when invited to consider the wisdom of Romans 8 that *NOTHING* "...will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Prayer: Invite us to remember Your kingdom when life's bad news makes us anxious, O LORD.

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

Jon – Leadership Team: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.

Indianapolis, IN

Friday, December 23: *When [the wisemen] had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary, his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Matthew 2:9-11 (New Revised Standard Version)*

The holiday season is often a time of chaos as people scramble to complete their Christmas shopping. Every year I tell myself that I will start earlier, yet I somehow end up with people I'm still shopping for at the last minute. While it is nice to share gifts with one another during this time of giving, it is important for us to remember the true reason for the season.

The birth of our savior Jesus is the reason we celebrate so merrily each year. It is this gift from God that is the greatest of all, and it is one that He gave to us because of His everlasting love. One gift we can give in return is to offer our hands and feet for sharing His love with the rest of the world. Perhaps this could be done through singing a carol about God's glory, volunteering time to help the less fortunate, or making a donation to a charity. If we love each other the way God loves us, His love will spread and people will be reminded to thank God for all that He does for us. Through sharing our time, money, and talents, we spread the love of God, which is truly the gift that keeps on giving. As we stop to recall this, we can thank God by taking a moment to give Him praise. Even a simple prayer to show our appreciation would be valuable to our ever-loving God.

Prayer: Lord, guide me to spread Your love so that the world will continue to adore and praise You.

Wondering While Waiting: Reflect on some of the valuable gifts that we can offer to God

Brittany – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.

Shiloh Lutheran Church, Walton, IN

Saturday, December 24

*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)

This is such a familiar verse. We hear it every Christmas Eve and yet sometimes I find myself reading/hearing it on autopilot instead of with the wonder and awe it deserves.

A child – not a king or warrior as many expected, but a vulnerable child – who could understand our vulnerabilities.

...born for us, a son given to us – For us, to us – his gift offered to each of us, regardless of who we are or what we've been. This gift, given out of great love!

Authority rests upon his shoulders... not the authority of a dictator or tyrant but of one who lived and experienced a human life: the authority of a savior.

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Each of these roles offers us a glimpse of our savior – and so much more! The One whom we can trust, believe in, turn to and worship.

This, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing. Haste, haste to bring him laud, the babe, the son of Mary. (from the hymn *What Child is This?*)

Stand in awe and wonder! Shout it from the rooftops! Christ the Savior is Born!

Prayer: Loving God, thank you for the gift of your Son. May we never take your gift for granted and may we share it with all we meet, not just in this season of Christmas but all year. Amen.

Wondering While Waiting: Ponder a time when divine love caught you off guard.

Amy – Leadership Team: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Elkhart, IN

Sunday, 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. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.* John 1:14, 16-18 (New Revised Standard Version)

This is one of my all-time favorite passages. It is a simple, brief, and poetic detail of the birth of Jesus, whom we celebrate on this day. I don't know about you but I need daily reminders that I have received grace upon grace and that my grace and truth (and yours) come through Jesus. It is not dependent on me – never has been and never will be. I cannot do anything to earn this grace and truth; it is a gift from God through the Son Jesus Christ. This is what allows me to love with the love that I have received through Jesus. It is this love that helps bring hope to the world by the way we live our lives and share the love of Christ to all.

Prayer: Thank you, Jesus, for showering us with grace and for revealing your grace and truth to us. May our lives always shine with your grace and truth to all people. Amen

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

Sharon – Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Shiloh Lutheran Church, Walton, IN