

ADVENT – CHRISTMAS DEVOTIONS

2020 – 2021

Indiana-Kentucky Synod

These Advent/Christmas Devotions are provided to you as a gift from the participants of the IK Synod Spiritual Renewal Process – Inspire. Ignite. Invite. Siblings in Christ from 22 congregations began meeting in four cohorts in April 2020. During the monthly ZOOM meetings participants learned a variety of spiritual practices, wrote their own descriptions of spirituality, led small groups in their own congregations, developed relationships with others across the synod, and deepened their own spirituality.

Thank you to the leadership team for Inspire. Ignite. Invite. – Jon Dahl, Gethsemane, Indianapolis, IN; Pr. Daryl Emowrey, Calvary, Angola, IN; 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.

ADVENT 1 – HOPE

November 27: *Our soul waits for the LORD; he is our help and shield. Our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name. Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us, even as we hope in you.* Psalm 33:20-22 (New Revised Standard Version).

I am not a hopeful person. Is the glass half empty or half full? I'm not sure there is any water in the glass at all. I was raised to consider all possible outcomes, all potential pitfalls, all potential consequences. I was to expect the worst so I could be pleasantly surprised if things went well.

Hope is a word that I find difficult to define and it is a word we toss around lightly. We hope for good weather. We hope our sports team will win. We hope heavy traffic won't make us late. This seems like wishful thinking, more what we want than where we place our hope. Additionally, hope isn't optimistic "pie-in-the-sky" where everything is "going to be all right." More often than not, everything isn't all right. Pandemics happen, people are cruel to each other, bills can't be paid, children make bad choices.

So what is hope? For me, hope is God's presence. Hope helps me look beyond the present crisis. Hope lets me know that someone greater than me keeps me putting one foot in front of the other. Hope reminds me that God sits with me in difficult days. Hope reassures me of God's steadfast love.

Prayer: Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us, even as we hope in you.

Barbara – Cohort 1: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Gethsemane Lutheran Church, Indianapolis, IN

November 28: *For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O LORD, from my youth.* Psalm 71:5 (New Revised Standard Version)

I could not have been more than eight or nine years old that Christmas morning. My parents did an "ole switcheroo" on my brother and me. Instead of putting our presents downstairs, they waited until we went downstairs and then snuck them into our bedrooms upstairs.

Money did not grow on trees at our house, and so we learned at a very young age to be thankful for any gift, no matter what it looked like or who presented it. That year for Christmas, I had hoped for many different things, and those things I found in my room were not on my list! I remember I actually threw the brand-new curling iron against the wall. I was certainly not being thankful and was totally self-absorbed.

Who can relate to this moment? That's not what I want. That's not what I desire. That's not the way I would do it! That's not what I like. That's not... The things we hope for are not always the things God hopes for us.

Psalm 71 reminds us that our hope, our trust, only has to be in the Lord. No matter what our hopes and desires are, the LORD sits with us. The LORD is always coming to us, despite any less than thankful and self-absorbed moments. I pray your curling iron this Christmas is received with the hope and trust that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father!

Prayer focus: O Lord, may my hope and trust always be in you!

Candice – Cohort 3: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Faith Lutheran Church, Logansport, IN

November 29: Psalm 119:114 (New International Version)

*You are my refuge and my shield;
I have put my hope in your word.*

A few years ago, when I found out my daughter was expecting her first child, I was filled with the joy of having another grandchild. Then, at her first doctor visit the ultrasound revealed an issue of concern. Further testing confirmed a diagnosis of Turner Syndrome, which is a missing x chromosome. The prognosis was that the baby would have only a 1% chance of survival. Prayers for strength began immediately.

The realization of the diagnosis was initially overwhelming. Trying to stay positive and figure out how to be there for my daughter when I myself was struggling wasn't easy. By believing in God's promises and putting my hope in him, I was given the strength to encourage, listen, and support my daughter through an extremely stressful time. Together, with God's help, we could get through anything.

My granddaughter just celebrated her fourth birthday!

Prayer: Lord, we ask that you continue to give us hope in this sometimes-uncertain world. Help us to stay positive and to live our lives as your servants, believing and trusting that you are always walking with us in both our struggles and our joys. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Laura – Cohort 3: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
St. Paul Lutheran Church – Crossroads, Batesville, IN

November 30: *For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.* Jeremiah 29:11 (New International Version)

Who would have thought that our world would have changed so much over the past year due to the global pandemic?

Reading Jeremiah 29:11 reminds me of a similar life-changing situation the Israelites encountered. They were carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. Can you imagine being forced to live in a foreign land inhabited by your enemies? God was there with them and sent reassurance and a message through Jeremiah that they should marry, have children, prosper, and make the best of their circumstances.

God has a plan for our future. God wants us to have hope, trusting Him during our uncertain times. We are called to be cooperative, care for others, and act in kindness and love. As Fred Rogers said, "Look for the helpers."

Be mindful of all the health care workers who respond in sacrificial love daily. Also, notice emergency responders and essential service workers who take high risks for the sake of others.

Carol is a helper who's a gifted musician and seamstress. When masks were needed, she stepped up to the task and made over 500 masks (at 45 minutes apiece) for nursing homes, churches, and hospitals. Before the virus, she would go to area nursing homes and play the piano. Carol instilled the love of music to her students over the years. She also played for church services many years, using her talents for the Lord, always with a loving, kind spirit. She's a person who volunteers often, does the unnoticed jobs, and does everything with a humble heart.

Prayer focus: Listen for God's still small voice asking you to be a helper in His plans, as you seek ways to be more charitable and loving.

Judy – Cohort 4: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
St. Mark Lutheran Church, Batesville, IN

December 1: *Oh! May the God of green hope fill you up with joy, fill you up with peace, so that your believing lives, filled with the life-giving energy of the Holy Spirit, will brim over with hope!* Romans 15:13 (The Message)

If we have learned anything during this terrible pandemic, it is the emptiness of hope in the things of the world.

Advent hope is the anticipation of the coming celebration of the birth of the Christ Child. Jesus' life was his ministry; He was crucified and rose to new life. This Risen Jesus gives us hope and confidence in the forgiveness of our sin and eternal life with God.

When I was in chaplain training, there were two separate incidents when I felt I should go and visit patients on a weekend. I didn't go because of the long distance to the hospital. When I went to work on Monday, following each incident, I found that both patients had died. I thought, maybe I should start listening and trusting those *whispers from the Holy Spirit* and *act on them!*

There was a time in my life when I desperately needed hope. A loved one was in the hospital, dying. I felt empty and alone. As I prayed, listened, and waited, I had a profound sense that God was with me, in the midst of my sorrow. Jesus had wrapped his arms around me. I felt a quiet peace that sustained me through the days and months ahead.

Advent is a time when we wait, hope, and expect God's great love to come and to be present, even now. Not only does God come to us through our hope, watching and waiting, but *through our listening and trusting, as well.*

Prayer: May God bless you in this Advent season with the gift of hope spilling over with joy and peace, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Jane – Cohort 4: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Cross of Christ Lutheran Church, Crown Point, IN

December 2: *...the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints...* Ephesians 1:18 (New King James Version)

The season of advent is a time of hopefulness and expectation. The Savior is coming! Most years, the excitement of the holiday season mirrors this hopeful expectancy. Children anticipate opening their presents, and families look forward to time together. However, this year, I am not looking forward to holiday celebrations. Instead, I, like many of you, am planning to navigate the holidays away from family due to the pandemic. This feels like another in a long line of disappointments this year.

In light of this, Paul's words to the Ephesians here are comforting. He highlights that hope isn't something innate for Christians. In fact, Paul has to pray that they will know the hope that God has given. This is a reminder that I have been called, that there is hope in that, and it will lead to an understanding of the rich inheritance God has for me (which is better than any Christmas present). It would be lovely if I automatically was given hope when I was called. But Paul tells the Ephesians it doesn't happen this way. Rather, this hope needs to be asked for and given, repeatedly.

So, when I am feeling guilty about my lack of hope – in God's call, his guidance, his mercy – I can remind myself of the Ephesians and ask for hope. In those moments, I might join Nadia Bolz-Weber's prayer:

Prayer: "I don't think you created us to be able to metabolize such a constant stream of bad news everyday, Lord . . . So if you could show...up right now, that would be great. And if you are already showing up, give us new eyes to notice you."

Nadia Bolz-Weber. "Sunday Prayers: turn me not into my enemy edition." *The Corners*. 20 Sept. 2020.
<https://nadiabolzweber.substack.com/p/sunday-prayers-23c>

Jeanette – Cohort 4: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Calvary Lutheran Church, Angola, IN

December 3: *[Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.] And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. Romans 5:3-5 (New Revised Standard Version)*

I both love and dislike this text, but it has been one that I have returned to many times in my life. I love the idea of a hope that does not disappoint. Especially in our challenging times, hope is one of the things to which we can cling. But I dislike all that suffering, endurance, and character stuff that seems to come before it.

And yet, upon closer look, we are first told that, through faith, Christ gives us peace and grace and in that we can boast (or as some translations say, "shout praise"). So, standing in that peace and grace, we still can offer praise even while we are in the midst of suffering (or hardships), knowing that they produce endurance (passionate patience, perseverance) which produces character (experience, strong virtue) which produces hope (alert expectancy) that doesn't disappoint (leave us).

What a timely message! As the grief and stress of all the changes we've had to endure threatens to overtake us, still we can praise our Triune God, for hardship produces passionate patience (I love that!) which produces experience which produces alert expectancy that will never leave us. We will get through this – not because of what we do, but because of who God is. In this season of Hope, may we have the "alert expectancy" for how God is at work in us and all of creation. Thanks be to God!

Prayer: God of All Hope, in this season of Advent, when it is sometimes difficult to find hope, help us to know that, because of who you are, we have hope that does not disappoint. Grant us passionate patience so that, living in alert expectancy, we experience your presence always: in, around and through us. Amen.

Amy – Cohort 1: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Zion Lutheran Church, North Manchester, IN

ADVENT 2 – PEACE

December 4: *O LORD, you will ordain peace for us, for indeed, all that we have done, you have done for us.*
Isaiah 26:12 (New Revised Standard Version)

Peace is a big word. It can take on a personal meaning, like when we find comfort in a stressful time. On a grander scale, it is used to describe the resolution of conflict between enemies. In matters of the Spirit, peace comes from the removal of that which separates us from God.

Today, peace by any of those definitions seems elusive. Political and religious leaders harness resentment to scapegoat the disfavored. Millions die worldwide from a disease that had no name before 2020. Nations fight over disputed territories. Natural disasters displace thousands.

Celebrating our Savior's birth, we read passages mentioning peace. Isaiah's words speak of a peace that is yet to come. He is assured by faith it will be established, just as he believes God provided in the past.

History reminds us that a lack of peace is nothing new. During the Civil War, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote a poem titled "Christmas Bells." Later set to music under the title "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day," it has become a familiar carol. Longfellow lamented the division of his time, yet the bells reminded him that God was still present and active in the world.

Prayer focus: Take time to notice where you feel God's presence in the world and how that can bring you peace.

P.J. Hinton – Cohort 1: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Gethsemane Lutheran Church, Indianapolis, IN

December 5: Luke 1: 78-79 (The Message)
*Through the heartfelt mercies of our God,
God's Sunrise will break in upon us,
Shining on those in the darkness,
those sitting in the shadow of death,
Then showing us the way, one foot at a time,
down the path of peace.*

Whether we have known someone who has faced difficult challenges mentally, physically, or spiritually, or we have struggled with our own periods of confusion, despair, or pain, it's never easy to believe that God's love is present in the midst of deep darkness. When we cry out to God for help, it's hard for us to feel God's grace and mercy. We might even doubt that God genuinely cares about people's needs at all, save for those who might seem to live happily day-after-day without a care in the world.

In this scripture passage, Zechariah tells us that we can trust and place our hope in God. We not only believe, but we also *know* that God's Spirit is always with us, providing an abundance of goodness for us through God's heartfelt mercies. In fact, God is so compassionately merciful that God's Sunrise—God's only Son Jesus—shines on us even as we sit in the shadow of death. We have nothing to fear, only Christ's peace to gain!

The light that radiates from the Christ Child illumines our dark corners. And that glorious light makes it possible for us to find our way from death into eternity, step-by-step, one foot at a time. In faith and expectancy, we journey on earthly pilgrim paths of peace until Christ comes, wiping every tear from our eyes, and we never have cause to cry again.

Thanks and praise to God for Christ's peace – "inhaled and exhaled" grace after grace-filled day!

Prayer focus: Those who feel helpless and fearful.

Jill – Cohort 4: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
St. Mark Lutheran Church, Batesville, IN

December 6: *I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety.*
Psalm 4:8 (New Revised Standard Version)

This verse has a profound message for us. We are all vulnerable as we sleep. Remembering this verse should let us sleep peacefully. However, that is not always the case. Just this past week I woke up and couldn't get back to sleep. I had way too many things going through my mind. I was worried about what I needed to do the next day at work. Then I was thinking about my possible early retirement. I was so tired, but I just couldn't seem to quiet my thoughts. I started thinking about this verse and being able to sleep peacefully. Then one of my favorite Christmas songs, *Silent Night*, popped into my mind. "Silent night, holy night! All is calm, all is bright round yon virgin mother and child. Holy Infant, so tender and mild, sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace." I started singing this song to myself and I soon fell asleep.

Sleep is such an essential part of our day. Our bodies need to be restored by restful sleep. Yet many people find this impossible for one reason or another. I believe the Lord wants us to know that we should turn our cares over to him and sleep in peace.

Prayer focus: Remember in prayer those people that cannot sleep peacefully. The soldier in a war zone, the homeless person without a bed, the person in chronic pain and anybody else that is suffering from the lack of restful sleep.

Ginny – Cohort 3: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
St. Paul Lutheran Church – Crossroads, Batesville, IN

December 7: *Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*
Philippians 4:5-7 (New Revised Standard Version)

I am a prayer. I pray with people, for people, and alone. I pray for peace, justice, and miracles. I pray for healing, and reunification with Christ. I pray thanksgiving and praise prayers.

However, I often forget to pray for the things I worry about most. The situations on my mind and in my heart, which keep me up at night. The problems that seem too big to solve. I think through and try to solve them alone. And when that does not work, I call a friend, but forget to take it to God.

I hold those things tight, within my control, and I cannot solve them. Yet, the Holy Spirit often intercedes and reminds me to take it to God in prayer. And as soon as I do, the worry is released. The need to control and solve my difficult problems is no longer mine to solve alone.

Instead, I am now filled with the peace that surpasses all understanding, and able to find answers, solve problems, and journey through trouble with God. The Spirit of Gentleness intercedes.

May you feel the Spirit in this hymn – *Spirit, Spirit of gentleness* at <https://youtu.be/TcxLeObxoJs>.

Prayer: Dearest God, our hope, gently nudge us into your presence, so we may take time with you in prayer each day, giving you all our cares, concerns, fears, problems, worries, and praises, welcoming you into the journeys of our lives. Amen.

Joy – Cohort 3: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Bethel Lutheran Church, Gary, IN

December 8: *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)

What's in a name? The answer is: "a lot!" My name, for example, carries a reminder of my mother's lineage. My middle name is my mom's maiden name – Martin. That's a pretty good name in Lutheran circles! I'm just glad that her maiden name wasn't Dinglemeister! (With my apology and meaning no offense to anyone reading this who might have that name.)

The name *Jesus* means *Savior* or *the Lord saves*. But about 700 years before Jesus' birth, Isaiah prophesied that a son would be born who would carry the names/titles of Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. And although my childhood was lived in the 1960's when peace symbols like ☮ or ✌ were seen everywhere due to civil unrest and the war in Viet Nam, I believe that I have not known a time when peace was needed more than today. The conflicts I've witnessed here in Louisville, KY, the division I see in our nation, and the wars I read about around the world leave me longing for the arrival of the Prince of Peace.

The season of Advent offers the opportunity to prepare ourselves once again for Jesus' birth, even as it allows us to look forward to his return – and the day when wars will cease, and God's perfect peace will reign.

Prayer: Jesus, name above all names, ignite our hearts with eager anticipation as we await the celebration of your birth and the peace it brings. With whom will I share your peace today? Amen.

Ken – Cohort 2: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Ascension Lutheran Church, Louisville, KY

December 9: *Now may the Lord of Peace himself give you his peace at all times in every situation. The Lord be with you all.* 2 Thessalonians 3:16 (New Living Translation)

As I move from day to day events, I ask myself, "where is this peace?" Why do we struggle so hard searching for peace? We have fought wars, lives have been lost, and people wander around searching for peace. We may be searching for a false peace, which leaves us with a disappointed soul instead of an inner heartfelt peace. A peace that brings comfort, rest, refreshment, and hope. I compare this peace to a calm breeze, a feeling that makes me stop, think, and smile. By accepting the Lord into my heart, I am believing that he will grant me true peace. We have been given this gift. We must accept, feel, live, and share it.

My granddaughter discovered this calming peace in her journey with the death of a coach and friend. She questioned why and felt anger. I heard her mom tell her the perfect line, "Sweetheart, we must believe that the Lord is with us and that he will take care of us." I wept as I watched and observed the love of God in action. A mom comforting a child with the words of the love, offered to all of us from our Lord and Savior. That evening I saw a smile from Addi as she shared the peace that she was feeling. She stated, "I know God needed a great soccer coach and I am certain he has gotten the best coach today." She could feel the calm breeze of peace that her Lord was providing her.

Prayer: Dear Lord, may we all be able to live with a childlike trust relationship with Christ, being fully aware that he knows us, sees us, loves us, and continually offers us peace in every situation. May we all feel the peace of God to guard our hearts and bring us comfort, rest, and hope. Amen.

Janie – Cohort 1: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Calvary Lutheran Church, Cromwell, IN

December 10: *How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of those who bring the happy news of peace and salvation, the news that the God of Israel reigns.* Isaiah 52:7 (The Living Bible Paraphrased)

At the age of fourteen, I was given my first bible: *The Living Bible Paraphrased*. The inscription, in part, reads:

“To Ladona: Always remember “Christ is the answer” and keep him in control of your life...you shall always know the fruits of the Spirit!” (Gal 5:22). Love you, Thelma, 6/29/1974.

I was seeking peace in those awkward teen years. “Who am I?” “Where do I belong?” Now, years later, I understand I was really seeking the answer to this question: “To whom do I belong?”

As Isaiah announced to the exiles that God would comfort them and bring them out of exile, Thelma, too, placed the word of God into my hands, the happy, good news, that led me to find peace in knowing the saving love of our God. Through God bringing me out of exile, I find peace in God’s unwavering faithfulness, even when I am unfaithful. Peace in knowing God is in charge and I am not. Peace in knowing that through believing, I have been given fruits of the Spirit to bring others the happy, good news that God indeed reigns.

Thelma, on June 29, 1974, changed my life in providing me God’s word. My life has never been the same, as each day I find peace in knowing to whom I belong.

Thank you, Thelma. Love you!

Prayer focus: Those who share the happy, good news of our loving God.

Ladona– Cohort 3: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Trinity Lutheran Church, Brookville, Indiana

ADVENT 3 – LOVE

December 11: *A new command: I give you. Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.* John 13:34-35 (New International Version)

During one of the last years before I retired from teaching, I received an invitation to be recognized as a person that made an impact on a senior Honor Society student’s life. I really thought someone made a mistake but near the end the student who was recognizing me gave her reason. She stated that the first day of class I had said each one of my students was important to me and I truly loved them all. She had doubted the honesty of that statement, but as the year went on, she saw I really meant what I said. That made a huge impact on her and had on many of my students through the years.

My life has been to show my students my love and the love of God to each of them. I have tried to be a good example of God’s love, especially with students that most people give up on. Those were some of my best students. God touched their lives.

Without God’s love for me, I would not have been able to help students and others see the worth of their lives. God has granted us all this love and we need to make sure we use it as intended.

Prayer focus: People in your life who need your love and God's love.

Bonnie – Cohort 1: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Calvary Lutheran Church, Cromwell, IN

December 12: *No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.* John 15:13 (New Revised Standard Version)

Giving your life for your friends – that sounds like a bit much. But if you change the word *life* in the text to *time* or *money*, we can love as Jesus asks.

When you lay down your time for your friends, it could be prayer, physical labor, a meal or a phone call with a listening ear or a text that comforts and encourages. The list goes on. Your friends are also people you haven't met or people you may never meet but you pray for them and donate to the causes that will help them in their time of need.

Jesus gave his life for his friends. What a friend we have in Jesus. What a friend Jesus has in us, when we care for his people, our friends.

Prayer: Jesus, my friend, how do you want me to lay down my time and my money for our friends?

Amy – Cohort 1: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Zion Lutheran Church, North Manchester, IN

December 13: *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.* John 3:16-17 (King James Version)

John 3:16-17 – likely the most ubiquitous verse in the entire Bible. We see it on signs, at sporting events, on t-shirts, scrolled across the walls of buildings, under bridges, as tattoos, and on bumper stickers. Yet, do these words take your breath away? Do these words make your heart joyful? Do they humble you with the sacrifice made and the promise of eternal life? Do you feel God's arms wrapped around you and His words comforting you in times of joy, sadness, uncertainty?

As we are in the midst of the Advent season, let us be reminded of God's promise of eternal life and the sacrifice given to each and every one of us who have accepted Christ into their lives. Let us not be distracted by the lights, tinsel, bells, buttons and bows. Let us not be distracted by the shopping, waiting for a package to arrive, and the worry that consumes us looking for that perfect gift.

But, let us be ever mindful in our thoughts, words, and deeds during this Advent season that we have already received that perfect gift of everlasting life. Let us be confident that God sent His Son to save the world not condemn it. His gift was bestowed upon us yesterday, it is ever present today and will be there waiting for every tomorrow.

Prayer: Our Heavenly Father, We ask that you help us not to succumb to outside distractions this Advent season but to focus on and remain ever steadfast in being stewards of Your words and to remember Your promises and rejoice in Your truth. Amen.

Cheryl – Cohort 1: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Bethany Lutheran Church, Indianapolis, IN

December 14: *But God demonstrates His own love for us: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*
Romans 5:8 (New International Version)

Every year as preparations begin to celebrate the birth of our Lord, I get excited, light-hearted and have a sense of goodwill. I'm a bit old-fashioned and still look forward to mailing out Christmas cards. I spend a lot of time choosing a card that sends cheer and relays the Good News that Christ the Savior is born!

A few years ago, I discovered a card that wasn't bright and cheerful. It was dark in color. On the front was a manger with a light from above, which I thought it might be symbolizing the light of the world that is Christ coming into a dark, cold world. Over the manger was the shadow of a cross. Inside the card were the words, "From His first cry in Bethlehem to His last cry from the cross, all He ever did was show His love for us." I thought to myself, "This is the perfect Christmas card."

The story of Jesus is the greatest love story ever told. God sent His Son to earth to live among us, be tempted in every way that we are tempted. We, who are unworthy, guilty of sin, are helpless to find salvation on our own. It took the amazing grace, and sacrificial love of Jesus, who was without sin, going to the cross to save our fallen race. As we celebrate Advent and Christmas, remember that the best gift you can give is sharing Christ's love with another.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, during this season of Advent, as we come expectant with joy, pouring over promises made by prophets, may we rest assured that even though we have sinned, nothing can separate us from your love. Give us the grace to show and share the love of Jesus with everyone we meet.

Judy – Cohort 4: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
St. Mark Lutheran Church, Batesville, IN

December 15: Psalm 89: 1-2 (The Message)

Your love, GOD, is my song, and I'll sing it!

I'm forever telling everyone how faithful you are.

I'll never quit telling the story of your love—

how you built the cosmos

and guaranteed everything in it.

When I was in high school, I dated my first boyfriend, and after we broke up, I fell into a deep depression. I felt unlovable because for so long I had based my self-worth on that relationship. I broke away from friendships that were bad for me. I felt cold-hearted because for so long I had expected myself to make them work even though it was time to let go. These experiences made love feel absent from my life. Even though I knew there were still people who loved me. Even though breaking away from relationships that are hurting you does not mean the good memories have to disappear. I was beginning to feel distant even from God's love.

But God had a plan for me and eventually I met new people who I could feel His love through again. Everything happens for a reason and these experiences helped me grow into the person I am today. Because I have faced challenges, I know even more of the importance of love and compassion. I sing God's song of love everyday by showing kindness to those around me. Love is a crucial part of our existence. Without love, life would be hopeless and empty. That is why God sends us His love in many ways through our relationships with each other as friends, family, partners... As long as we spread God's love by loving and showing kindness to each other, the story of His love will never end.

Prayer focus: those who feel unworthy of being loved.

Brittany – Cohort 4: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Shiloh Lutheran Church, Walton, IN

December 16: *See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!* 1 John 3:1 (New International Version)

When I was seventeen, I received a scholarship from the United States Congress and the German Bundestag to study in Germany. I was assigned to a host family with three girls and was immediately treated as a member of the family.

When December rolled around, I found that there were many American customs that I missed, but I was struck by the acute focus that was placed on Advent. My German family didn't decorate their home from top to bottom, covered with holiday trimmings at the beginning of the season. Instead, the only sign that the season was upon us was the simple evergreen wreath and glowing blue candles that graced our dining table at every meal.

As my sisters and I took turns lighting the candles, we would read a daily devotion, share a prayer, and discuss faith. Gathered around the table, staring at those flickering flames, I grew in my understanding of how loved I was by Jesus. To this day, I treasure the season of Advent as a time to rest in the presence of God and look with anticipation towards the "good news for all people, the light that will always shine in the darkness. A great love which the Father has lavished on us."

That first Advent in Germany, I experienced anew the longing for Christ as I expectantly waited for the joy of Jesus' birth. And like the writer of 1 John reminds us, I saw the lavish love of God.

Prayer: Gracious Lord, As we gaze upon the flickering flames of our Advent candles, may we be reminded that you cast light into our lives, illuminate places of darkness, and shine your lavish love on us. Break into the places within us in need of your care, fill us with your grace, so that we may radiate the joy that comes from being a beloved child of God. Amen.

Heidi – Cohort 2: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Pilgrim Lutheran Church, Carmel, IN

December 17: Psalm 36:5-6 (The Message)

*God's love is meteoric,
his loyalty astronomic,
His purpose titanic,
his verdicts oceanic.
Yet in his largeness
nothing gets lost;
Not a man, not a mouse,
slips through the cracks.*

I marvel at the unimaginable complexity of this remarkable creation, which we have been given to enjoy. In awe, I often find myself peering out into the expanse of this universe, attempting to comprehend the wonders yet unseen that it contains. With trepidation, these moments of marvel and awe turn the infinite universe within as I contemplate the present moment of my life. In the depth of the silence, as my mind fills with questions, my heart begins to understand the presence of grace as the whole of creation melts away. God's Love, divine and endless, is breathed into the expanse of my imagination and comforts the depth of my soul's longing.

Prayer: We pause with thanksgiving and pray,

L: O Come, O Come, O Lord of might...

O: O Come, O Come, O Dayspring (*Oriens*), come and cheer...

V: O Come, O come, Victor over the grave...

E: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel...

Thank you, gracious Jesus; we rejoice, embraced in your unceasing Love. Amen.

Creighton – Cohort 3: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.

St. Paul Lutheran Church – Crossroads, Batesville, IN

ADVENT 4 – JOY

December 18: *Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit.* Psalm 51: 10-12 (King James Version)

The first thing I notice in this passage is David asking God to “renew a right spirit within me.” Even in retirement, my To Do list continues to be long. Most of the things on my list seemed to be important when I listed them, but most of the items on my To Do list are really more “self-centered” than “Christ-centered.” During this holiday season, my list gets even longer.

I recall part of a sermon from a long time ago where the pastor said, “On those days when my list of things to do is so long that it seems impossible to get all of the important things done, I double the time I take for prayer.”

The second thing I notice is David asking, “Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation.” I have experienced an inner peace when I ask for God’s forgiveness and guidance, and I find that the most important things on my list do get done. More importantly, when I make sure I do things that are Christ-centered, I have the joy of having a clear conscience.

May you also experience God’s joy every day.

Prayer focus: For those who feel overwhelmed with all that they have to do.

Bruce – Cohort 1: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.

Bethany Lutheran Church, Indianapolis, IN

December 19: *Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.* 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (New Revised Standard Version)

I stood presiding over communion, singing, “*It is indeed right... that we should at all times and in all places offer thanks and praise to you...*” when the words caught in my throat and my eyes filled with tears. The events of the past month finally caught up with me.

My father-in-law was dying of cancer. My own father and stepmother survived a frightening car accident while towing their boat. Numerous people in my congregation had received news causing additional sorrow. We were all hurting, and yet, here we stood, daring to give thanks and praise to God. Really?!

It is this same urging that we read in this first letter to the Thessalonians. Rejoice, pray, give thanks, always without end. Not only in the joys of life, but in the midst of challenges. Rejoice, pray, give thanks. But at times we cannot help but ask, “Really?!”

That day I argued with God. And God responded.

There in that ancient communion liturgy sung by the church for centuries, I heard again God's promise. God's assurance that in Jesus' death and rising again, he overcame death and the grave. That death is not the end. And then, as we ate and drank the body and blood of Christ, I felt that promise of Emmanuel, God with us. I experienced that good news of Jesus that day. That good news that enables us to rejoice always, pray continually, and give thanks in all circumstances.

Prayer: Gracious God, you know the longings of our hearts, the burdens we bear, and the stirring of our souls. Fill us with your presence, and remind us of your promises in Jesus Christ, that we would always be able to rejoice in you and give you thanks. We pray this in your holy name. Amen.

Marty – Cohort 4: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Faith Lutheran Church, Fort Wayne, IN

December 20: Isaiah 55:12 (The Message)

*So you'll go out in joy,
you'll be led into a whole and complete life.
The mountains and hills will lead the parade,
bursting with song.
All the trees of the forest will join in the procession,
exuberant with applause.*

As we focus on the birth of Jesus, we think of joyous times with singing and dancing, the coming together of family and friends to celebrate the birth of the Christ child and the lives of those around us. It is also a time to remember those who have gone before us and those who struggle at this time of the year. The year of 2020 has been a challenge for many of us as we have navigated the COVID-19 wilderness, the injustices all across our country and around the world, and the tumultuous elections. During this time of Advent and coming Christmas Season, it is a good time to quiet our minds and our thoughts and focus on God's love and God's many gifts we have received. Let us remember our neighbor in need and reach out with the same grace that has been extended to us.

May we all focus on the promise in Isaiah 55:12 and celebrate the joy and the complete life we can have when we join in the parade with all creation! When we turn to God, we will find joy and even all creation will celebrate with song and exuberant applause!

Prayer focus: Giving thanks we are invited to the parade.

Sharon – Cohort 4: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Shiloh Lutheran Church, Walton, IN

December 21: *Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones.* Isaiah 49:13 (New Revised Standard Version)

As a child, I had a very real fear of dying. A frightening fear of being alone in a very scary place. Looking back, all those years ago, at a very young age I lost my great grandmother and my grandfather, her son, within a few weeks of each other. Great Grandma Christena was very old. The last time I saw her she was frail and bedridden. Grandpa was a robust hardworking farmer. My memory is fear, sadness and the sorrow of my parents that was too much for me to understand. There was no joy, only sadness.

My mother passed away over sixty years later. Her life was one of love and caring for her family, and a great love for her Lord. Sitting at her bedside, watching her slip away, I felt peace throughout my body. Her words at Dad's passing, "I don't know how anyone can get through this without faith," echoed in my mind.

When she took her last breath, I witnessed the heavens opening, immediately feeling an electrifying presence as she was accompanied home. I could sense angels singing as she was lifted above me. I felt His comforting embrace. I knew. I believed.

Now relating my experience, I still feel His presence as I am once again wrapped in His love. As we await the good news this Advent, know and believe in His love.

Prayer: Dear God, as we await with joy and anticipation the celebration of our Lord Jesus, may we also look with faithful anticipation and celebration of our eternal life with Him. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Kathy – Cohort 1: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Calvary Lutheran Church, Cromwell, IN

December 22: *As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.*
John 15:9-11 (New Revised Standard Version)

When I read these verses my mind kept coming back to two words - *love* and *commandments*. I think of these words in the context of Jesus' simple declarations of loving God and loving thy neighbor as thyself (Matthew 22: 37-39). For me this meant trying to find a way to follow Jesus into the world. My home church gave me that opportunity when I was asked to lead The Neighborhood Connection. I found myself being led by the Holy Spirit to meet new people. The Spirit drove me not to preach the Gospel, but to live it. My task was to knock down walls that had become barriers. It was proving that a church could live and thrive in a community.

Our congregation (30 on a good day) has purchased hundreds of book bags stocked with supplies. We've fed huge crowds at Thanksgiving. We've hosted neighborhood children at Easter. We've turned our grounds into a neighborhood park complete with walkways, a playground, a labyrinth, beehives, and a wild-flower garden. These things mean love to me and my church family. Love means smiles on faces. Love means communicating with someone new. Love means seniors decorating pumpkins with children from the community. Love means playing bingo with challenged people who only know how to love. Love means kids hugging my daughter in her bunny costume. Love means the love and understanding that people have for each other when barriers are broken, and love means the tears in my eyes as I write this devotion.

Prayer: Please, God, give us the strength to continue to follow Jesus into the world, and may we see his face in the faces of strangers and friends. Amen.

Gary – Cohort 1: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Gethsemane Lutheran Church, Indianapolis, IN

December 23: Psalm 126:2 (New Revised Standard Version)
*Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
"The LORD has done great things for them.*

Almost 20 years ago and not long after my future wife, Sarah, became organist and choir director at our current congregation, I attended the holiday choir party as her guest. It was a bit of an intimidating affair for a poor singer to be around all these people who could carry a tune. On top of that, even after being a church member for five years, I did not know most of the people there since they spent their Sunday mornings in the choir loft.

So, after some polite mingling, I sat down on the fireplace ledge of the host's home to warm up and watch others enjoy the party. One of the choir members, also named John, sat down by me and shortly we were laughing like a couple of goofballs over something now long forgotten. We hardly knew one another and had both thought the other was overly reserved but the laughter and good-natured silliness changed that. In fact, John's wife, Noel, threatened to never let us sit next to one another again at a choir party! However, we have sat next to one another at every choir party since with much more laughter.

Like all gifts, laughter can be used in bad ways – belittling or teasing someone else, for example – but God gave it to us to break down barriers and to enjoy fellowship. And when we do that, it becomes easier to band together and do God's work.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for the gift of laughter. Help us to use it to bond with each other so we can cheerfully do Your work. In the name of Your Son, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

John – Cohort 2: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Pilgrim Lutheran Church, Carmel, IN

December 24: *An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord."* Luke 2:9-11 (New International Version)

Oh, how I love the Christmas season! Don't you? I mean really, who doesn't love the bright lights, decorations, baked goodies, and even a little of that white stuff on the ground!

I love the anticipation on the faces of my grandchildren...

I love the extended family time together...

I love all the holiday goodies ...

I love planning gift giving (my primary love language) ...

And I even love the mess (did I just say that?)...

On the first day of the Advent season, I place on my mantle my Fontanini nativity set given to me by my parents. As I go about setting up my nativity, I often wonder what angels really look like! I then share a prayer of thanksgiving as I work, which leaves me with a feeling of inner calm and peace.

I love that even during the midst of all the hyper-consumerism we still exalt the name of Jesus! We declare to the world that there is news of great joy for ALL people. A Savior has been delivered to us, one who can free us from threat and danger! How blessed we are by this news!

Prayer: Father, what an amazing night these shepherds had as they experienced a glimpse of your heavenly glory. We thank you for letting us hear your story again. May we write it large on our hearts as the angel tells of the glorious birth, so that we may also share this joyous news with others. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Becky – Cohort 3: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Faith Lutheran Church, Logansport, IN

CHRISTMAS – GRACE AND LIGHT OF CHRIST

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. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.* Luke 2:15-20 (New Revised Standard Version)

Instant belief. Perhaps it was something about being a humble shepherd that allowed them to hear the news that the Saviour was born and instantly believe it. Perhaps it was a simpler time where people were more open to good news and didn't have to dissect it a million different ways, as we often do in today's information-overloaded world. Before retiring, I worked as a CPA and this profession is one by its nature to require skepticism and caution before accepting a premise. It was a good career match for my personality since I've always felt the need to verify and double or triple or, heck, quadruple check something before finally believing it.

I'm awestruck by these shepherds, sitting out in a sheep pen on a cold, dark night, to be visited by angels bringing this incredible news and instantly believe it. Not only that but then they immediately went to the manger to share what they heard with Mary and Joseph. Perhaps Joseph was like me – he still needed to verify what was going on – and one can only wonder if the shepherds' visit was the final jigsaw piece needed to truly believe what was happening with his family. The shepherds became the first human evangelists to spread the Good News after Jesus' birth and, on this Christmas Day, we can give thanks to God for putting the Holy Spirit into their hearts and allowing them to instantly believe what the angels proclaimed!

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for coming into this world in the form of Jesus Christ. On this Christmas Day we give you thanks for the shepherds who heard and instantly believed the Good News of your coming. Help us through the Holy Spirit to listen to you and to believe what you are telling us with open and thankful hearts. In the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

John – Cohort 2: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Pilgrim Lutheran Church, Carmel, IN

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.* Luke 2:15-18 (New Revised Standard Version)

What would it have been like to be those who gathered around Mary and Joseph as the shepherds entered to see Jesus? All of a sudden, shepherds come in, excited to see the child. Then, you hear them tell an amazing story of angels appearing on a hillside, singing that this baby is the long-awaited-for Messiah.

Certainly, this would be an amazing story to hear! But would you believe it? Would those in Bethlehem be waiting for Jesus to take up his role as Messiah, or would the routine of their lives quickly overshadow this event? I imagine that the amazement and wonder of this moment would fade with the daily tasks of life. This seems to happen to me each year. On Christmas Day, I am filled with awe and wonder at God taking on human flesh and walking among us, but by day twelve of Christmas I am already getting caught back up in the tasks of daily life.

I am tempted to think that this is a shame, that I should be able to hold onto the same awe and wonder I feel at Christmas all year. However, maybe that perspective misses an important aspect of Christmas: that God enters fully into this world, even into the mundane daily tasks. I am reminded this Christmas that even when I get caught up in the daily tasks of life, Christ is there too, filling them with God's presence and love. Truly, that is an amazing thing indeed!

Prayer: Immanuel, God with us, we are amazed that you have entered into this world alongside us. Help us ever be aware of your presence in our lives, especially in the everyday tasks. We ask this in the name of the one who took on flesh and walked among us, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

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

December 26: *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.* John 1:14 (Revised Standard Version)

I know it's happened to me. Maybe it's happened to you, too. I'm reading the words on a page in a book. And suddenly, a thought, an idea comes to me that I never thought of before. Something new came alive for me. Those words on that page in a book were no longer just printed words. They were living words.

Jesus is God's living Word for us. And we have just celebrated his birth as the Child of Bethlehem. And that tiny child makes not just the gospels come alive, he makes all of scripture come alive. The entire bible, read through the lens of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, brings new thoughts and insights to us we never considered before.

And here's the biggest insight of all, at least for me. He came among us to take on our human flesh. He came to become one of us in all the complexities, difficulties, and beauty of life.

He came that we might live for him by serving others. What better description is there of the Christian life? And it is through such a life of serving others that the Word comes alive in us. And we proclaim that word, reflecting God's glory to others, just as God's glory was revealed to us in Christ. All of us together have experienced the living Word among us, beholding his glory.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, come alive in us every day, speaking your Word to us, reflecting your glory in and through us for others to see. Amen

Tim – Cohort 1: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Calvary Lutheran Church, Cromwell, IN

December 26: *The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; On those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned.* Isaiah 9:2 (New International Version)

Upon reading the scripture verse, and verses prior to it, I began to see and understand the uncertainties these people faced. They were unsure of many things, facing crossroads – where to turn, which way to go, or who to turn to. At times in our lives, we all face similar circumstances. Many years ago, I was at a major crossroad in my life – do I continue in this relationship, stay on this path or find another? Once I recognized the situation was hopeless, I gave up and gave it to the Lord. Only then did I find solace and peace and was able to see things as they were. And it was truly as if someone took my hand and opened the door to the 'light.'

Prayer: Heavenly Father, you knew us before you formed us in the womb and only you know the plans you have for us. Please help us to be ever mindful that your light is always there. And, when we face crossroads in our lives, we need only to turn to you in prayer to find solace and peace – and the true ‘light.’ Amen

Sharon – Cohort 4: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
St. Mark Lutheran Church, Batesville, IN

December 27: Luke 2:28-32 (New International Version)

Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

*“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel.”*

Just a few years ago I was diagnosed with a brain tumor. It was pressing on my optic nerve causing worsening vision issues. The doctors determined I needed surgery to remove the tumor, both to detect what kind it was as well as to relieve the pressure on the optic nerve to prevent total vision loss in that eye. As I was about to be sedated for the 10-hour surgery, I felt an incredible peace. And praise God, the surgery was a success, and the tumor was benign. This was a sobering time to ponder my eternal future.

In our passage today, Simeon told God, “Lord, I am your servant, and now I can die in peace.” Simeon was able to say this because the Lord had previously promised him he would see the Messiah. When he held Jesus that day in the temple, he knew God had kept his promise!

I know God’s peace because I know He keeps all of His promises. Promises to never leave me or forsake me! Promises to give me eternal life through His Son Jesus!

What about you? Can you say with Simeon, “now I can die in peace?” We can face death with peace because of our precious Lord Jesus whose birth we celebrate this season.

Prayer: Father, thank you for the peace we have even unto death because of the gift of our Savior Jesus. May I walk in that peace every day. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Becky – Cohort 2: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Ascension Lutheran Church, Louisville, KY

December 27: *This is my life work: helping people understand and respond to this Message. It came as a sheer gift to me, a real surprise, God handling all the details. When it came to presenting the Message to people who had no background in God’s way, I was the least qualified of any of the available Christians. God saw to it that I was equipped, but you can be sure that it had nothing to do with my natural abilities.*

Ephesians 3:7-8 (The Message)

In our Christian tradition, Christmas is a time of gift giving. At Christmas we celebrate God’s greatest gift of all — the baby Jesus, God’s Son. But God doesn’t give gifts just once a year, God keeps giving and giving and giving. As I read the verses above, they reminded me of a gift that God gave to me.

When I was applying for seminary, my supervisor wrote in his letter of recommendation, “Nancy has a lot of great qualities for being a pastor, but she is a bad public speaker and I’m afraid this will hold her back.” He was right. When speaking in front of a crowd I was scared, I felt sick and my voice would shake. As I attended seminary, took classes and gained experience, I began to be a better public speaker. God’s gift

was given gradually, so gradually, that I almost didn't recognize it being given. When I graduated from seminary, I received one of two preaching awards. It was nothing less than a miracle.

How about you, can you look at your life, far back or more recent, and recognize gifts that God has given to you? Maybe the gift of a friend, spouse or children, an opportunity to serve, a supportive faith community, a talent, healing, comfort, strength, patience, or hope? Thanks be to God for God's gifts!

Prayer focus: Give thanks to God for a gift that God has given.

Nancy – Leadership Team: Inspire, Ignite, Invite.

Director for Evangelical Mission, Indiana-Kentucky Synod, Indianapolis, IN

December 28: *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* Ephesians 2:8-9 (New International Version)

When I think about the *grace* from God, some days I don't think I deserve it. I think about the times when I have been unkind to others. When I have been rude, unforgiving and sometimes downright mean. Was it because I had been hurt by unkind words and had not yet gotten over my own hurt? Or was it because I lack emotional intelligence to communicate better? I think about those times and I cannot forgive myself. How could I have acted that way, especially to those I love? I could say I was stressed out, frustrated, not happy about my circumstances at the time. But there is no excuse. Am I/was I just a terrible person?

Then when I read this bible verse, I know that I have been gifted with the *grace* of God and I am forgiven. So, I must begin the process of forgiving myself. God loves me and knows that I am not a perfect human being and gives me his *grace* anyway. I pray that those I have not been kind to will forgive me. I can say that by *grace* I have grown to understand the power of words. Working to forgive myself is an on-going process.

Prayer: Dear Lord, you know all my failures and where I fall short, and still I am loved. Thank you for the gift of Grace. I Believe. Amen

Charolette – Cohort 3: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.

Bethel Lutheran Church, Gary, IN

December 28: *For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by men and hating one another; but when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration, and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life. The saying is sure.* Titus 3:3-8 (New Revised Standard Version)

I find it easiest to be my best self with a lower stress level. The last few months of 2020, however, have done nothing but drive it up. My experience on the Christian journey suggests that without knowledge of self, there is no knowledge of God. Suffice it to say, the self-knowledge God revealed to me in the past few months has not been flattering! Which is why reading verse 3 of today's passage I thought, yep, sorry to have to admit that, at times, that's STILL me!

But Christmas is nothing if it is not about God's continuing transformation of people just like me. The saying IS sure. The incarnation's gifts of Grace and Light, of Jesus, are still, by the power Holy Spirit, being perfected in us. Our role is knowing, having learned the lessons which healthy humility and Christian hope both have to teach us, that the image of God, in spite of us, remains the vital center of each and every one

of us. And knowing that that center is always waiting to be born into the world! As Victor Hugo wrote, that image, “lost as it may sometime seem in the depths [of us], small, isolated, a pin point, brilliant but threatened on all sides by the dark forces that surround it: nevertheless, is no more in danger than a star in the jaws of the clouds.”

Prayer focus: Where is the Holy Spirit at work now to change me?

Elisa – Cohort 2: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Christ Lutheran Church, Louisville, KY

December 29: *Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.* Romans 5:1-2 (New Revised Standard Version)

The price we pay for God’s Grace is Faith. Faith is free. The peace we get from God’s Grace results from our Faith. None of this is automatic. We must work to maintain our Faith which provides us with God’s Grace and leads to the Peace of God. The circle formed is similar to the Trinity or is it the same?

Although I am faithful, I still face challenges. I sometimes want things that are not good for me or don’t make sense long term. God’s plan differs from ours, either by schedule, outcome, or procedure. God’s plan is always perfect. God’s plan includes what is best for us and our environment.

Over the years, I have done some really dumb things. God has always been there to rescue me. Sometimes to my amazement. Sometimes when I didn’t deserve it. When stress gets to me, I try to figure it out myself. When that fails, I simply ask God to lead me and he provides the Peace. Unfortunately, God is not always the first choice, but God is the best choice.

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

Florzell – Cohort 3: Inspire, Ignite, Invite.
Bethel Lutheran Church, Gary, IN

December 29: *But he said to me, “My grace is all you need. My power is strongest when you are weak.” So I am very happy to brag about how weak I am. Then Christ’s power can rest on me. Because of how I suffered for Christ, I’m glad that I am weak. I am glad in hard times. I am glad when people say mean things about me. I am glad when things are difficult. And I am glad when people make me suffer. When I am weak, I am strong.* 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 (New International Reader’s Version)

Everyone I know dreads the job interview question about weaknesses: “Tell us about your weaknesses.” Of course, the reason for asking this question is to learn about a person’s self-awareness. Still, how do you answer a question like that?

Since I work best solo, my go-to answer is teamwork. I can work in teams and have, but it’s not my sweet spot. God’s grace has truly manifested itself in teamwork situations where I have learned from others and the team has produced a better result than I ever could have produced on my own.

Perhaps Paul is addressing another kind of weakness. The lack of control I felt when my eldest daughter drove away by herself for the first time while I waved goodbye from the window of our house. Or the day my employer announced that my job was moving to a different location in another state. Or the day I learned my parents were getting a divorce. With what little faith I could muster at those times, and with hindsight, I learned God does indeed prove powerful. While life doesn’t always arrange for happy endings, God’s grace has helped me find peace in my weaknesses.

The interview question for which I hunger is, “What is your superpower?” According to Paul, our superpower is faith in and reliance on God, especially when we feel weak and helpless.

Prayer focus: Lessons learned in weakness.

Jon – Leadership Team: Inspire, Ignite, Invite.
Gethsemane Lutheran Church, Indianapolis, IN

December 30: *When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”* John 8:12 (New International Version)

When my husband Mike died, I felt as if the light had gone out of my life/world. However, Jesus has shown me every day since that He is the light and is with me always. When we feel as if the world's darkness will overwhelm us, He is there to guide our steps and show us the Way. Let us thank Him every day for being our Light. May Christ's Light shine through us into the world.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, thank you for being our Light. Help us to be a reflection of your Light in the world. Amen.

Teresa – Cohort 1: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church, North Manchester, IN

December 30: *May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.* 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17 (New International Version)

Greetings! Best wishes to you! Peace to you! We have had to become good at sending wishes to each other by alternate methods in recent months, haven't we? We have nothing of the difficulties of the times for Paul and the early Christian brothers and sisters, however! Writing, or dictating to a scribe, making plans for this precious letter to be carried by hand to a beloved group of friends, by walking it there on foot! Maybe we have not had it so bad communicating by internet, Zoom, and phone. How different are our times.

Paul excels at sending encouraging opening-greetings to the Christian brothers and sisters he so loves and cares about. I have loved the opening of 1 Corinthians 1:4 (The Message) for many years: *Every time I think of you—and I think of you often!—I thank God for your lives of free and open access to God, given by Jesus.*

Such an earth-shattering awakening that through Jesus' life, and death, each of us has access to God! The privilege of children in approaching God, our creator, savior, and loving guide.

May Paul's words of greeting to the Christians in Thessalonica, which he hoped would encourage other Christians through the known world then and on through the years, be a strong reminder of the source of our encouragement - Jesus Christ himself and God our Father.

Blessings to you as you embrace – and share - God's love, grace, encouragement, hope and strength, in every good deed and word!

Prayer focus: Prayers for peace in the new year.

Kathy – Cohort 4: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Faith Lutheran Church, Fort Wayne, IN

December 31: *For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ. 2 Corinthians 4:6 (New International Version)*

I lost my mom last year and it was the hardest thing I ever had to endure. Mom came to live with me in February. She passed away the following October. She was dealing with dementia that was progressively getting worse, to the point that for the last months of her life she seemed to be living in darkness. Not literal darkness, but the darkness within her own mind. Having to move her from her familiar surroundings, coupled with the fact that most of the time she didn’t recognize me, broke my heart. I was a familiar face, but she rarely could call me by name.

Mom was very strong in her faith throughout her life. She lived knowing that one day she would stand in glory and be made new in the presence of God. I saw light shine out of her darkness every day. I saw it the moment I walked into her room, as that radiant smile spread across her face and her eyes lit up like stars. The fact that she may or may not have known who I was at that moment didn’t matter. Her heart was full of joy, knowing that I was there to spend time with her, and that was enough.

We should all be so grateful for the little things in this life and let the light of God shine through us in the darkness of today’s world, living with the knowledge of God’s glory, and knowing that one day, we too will see the face of God.

Prayer: Lord, we pray that you continue to be the light in any darkness that we face here on earth. Help us to show that light to others in the things we do and the way we live our lives. Live in our hearts until that day when we too are standing in your glory, face to face. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Laura – Cohort 3: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
St. Paul Lutheran Church – Crossroads, Batesville, IN

December 31: *For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Romans 3:22b-24 (New Revised Standard Version)*

These three short verses speak to me on so many levels. If it weren’t for God’s grace and understanding, I wouldn’t be writing this. There have been times when I have pushed God into the background, languished in self-pity and doubt, questioned God’s existence, deciding it was easier to not believe than to believe. While all this was going on, the emptiness I felt was always present, but in that emptiness the presence of God was always there.

For me, God appeared as a stranger. Shortly after moving into a senior apartment complex, one of my new neighbors told me about a bible study, encouraging me to attend every time I saw him. I finally attended, meeting several people, but felt no need to go back until the following Wednesday when I clearly heard a voice say, “You need to go.” That day I was invited to visit on Sunday. In spite of the fear and panic I felt, I decided to attend a service.

Walking to the entrance I felt like my presence would bring the walls of the Church down upon me, feeling that my absence from faith doomed me. I didn’t know God’s grace brought me to a place where love mattered. Smiles and handshakes welcomed the stranger. I don’t remember the sermon, but I felt a weight lifted off of my soul. It was nothing I had done or earned. It was grace, a gift from God. God was saying, “I love you even with your frailties.”

Prayer: Heavenly Creator, thank you for caring for the lost and the stranger for without your grace we would all fall short of the glory of God. Amen.

Gary – Cohort 1: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Gethsemane Lutheran Church, Indianapolis, IN

January 1: *Because of all that the Son is, we have been given one blessing after another. The law was given by Moses, but Jesus Christ brought us undeserved kindness and truth. No one has ever seen God. The only Son, who is truly God and is closest to the Father, has shown us what God is like.* John 1:16-18
(Contemporary English Version)

Happy New Year! As we begin a new year, it is natural to reflect upon the year that has just come to a close. Our verses in John remind us that we have been given one blessing after another. When we think of blessings, we might reflect on tangible blessings. I am thankful for the new apartment I moved into this past year and my new neighbors who are quickly becoming friends. What are the tangible blessings for which you give thanks?

John reminds us in these verses that we have one blessing after another because of all that the Son is. Who is Jesus to you? — friend, companion, Savior, guide, comforter, brother, confidant? Add your own to this list. What is Jesus to you? — peace, strength, kindness, way, truth, life, hope, forgiveness, grace, mercy? Add your own to this list. As we look back at last year — hardships, isolation, challenges, sickness, losses, griefs, worries, and demands — may God open our eyes to also recognize the blessings that we experienced, even in the midst of all of this. And may we look forward to this year in anticipation, knowing that because of all that the Son is, we will continue to be given one blessing after another.

Prayer focus: Giving thanks for our blessings.

Nancy – Leadership Team: Inspire, Ignite, Invite.
Director for Evangelical Mission, Indiana-Kentucky Synod, Indianapolis, IN

January 1: Isaiah 60:1-3 (The Message)

Get out of bed, Jerusalem!

Wake up. Put your face in the sunlight.

GOD's bright glory has risen for you.

The whole earth is wrapped in darkness,

all people sunk in deep darkness,

But GOD rises on you,

his sunrise glory breaks over you.

Nations will come to your light,

kings to your sunburst brightness.

I am not a morning person. I snooze my alarm. I don't want to wake up. I want to stay cocooned in my warm blankets. My default is a night person.

When I was born in an Air Force base hospital, my dad was a pilot instructor, working nights, teaching his pupils the intricacies of night flying. My mom synched the two of us to his schedule, and I've upheld that my lifelong preference for staying up at night was a result of living in tune with my dad's schedule.

And yet...I have long loved this passage with light images, which in the New Revised Standard Version, begins "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has come upon you." I want – I yearn – to rise and shine in the glory of each new day, with God's sunrise glory breaking over me. It's just such a

struggle to throw off the blankets and get out of bed. But once I'm up and had a cup of coffee, I can turn my face to the Sun-light, open and ready to see what God is up to that day, what he is calling me to do.

Although times of deep darkness may cover me, I cling to the promise that God's sunrise glory will radiate into the corners of that darkness. I can be a joyful morning person for "the night and the day are both alike" (Kathleen Thomerson, *I want to walk as a child of the light*).

Prayer: O God of night and day, of endings and beginnings, we are thankful that you are present wherever we are: guiding us, protecting us, sustaining us, inspiring us, creating new hearts within us. In this new year, this new day, may your sunrise glory break over each of us. Shine in our hearts, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Carol – Administrative Assistant: Inspire, Ignite, Invite.
Indiana-Kentucky Synod, Indianapolis, IN

January 2: *Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. Genesis 1:3-4 (New Revised Standard Version)*

As a child, I was afraid of the dark. I carried this fear for quite some time. However, even as a child there was one night of the year where the darkness did not seem so scary: Christmas Eve.

My family would attend the latest service in the evening that we could on Christmas Eve. As we would sing "Silent Night," the darkness did not seem scary, but rather calm, peaceful, and cozy. I had to realize that the problem was not the darkness itself, but my own fear-filled response to it.

Sometimes this verse from Genesis can have us believe that the darkness is bad. But God only calls the light good; God does not say that darkness is bad. Indeed, our Christmas story indicates this too, as we see the light of the world entering creation in the midst of darkness.

Our hymnody is full of acknowledging the way in which light and darkness happily co-exist in this story. Darkness is not an enemy to be vanquished but is an invitation for stillness and peace. Perhaps during this season of increased darkness, we can use these ever-lengthening evenings to find some peace, using the darkness to focus on the light of Christ shining in our hearts.

Prayer: Life-giving God, you are over the darkness and over the light. Help us to know your peace in both the daytime and the night, through Jesus Christ, the light of the world. Amen.

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

January 2: Proverbs 4:18-19 (New International Version)

*The path of the righteous is like the morning sun,
shining ever brighter till the full light of day.
But the way of the wicked is like deep darkness;
they do not know what makes them stumble.*

I can often see the sun rise from my kitchen window. Because I live on top of the hill, the sun rise is visible from the first crack of light over the hill. Then as it comes up, "it shines ever brighter till the full light of day."

In my home state of Kentucky, we have a large cave system called Mammoth Cave. When you take tours into this vast cavernous space, the guide will often turn off his flashlight for a moment to throw everyone into complete darkness. It is "deep darkness" that could easily cause one to stumble if they tried to move around without any light.

Today's passage reminds me of these images as it speaks of righteousness being like the morning sun and the way of the wicked being like deep darkness. I think of how one becomes righteous in the first place and am so thankful for my right standing with God because of the precious blood of Christ. Ephesians 5:8 puts it like this, "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of the light..."

As I live this Christian life, I want to shine brighter every day for the light of Christ to shine from me to others. This is only possible as I surrender to the power of the Holy Spirit to produce light.

How about you? This New Year is a great time to begin to shine for Christ like never before.

Prayer: Lord, I pray that you will fill me every day with your full light so I might shine ever more brightly for Jesus!

Becky – Cohort 2: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Ascension Lutheran Church, Louisville, KY

January 3: *And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night.* Exodus 13:21 (King James Version)

During my first year of college my declared major was business, specifically accounting. My father had talked to me extensively about getting a job that made lots of money. As a child raised during the Depression, money was security to him.

For three years, I took my business classes. Although I did well, I didn't have a sense of fulfillment. I didn't feel like what I was learning to do would make a meaningful impact.

In the meantime, I worked for Parks and Recreation on the summer playground and during the school year at after school recreation programs and at a community center. It seemed that almost every job I held involved working with children in some way. When I needed to earn more money for tuition, I was offered part-time jobs working with kids at several church and temple programs.

When I reached my junior year, I took a career exploration class. We took aptitude and interest tests. Among the careers I would be suited for was teaching. Even though I had already completed several years of business courses I decided to switch my major to education. I felt like I was being called to teach. Even though my father had wanted me to go into business, he was proud of me when I became a teacher.

It took me three years to follow the light that was shining for me but I have no doubt that this is where I was meant to be.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, give me the courage to follow the light you shine for me and trust in the path that you set. Amen.

Sue – Cohort 4: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Faith Lutheran Church, Fort Wayne, IN

January 3: *But I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God's grace.* Acts 20:24 (New Revised Standard Version)

Look at how we are made! God's good creation is abundantly diverse. Even human beings are created to be unique. Sadly, it is often these differences that cause us to alienate ourselves from others.

One time our family was leaving church, already in the car, and a black man walked into the building. Knowing the pastor was alone inside, my fear caused me to go back and check on the situation. It was her tax accountant. Sigh. Although that was 30 years ago, I can't honestly say I wouldn't do the same thing

again. I also can't honestly say that if the man had been white that I would have done the same thing. All I know is that I saw someone who was "other" and made a judgement. I was wrong.

Paul is speaking here about letting *everyone* know about God's grace. I emphasize "everyone" since God's grace is all inclusive. I'm not nearly as generous. I often reserve grace for those like me or for those I feel deserve God's grace. History and today's news tell me that I am not alone. There is always (always!) someone or some group for whom we prefer judgment rather than grace.

Thank God we don't get the final say! In the meantime, I need to find a way to expand my heart to be less stingy with God's grace. Maybe that's the ministry God has given us, and we need to see it through.

Prayer focus: Grace for those with opposing political views.

Jon – Leadership Team: Inspire, Ignite, Invite.
Gethsemane Lutheran Church, Indianapolis, IN

January 4: A Psalm of David. *The Lord is my light, and he saves me. Why should I fear anyone? The Lord is my place of safety. Why should I be afraid?* Psalm 27:1 (New International Reader's Version)

Just a year after my husband left me, I had driven into town with two small daughters to pick up our dog from the vet. We were heading home, where I knew a man was working on the furnace, when one of my friends from church came running across the street and practically grabbed me. Her face was ashen! "I'm so glad to see you!" she said. "The fire department was called to your house and no one knew if you and the girls were in the house!"

When we arrived, flames had already reached the roof of the old farm house. A friend took the girls, and I ran up the long driveway to be sure the workman had gotten out of the house safely. A fireman pointed me to him, and I heard that he had been blown across the room, but he had phoned the firemen. One fireman shopped with us later for nightwear and clothes, and two stuffed animals the girls chose.

Later, at my friend's house, I felt inexplicable peace. "This," I thought, "is surely the peace that passes understanding. There is no earthly reason to feel peace! We have practically nothing!" David's Psalm expresses the Lord's preparation of this for me, though I hadn't known to ask. I hadn't thought to be afraid of fire.

God - my light who shows me that I am in your care through Christian friends - my savior who provides a place of safety. Why should I be afraid?

Prayer: Saving God, thank you for Christian friends who reflect your light all around me. Thank you for being my place of safety and taking away all my fear. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

Marcia – Cohort 4: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Calvary Lutheran, Angola, IN

January 4: *You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.* Matthew 5:14-16 (New International Version)

Eleven years ago, God called me to be a light and I gave him not one, but many excuses. To be God's light, one must shine from within and work for the well-being of others. God's call came in the form of a letter from the local elementary school principal. She asked the local churches to come to a meeting to discuss student hunger. The children were showing signs of hunger after the weekend at home and the breakfast rate had grown on Mondays when they returned to school.

God's call included showing me a dark, musty, junk-filled church basement that was to be used to store and pack food for a Buddy Bag program that would eventually feed over 200 students in grades pre-K through 12! After several wake-up calls, the Holy Spirit led me to a place of light, compassion, and love. Quite literally that dark basement became a shining light and a place to glorify God. When the Holy Spirit calls, we can build a town on a hill and give light to others! Jesus wants us to be a light for the world and tells us in Matthew 5:14-16 to let our lights shine and, by doing, so glorify God. It may take a few times before you hear His call but when you walk into the light, guided by the Holy Spirit, your heart will soar and your lamp will burn brightly!

Prayer: Father God of light and compassion, we pray that each of us will come to your light and shine brightly for You and for all Your children. Amen.

Mary – Cohort 4: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Shiloh Lutheran Church, Walton, IN

January 5: *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 2:10-11*
(New Revised Standard Version)

For the magi, when the star stopped, they knew that their search was nearly at an end. The star would guide them to Christ whom they were searching for. This filled them with joy for they knew that the faith which drove their research and preparation would soon be justified. They felt gratified as they paid homage and presented their gifts.

Like the magi, I am filled with joy when I discover a calling. As I discern the will of God for myself, the star stops moving and I feel excitement in the pit of my stomach. Suddenly the disparate experiences in my life are connected to each other and everything makes sense. I know that the gifts that I have from God will now find their purpose as I devote myself to that calling.

Despite the hardships everyone has suffered in 2020, there were also many blessings. At my congregation, we learned how to worship in alternative ways and to deploy online audio and video technologies to expand our reach beyond the church building to people far and near. I look forward to the blessings and challenges that I will be called to in 2021.

Prayer: Dear Lord, you have sent us the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ, to give us hope and save us from our sins. Allow each of us to be overwhelmed with joy this Christmas season as we pay homage to Christ, offering our gifts, whatever they may be. Amen.

Greg – Cohort 3: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.
Bethel Lutheran Church, Gary, IN

January 5: *And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him. Luke 2:40* (New King James Version)

As a child, I went to church with my parents and siblings every Sunday. It was one of those things that was required without question.

I was one who had questions. The older I got, the more questions I had. By the time I was in my mid-teens, I realized that most of my questions were deflected instead of being answered, or the answers were incomplete.

I came to the conclusion that the pastors and deacons didn't have the answers, but they weren't going to admit that.

As an adult, I still have questions. But I've learned that my faith isn't dependent on knowing all of the answers. I've learned to trust in that same grace that filled Jesus as a child.

(And I'll keep that list of questions to ask God, when I finally get to heaven!)

Prayer: I pray that God gives all of us strength, healing, miracles and answered prayers during these difficult times. Grant us peace and understanding. Amen.

Vivian – Cohort 4: Inspire. Ignite. Invite.

Faith Lutheran Church, Ft. Wayne, IN