

## **ADVENT DEVOTIONS 2024**

### **Indiana-Kentucky Synod, ELCA**

### **Inspire.Ignite.Invite.**

These Advent Devotions are provided to you as a gift from the participants of the IN-KY Synod Spiritual Renewal Process – Inspire.Ignite.Invite. Siblings in Christ from seven Lutheran congregations and one Episcopal congregation have been meeting monthly via Zoom in the second year of this process – Ignite 2024. During the year we have learned more about the Holy Spirit, focusing on aspects of the Holy Spirit – interceding, fruit of the Spirit, comforting, stirring, renewing, inspiring, empowering, discerning and creating. These Spirit themes are reflected throughout the devotions. What a joy to continue to grow relationships with others across the Synod and across denominations, to share our encounters with God through testimonies, and to continue to deepen our relationship with the Holy Spirit.

We are thankful to the alumni of Inspire.Ignite.Invite. who participated in the 2020-2022 sessions and contributed a reflection to this collection.

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Prior to the end of her call as Director for Evangelical Mission, Pr. Nancy Nyland was instrumental in creating and leading Inspire.Ignite.Invite. and we are thankful for her ministry with us and her legacy.

### **ADVENT 1 – “Being, Interceding, Comforting Spirit”**

**Monday, December 2:** *Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."* Luke 3: 21-22 (New Revised Standard Version)

When we hold a newborn baby, a feeling of wonder often enfolds us as we gaze into that tiny face. Holding a newborn infant is like holding a little bit of God's own Spirit in bodily form. We can begin to understand how Mary felt as she looked upon her son for the first time. During Jesus' time on earth, God lived bodily with us, from His birth to his baptism, death and resurrection. In this passage, where Jesus is baptized, God reveals another visible sign of God's presence in bodily form; the Holy Spirit as a dove descends upon Jesus with whom God is pleased.

The Holy Spirit may not manifest in our lives as obviously as a dove. The Holy Spirit often moves within our creativity and wonder. The Holy Spirit lifts up in us, curiosity and compassion for one another. The Holy Spirit yearns for comfort and peace, peace within our own spirits and peace worldwide. The Holy Spirit will guide and encourage us if we can listen and pray after a long day. For the times we're too tired to pray, the Holy Spirit will step in for us, gently tug our fatigue aside and talk to God for us when our minds and hearts are tired, as they often are during the Holidays.

**Prayer:** This Advent may the Holy Spirit enfold you with curiosity and grace as we yet again await and place our hope in God and the promise of His newborn King. Amen.

Lette – Resurrection Lutheran, Marion, IN

**Tuesday, December 3:** *If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot*

*receive because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him because he abides with you, and he will be in you.* John 14:15-17 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

I've had a Best-Friend-Forever (BFF) even before it was fashionable. Mike and I grew up together on the same block, attended the same schools, and attended the same church and Sunday School. Over the years we have laughed and cried together and confided in each other. That relationship carries on today even though we now live many miles apart.

From the early days of sitting on the side of the viaduct at the end of our block contemplating life as we saw and experienced it as children, to the awkward teen years, through the coming-of-age experiences, to working life, marriage, parenting, and loss of family and friends, Mike and I have been able to be present for each other. What a blessing it has been and continues to be to have someone who knows your joys and your sorrows, your triumphs and your failures, and can empathize with your situation and circumstance.

In this passage Jesus tells his disciples that, "he will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever...You know him because he abides with you, and he will be in you." As believers, this Advocate (Helper, Comforter, Advocate, Intercessor, Counselor, Strengthener, Standby) indeed abides in us and walks alongside us in our faith journey. I believe that God sends people in our lives to help facilitate and live out that faith. In my life, Mike is the manifestation of such an Advocate. Who has God sent to you?

**Prayer:** Gracious God may your Holy Spirit abide in each of us as we anticipate the Holy birth of the tiny baby Jesus who would grow to give his life on the cross so that we may live. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Marc - Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Merrillville, IN

**Wednesday, December 4:** *Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.* Romans 8:26-27 (New Revised Standard Version)

Life is full of distractions. From the small little annoyances that creep up and create ripples in our tranquil pond of life to the tsunamis that surge in and suck the foundation of our life out to sea. As we weather each metaphoric storm, we must trust in the Lord.

How many of us have been in the midst of chaos and heard that cry in the distance that urges us to keep going? How many of us have awakened in the night with the solution to a nagging problem or have felt as if the sermon was written exclusively for our ears? These are the countless times when the Holy Spirit has interceded on our behalf.

The true lesson of this insight is that these moments are not singular in nature. These Spirit interventions are more abundant than any of us are capable of understanding. Knowing my obtuse nature, I imagine the Holy Spirit calling out to me constantly, begging me to hear but I am like a spoiled child screaming and crying out to the void asking for help while pushing my fingers into my ears. I believe that many of us are too distracted to hear the very help that we are asking for. Once we understand that the Holy Spirit is continuously calling to us, we become more willing to hear the guidance that is continuously being offered. Listen with your whole heart for the Holy Spirit. It is guiding you to the life that was meant for you.

**Prayer:** Holy Spirit, continue calling us. Help us to listen to your presence in our lives. Amen.

Rachelle - Hilltop Lutheran Church of the Ascension, South Bend, IN

**Thursday, December 5:** *And the Spirit immediately drove (Jesus) into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan: and he was with the wild beasts: and the angels waited on Him.* Mark 1: 12-13 (New Revised Standard Version)

Has the Holy Spirit ever called and led you into a place where you were unsure of going? In this scripture, Jesus is purposefully led into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. It doesn't take long in our Christian walk to discover that temptations frequently come in our lives. It is through trials and temptations, that we grow in faith and understanding of our mission to share Christ with the world around us. The Holy Spirit can lead us and will stay with us through these difficult times. This Advent story shows us a new beginning for Jesus and an understanding of His humanity. In my own humanity I am often tempted and led into a desert of sin and unkindness. It is during those times that I call upon the Holy Spirit, my guide and my thoughtful soul. The word "advent" is adopted from the Latin word "adventus" which means "coming or arrival." As we meditate on waiting for the return of Jesus during this Advent season, let us remember how Jesus endured temptation as he entered his new mission and awaited his eventual death. As we work in our own mission field, let us allow the Holy Spirit to guide us and lead us to the eternal life promised through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. He is coming!

**Prayer:** Come Holy Spirit, live within our hearts and souls each day as we travel the road to eternity, through Jesus Christ, our precious Lord and Savior. Amen

Mary Pat - Christ Lutheran Church, Kokomo, IN

**Friday, December 6:** *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. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit."* Luke 1:11-15 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

On my mom's last birthday, my sister and I decided at the last minute to surprise mom and show up unannounced for a visit. The three of us live in different states, so there were a lot of moving parts. It was actually quite the undertaking, but between a plane, a bus, a car and lots of phone calls and texts, we pulled it off. We walked up to mom's door, did our best to hide ourselves until mom came to the door, and waited for her to see us standing on her porch. She was absolutely stunned. Her chin dropped and she stood there staring at what seemed an impossibility, her two daughters at her house, as if we'd just come from next door. After several seconds of stunned silence, she said, "Come in, come in!"

I wouldn't say that what happened to Zechariah in Luke 1 was similar, but the reaction likely was... stunned silence. But he didn't stay there. The angel said, "Do not be afraid, for your prayer has been heard."

God has the very best in store for us. Sometimes it takes time and often it is not exactly what we would have chosen. We don't have 20/20 vision into the future. God does and His plans are perfect.

In this life, surprises will come our way but if we put our trust in God, we don't have to be afraid. We can move from stunned silence to "come in."

**Prayer:** Thank you, Father, that nothing is impossible with you. Thank you for fulfilling promises in ways I could never conceive. Amen.

Laurel - Resurrection Lutheran Church, Marion, IN

**Saturday, December 7:** *Let us give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the merciful Father, the God from whom all help comes! He helps us in all our troubles, so that we are able to help others who have all kinds of troubles, using the same help that we ourselves have received from God. Just as we have a share in Christ's many sufferings, so also through Christ we share in God's great help.* 2 Corinthians 1:3-5 (New Revised Standard Version)

In these verses we see God's Comforting Spirit in action. Every time I have a problem that I think is impossible to solve, God sends someone to help. Over the years I have had many car issues, and they happen when I am on the road alone. The first thing I do is panic and yell help! I think, "what do I do?"

So I call my son. Then I call AAA. Usually someone comes and helps me out. As you can see, I go through a process. First I am alone and have no clue to what is wrong with my car. Next I ask for help and guidance and God always provides people who can help me. As you can see, I like to share my stress and problems with others. It is never good to keep stress to oneself. By sharing I am given comfort, and a plan is formed to solve the problem. This is what our Lord does for us each day. He sends His Comforting Spirit to us all the time. We are reassured that whatever the problem is, there is a solution. When we share our troubles, they become lighter. God is truly our friend and support in time of need.

**Prayer:** Thank You Lord for being my Comfort in times of trouble and in time of joy. In Christ's Name. Amen.

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

## **ADVENT 2 – "Creating, Stirring, Renewing Spirit"**

**Monday, December 9:** *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. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David..." 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 1:30-32, 35 (New Revised Standard Version)

Mary was afraid. The throne of David was on earth, but we know Jesus' kingdom was not. Mary was betrothed yet still a virgin. Would Joseph abandon her? How would I react if I did not know the outcome? My faith would need to be very strong, and I pray to achieve that level. My faith was tested and raised to this level when bringing my special needs son out of a Covid depression, waiting for a prodigal son to come home, and working with CASA children. My tendency to give up was overcome by perseverance to step my faith up a notch from the power of the Holy Spirit in this and future challenges. Reading the bible in a year through *Our Daily Bread*, I have become very aware of faith passages which support me in my faith journey.

**Prayer:** God, thank you for giving me a successful pattern of enhancing my faith. May I use the power of the Holy Spirit to be of service to you and help others. Amen.

Dan - Christ Lutheran Church, Kokomo, IN

### **Tuesday, December 10:**

<sup>1</sup>*Jesse's family is like a tree that has been cut down.*

*A new little tree will grow from its stump.*

*From its roots a Branch will grow and produce fruit.*

<sup>2</sup>*The Spirit of the Lord will rest on that Branch.*

*The Spirit will help him to be wise and understanding.*

*The Spirit will help him make wise plans and carry them out.*

*The Spirit will help him know the Lord and have respect for him.*

Isaiah 11:1-2 (New International Readers Version)

Perhaps this scripture is what Jesus was considering when he is quoted in John 15:5 as saying, "I am the vine. You are the branches. If you remain joined to me, and I to you, you will bear a lot of fruit. You can't do anything without me."

Really? Nothing? I don't like to feel so helpless. A young cousin of mine once told her helpful mother, "help-a-selfa!" Cute for a toddler and acceptable thinking in our world. Maybe you also like to think of yourself as self-made, self-reliant. It seems Isaiah and Jesus have other ideas.

One of the most powerful life lessons I learned as an adult was to let go and let God. Sounds simple. Sounds easy. It's terrifying! It reminds me of the story of the man who is hanging on to a tree root when he fell over the edge of a cliff. He's about to fall to his death when he prays to God to save him. God tells him to let go. The man cries out, "Is anyone else there?" Funny. Yet, I often prefer to find an alternative to the ways of God. "Help-a-selfa!"

Jesus was led by the Spirit. Jesus relied on the Spirit. Jesus accepted the help of the Spirit. As I also grow my relationship with the third person of the Trinity, I am enabled to lean into my gifts and talents. I am grateful for any fruit produced out of this relationship.

**Prayer:** Creating Spirit, we pray that your relationship with us grows and helps us to produce a lot of fruit for the glory of God. Amen.

Jon – Leadership Team, Indianapolis, IN

**Wednesday, December 11:** *The interest of the people by now was building. They were all beginning to wonder, "Could this John be the Messiah?" But John intervened: "I'm baptizing you here in the river. The main character in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will ignite the kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out."* Luke 3: 15-16 (The Message)

Over the past four years, the Spirit has been stirring and bubbling up random memories from various times in my life: memories ranging from delightful and joyous to heartbreaking and painful to just plain ordinary, everyday memories. Finally, I began to jot down brief notes about those memories and began reminiscing about the stories these memories captured and encapsulated. That's when I started thinking that maybe *someday* I might write my memoir to pass on to my children and grandchildren – "when I have the time."

Three years ago, a powerful phrase from a sermon ended up being a daily reminder in my phone calendar of how the Spirit was igniting me to change "from the inside out": "Today and tomorrow I will be God's love." What a treasured way to start each morning. A year ago, the Spirit led me to another precious daily reminder, a quote from Albert Schweitzer: "The only thing of importance, when we depart, will be the traces of love we have left behind."

Having retired on September 1st, I now have the time, as well as my plethora of memories, to write my memoir. The Spirit has continually been stirring, steering me to a marvelous course on writing a book. My working title for my story is *Traces of Love: Being God's Love Today.*

How is the Spirit stirring in your life? Where do you see traces of God's love in your life? How are you responding to God's call to be God's love?

**Prayer:** Gracious Spirit of Love, you call us to be Love and to leave traces of that Love as we live each day. Thank you, Stirring Spirit, for igniting us and changing us from the inside out by opening our hearts and our hands, our minds and our voices to proclaim God's embracing and inclusive Love. Amen.

Carol – Leadership Team, Lebanon, IN

**Thursday, December 12:** *In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.* Acts 1:1-2 (New International Version)

I have only started to study the Bible earnestly in the last few years. In studying the Bible I am also learning all that Jesus did while on earth. The apostles learned how to live and act by being with Jesus and following Him. After Jesus died the Holy Spirit gave the apostles strength and wisdom to continue spreading the message of Jesus. At some point, all these messages were written down for future generations so they too could learn about their friend, Lord, and Savior, Jesus.

I am glad I can look to all the words in the Bible to find out about Jesus. These words have stood the test of time so I too can learn how I should act and live. It is a privilege to be a child of God and read and hear His words. It is also my duty to share His words with others. I did this by taking my children to church, to Sunday school and teaching them to pray at home. I want the words of Jesus to live on forever, for all generations to come.

**Prayer:** Holy Spirit I ask you to give me wisdom to understand all teachings found in Your precious words and to help me spread them to others. Amen.

Ginny – St. Paul Crossroads, Batesville, IN

**Friday, 13 December:** *If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.* Galatians 5:25 (New Revised Standard Version)

Advent is a season of waiting, a time for quiet reflection and renewal. This past year, I experienced a significant setback that invited me into that very experience. It felt at first like a disruption, but soon I realized it was a chance to pause and look inward, asking where God might be calling me. Instead of pushing through, I found myself stepping back, surrendering my plans, to explore what God's path might be. In that space, the Spirit began to work within me, revealing a new sense of purpose and direction that I hadn't seen before.

Paul's words, "If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit," became a powerful reminder to trust in God's guidance, even when I couldn't see the way forward. Advent's invitation to slow down, reflect, and prepare felt mirrored in my own journey of renewal. I learned to listen, seeking the Spirit's wisdom to shape my next steps with humility and trust. Each day brought a choice to renew my spirit through small acts of surrender, making way for God's work within me.

This Advent season, I hold close the gift of that setback, a time that has deepened my faith and renewed my spirit.

**Prayer:** Holy Spirit, renew our hearts and guide our steps this Advent season. May we find peace in Your presence and be transformed by Your love. Amen.

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

**Saturday, December 14:** *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death... For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.* Romans 8:1-2, 5-6 (New Revised Standard Version)

At an intersection near my home there is a 4-way stop sign. Often cars wait at each corner for their chance to advance. Each driver understands the rules of who goes first and next, taking turns in a strict order. Thanks to that order, everyone eventually continues on, without argument or collision. But woe to the driver who piggy-backs on someone else's turn or leaps ahead! Horns blare, voices are raised, and an accident nearly happens.

Not all drivers stop, however. Some purposely ignore stop signs, ramming their gas pedal and blowing through the intersection. Others are distracted (as I have been occasionally) and drive on

without realizing they were supposed to stop and look and wait. The “law” of the stop sign exists, but it doesn’t prevent us from ignoring it or breaking it.

Continuing this metaphor, what is the “*Spirit of life*” for a driver? Is it someone motioning you to pull into traffic ahead of them? Is it adjusting one’s speed in a work zone so that the construction workers are safe? Is it pulling over as an emergency vehicle zooms by?

As we await the coming of Jesus into our world, as we look for the Prince of peace, we long for a time when the “*Spirit of life*” fills every driver with patience and generosity; a time when our commute or trip is marked by both safety and kindness, with consideration for others, and forgiveness for our own carelessness. Come now, O Prince of peace!

**Prayer:** O God of life, guard all who travel this season and bring them safely to their destination and home again. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

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

### **ADVENT 3 – “Gifting Spirit (Fruit of the Spirit)”**

**Monday, December 16:** *Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.* John 15:4-5 (New Revised Standard Version)

When I was a young child, my family attended church. Life was dramatically different after my parents’ divorce. Church was not as consistent. I was friends with other Christian girls in high school, attending church with them. But I was holding on to a secret. Deep down, I knew I was gay. I also knew that the church disapproved.

Although I met other women like me in the Air Force, I drifted through life not finding a committed relationship. And I left the church.

After 27 years my life became “quiet.” I began to hear the Lord calling me back. Through the Salvation Army, I poured myself into learning about the Lord. I learned to play many musical instruments, leading children’s singing groups. I began to see the fruit of the Spirit.

Then one Sunday a new person came walking into the church. She was from the Kokomo Salvation Army, and we became close friends. Our relationship grew to a deeper love that we both knew would not be accepted. It was a difficult decision, but we had to leave the church.

It was almost a year before we found Resurrection Lutheran Church. Unbelievably, the congregation opened their arms to us and accepted us as we were! We started a Praise band and began to share the gifts God gave us.

As I look back over the last 17 years, I have been told that, unlike my time disconnected from the vine, I am bearing fruit. Thank you Jesus!

**Prayer:** Life’s road challenges us, Lord. Help us stay quiet, connected to you and bearing fruit. Amen.  
Debhora – Resurrection Lutheran Church, Marion, IN

**Tuesday, December 17:** *While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.* Romans 7:5-6 (New Revised Standard Version)

Adam and Eve were placed in the garden sin free. It wasn’t until they ate from the forbidden tree that sin began. Adam’s and Eve’s sin was then passed on to us all. Because we are sinful people, following the law of Moses can stir up sinful passions which can lead to death. The good news is,

because of Christ's death on the cross our sins can be forgiven. We are no longer slaves under the old written code. Our loving God gave his only son who became human and to live among us and to die a painful death so that our sins would be washed away. I cannot think of anything else that could show us the absolute love that God has for all those who believe in him!

**Prayer:** Lord, we thank you for your son, whom you loved, and all that he has done to save us from our sinful selves. In Jesus name we pray. Amen

Laura - St. Paul Ev. Lutheran Church, Batesville, IN

**Wednesday, December 18:** *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, for conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the words were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.* Hebrews 11:1-3 ( New Revised Standard Version)

Faith is not something I can see. I cannot touch it, hear it, smell it, touch it, or taste it. Yet, it is real! Faith is holding fast to a promise, like Sarah and Abraham held fast to God's promise to them.

I am a stitcher. I sew, I needlepoint, I cross-stitch, I knit, I quilt. Nothing makes me happier than walking into a store that sells materials for these activities. I see fabric, thread, and yards of fabric of a thousand different colors and patterns. Glorious!

Yet, none of these materials are the finished product. I can see the raw materials, and then I can visualize in my mind the finished product. It may be a dress, or a sweater, or something to hang on the wall. It may be something for me or something to give away. However, I believe that, with my skills and with the materials, the unseen item will be created. The final product is something not seen at the beginning. I have to believe that I can accomplish it.

Faith is like that to me. I cannot see the final product. It may even seem totally impossible; but, I have to believe that God sees the final creation. I have to pray that our Lord will help my unbelief.

**Prayer** God of creation, help me to see your work. Support me even when it would be easier not to believe. Amen.

Dee Ann – Christ Lutheran Church, Kokomo, IN

**Thursday, December 19:** When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." Luke 1:41-42 (New Revised Standard Version)

Last year, I wrote about the blessings and hope of children. I told about the joys of each and the sorrow of losing one. Three days after that devotion published on Facebook, Jon, my husband of 46 years, died from an aggressive cancer. We were all in shock, even as we watched him fade away. He was a strong, active, personable man who never met a stranger. Then all of sudden, he wasn't.

It has been a long year. The visitation and funeral, Social Security, veterans' benefits, medical bills, thank you notes that are still not completed. He was self-employed and the business needs to be cleared out and sold. Repairs to the house that were never done and now are mine to do. All this in addition to my fulltime job, church and volunteer activities. And yet, our grandson, Lucas, was born healthy and Jon did get to meet him. Our three adult children rallied around me (as they still do) to ease so many burdens. Family and friends called, sent sympathies, food, and gifts. People I barely know still tell me how much Jon is missed.

Life can be hard, and sorrows are heavy. However the gift of the Holy Spirit and the grace of God is shown through the love and care of strangers, friends, and family. These gifts give me the strength to keep moving forward as Jon would have wanted.

**Prayer:** Lord, Thank you for the blessing of family and friends during times of sorrow and joy. Amen

Amy – Christ Lutheran Church, Kokomo, IN



**Friday, December 20:** *If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.* 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 (New Revised Standard Version)

These verses speak to me about my motivation and the effect it has on the impact of my actions. When I am motivated by ambition, it seems like even my greatest achievements fail to make much difference. But when I accept God's gift of love through the Holy Spirit, it's like receiving some kind of divine matching grant! My smallest contributions are transformed and combined with the blessings of others into something of true significance.

During Advent it is easy for me to feel inadequate. There are so many celebrations, church services, family get-togethers, concerts, and other commitments that the joy of the season can be overpowered by feelings of guilt and responsibility. It helps to know that God's love never runs out. When I think about what I can do on my own, I am often overwhelmed by the commitments that I know I must fulfill. This year, I will focus on God's love as the impetus for what is meaningful. I pray for God's blessing that I might avoid the distractions of pride, personal gain, and vanity that are trumpeted from social media, advertising, and the earthly side of our holiday season.

**Prayer:** Lord, help us during Advent to focus on your love for us as manifested in the birth of your son, Jesus Christ. Inspire us to let love be the spark that lights our way during these hectic times and multiplies the fruits of our labor. Amen.

Greg - Bethel Lutheran Church, Gary, IN

**Saturday, December 21:** *As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.* Colossians 3:12 (New Revised Standard Version)

These gifts of the Holy Spirit are powerful and gifts not easy to "put on." I must prepare myself and get my mind and spirit in a place to receive these gifts. I do so in, with, and through spiritual readings and often through the refrain from hymns. One of my favorites, that we sang at the beginning and end of a recent Women's Retreat, is *My Life Flows on in Endless Song* (Evangelical Lutheran Worship #763). "No storm can shake my inmost calm while to you I am clinging. Since you are Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?" This refrain is so joyful and reminds me that I am a beloved and chosen child of God.

Another reading that prepares me is the classical devotion *Come Away my Beloved* by Frances J. Roberts. This excerpt is icing-on-the-cake. Imagine God saying to you, "Behold, I wait to bless you. I wait to give you my fullness. I delight to do for you. I love you beyond your power to begin to know. Only drop the things that you grasp in your hand and place your hand in Mine." Holding God's hand easily puts me in a place of wanting to serve others. They can know God's love through me being compassionate, kind, humble, meek, and patient.

**Prayer:** You are my All in All, Lord Jesus Christ: fill me with your love! Amen.

Walda - Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Crestview Hills, KY

## **ADVENT 4 – "Inspiring, Empowering, Discerning Spirit"**

**Monday, December 23:** *I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.* John 14:25-26 (New Revised Standard Version)

Have you ever missed someone you love and just wish you could ask them a question? After my mother died I missed her so much and then all these little questions would pop into my head like "how

do you know when the peanut brittle has boiled just the right so it isn't sticky?" or "how long do I bake this and at what temperature?"

Just like I have questions for my mother, so too I have questions for God! Maybe you do too? In John 14, Jesus promises us that he will always be with us – not in person but through the Holy Spirit. Sometimes we may hear the Spirit, inspiring or empowering us to try something that seems way out of our wheelhouse. Those words that inspire or empower us may come through a friend, a family member, or a complete stranger.

We are all designed to have a relationship and fellowship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is through daily prayer and devotional times that I feel the Spirit come to me and remind me of everything that Jesus has taught me through reading the scriptures. My prayer for you is that you too may feel the Spirit inspire and empower you in your time of prayer and devotion.

**Prayer:** Dear Holy Spirit, come to us this day to comfort us, guide us, inspire us, empower us, and fill us. Be near to us and help us to navigate this day. Reveal yourself to us that we may feel your power. Amen

Sharon - Leadership Team, Mulberry, IN

**Tuesday, December 24:** *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

Romans 12:2 (New Revised Standard Version)

This scripture tells me, "don't follow the habits of this world, but choose to follow the word of God." We are called to reset our earthly thinking to what God wants us to be. God wants us to be good and do good toward our neighbor. These traits are acceptable to God.

I believe God wants us to intentionally be Christlike. We should work hard every day to do what is acceptable to God. I don't use the term "perfect" because humans are far from perfect. However, we can and should be the best we can be in God's sight. I use the Ten Commandments as my guide to be Christlike.

Periodically, I drift into a worldly person. Wanting Fame and fortune. Big Job, fancy car, lots of money, etc. With prayer, I am reminded I already have all these things and more. Not to the extent of my dreams but definitely what I need. This includes the ability to do God's work. God's work is a priority for me. Work that I believe is good and acceptable to God. It simply requires adjusting our minds to what is good and acceptable to God and not necessarily to the world.

Having a Discerning Spirit enables me to navigate through the worldly attractions with the right focus. Always focused on God and doing God's work.

**Prayer:** Here I am Lord. Take my hand and guide me in the way you would have me go. Amen.

Florzell - Bethel Lutheran Church, Gary, IN

**Wednesday, December 25:** *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. 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. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.* Luke 2:15-18 (New Revised Standard Version)

This scripture passage is mostly about the shepherds. Yet, the holy courage of Mary caught my attention this time. She has been through a lot! Certainly more than we would consider normal for any

teenage girl. And here she is...not fretting, not angry, not disappointed. Or maybe she was all of these and more. Still, she treasures the shepherds' story and ponders it in her heart.

Now, my mind is a battlefield. My thoughts can be apocalyptic. In contrast, Mary "pondered them in her heart."

And "ponder" isn't a word we use often. It's bigger and deeper than the fast mental processing we call "thinking." Although "reflect" may capture its essence, "ponder" is more poetic, more elegant. There are, in the word "ponder," elements of the unexpected, of being surprised. We can feel Mary continuously working out these events in her heart. She is building, what author Brenè Brown calls, a "picture memory."

This Christmas season, we will all be building picture memories. Some of these memorable events will be filled with joy. It's also a time of loss and grief for others. Do you wonder, as I do, whether Mary continued to ponder these memories during the difficult days of Jesus' life? Perhaps especially at his death?

A faith built upon pondering, upon reflection, upon remembering can sustain us when the world becomes dangerous. What would it take for me to have that kind of faith?

**Prayer:** Holy One, teach us the way to faithfully ponder.

Jon – Leadership Team, Indianapolis, IN