

Advent

STUDY



ELCA World Hunger
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.



The story of Advent is a story of hunger.

A people's hunger for salvation, the fleeing holy family's hunger for safety and the world's hunger for a new dawn. It is a season when we await the one who will "give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" (Luke 1:79a). Advent hope draws us into the world as people of promise, people for whom the "shadow of death" cast by deep hunger and poverty around the world is not God's final word to God's people. In Advent, we reflect on how far the Lord has led us and how far we have yet to go toward a world in which all are fed. As we prepare for the arrival of God's Son, this season offers an important opportunity to reflect on the mystery and excitement of the promise from God.

This Advent, we invite you to journey with ELCA World Hunger through the Scripture readings for this season. This study takes us through each week of Advent with devotions based on the lectionary, questions for reflection, prayers and hymn suggestions. The study can be used as a guide for worship, adult study forums or personal devotions at home. Blessings related to our church's response to hunger and poverty are also included.

Each week's theme:

- **Shared vulnerability** (Matthew 24)
- **The "good fruit" of repentance** (Matthew 3)
- **Care for creation** (Matthew 11; Isaiah 35)
- **Finding God in unexpected places** (Matthew 1)

Questions, comments or feedback on the resource can be directed to hunger@elca.org. For more ELCA World Hunger resources, visit ELCA.org/Hunger/Resources.

May you and your community be blessed, enriched and challenged by this Advent resource, and may the stirrings of the season take root within you.

— **ELCA World Hunger team**



Week 1: A People of Promise



Isaiah 2:1-5

Matthew 24:36-44

With the memory still fresh as he preached, the Rev. James A. Forbes Jr. reflected on the devastation wrought by the 9/11 attacks on New York City. He recalled the streaming masses leaving Manhattan, people of every race, ethnicity and class and saw in them the pain and fear so many other people had faced throughout history. He saw, too, a remarkable unity amidst the chaos – "They are all poor now," he observed.

Poverty takes many forms. To be poor may mean to lack material resources, to struggle to put food on the table. To be poor may mean to lack meaningful relationships, to not feel welcome at any table. To be poor may mean to feel spiritually empty, to not feel welcome even at the Lord's table. Philosopher Abigail Gosselin found in her research that how we define the problem of poverty and its causes determines how we believe it should be solved. If poverty is economic, the solution is economic. If poverty is spiritual, the solution is spiritual.

For Pastor Forbes, poverty goes deeper than just material, social or spiritual lack. To be poor, at its root, is to be vulnerable – vulnerable to sudden economic swings, to insecure employment, to disease or to disaster.

In a strange twist in the Gospel, Jesus compares waiting for the coming reign of God to the time before the flood in Genesis, when people were “eating and drinking” with no thought to the coming disaster. This is a vulnerability many communities today know well. The reminder of this risk is not a pleasant thought. How strange that Jesus would compare something we long for – the coming of the Son of Man – to something we all try to avoid – the devastation of a natural disaster.

In the analogy, Jesus reminds us of our vulnerability. Just as we’re ready to separate the world into us and them, the saved and the damned, the haves and the have-nots – Jesus reminds us: We’re all poor now. Yet, true to the Gospel message, Jesus turns that vulnerability on its head with a promise. The dread of a people waiting for the next flood to come is transformed into the hope of a people saved by God. The vulnerability of our shared poverty becomes the security of our shared faith in the promise of God, described so well by the prophet Isaiah as a time when we will “walk in the light of the Lord” (Isaiah 2:5). This promise comes to light as we accompany neighbors in the midst of vulnerability, through ELCA World Hunger. Through this signature ministry of the ELCA, Lutherans acknowledge our shared poverty while confident that the promise of God is greater than the risk we face and that an end to vulnerability is not only possible but promised.



Reflection questions:

- 1) What does it mean to be vulnerable?
- 2) When have you experienced vulnerability? How has your faith strengthened you in times of vulnerability?
- 3) In what ways does our congregation accompany people in the midst of their material vulnerability? Their social vulnerability? Their spiritual vulnerability?
- 4) What does it mean for our congregation to be people of promise at a time when “we’re all poor now”?



Prayer

Saving God, who became human and took on our vulnerability, be with us in our poverty and open our eyes to see the hunger and poverty of one another. Strengthen our faith to be people of promise in all of our ministries. Use our hands, feet and words to make hope visible in a world where all are vulnerable. In the name of your son, Jesus Christ, Amen.



Hymn suggestions

Hark, the Glad Sound! ELW 239

Lost in the Night ELW 243

Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus ELW 254

Comfort, Comfort Now My People ELW 256



Week 2: Bearing Fruit



Isaiah 11:1-10

Matthew 3:1-12

“Bear fruit worthy of repentance” (Matthew 3:8). This emphasis on merit or worthiness raises a bit of a question for Lutherans, who believe that grace and salvation come from God unmerited, that we can never be “worthy” on our own of all God has to offer in Christ. But the Greek word translated as “worthy” here can have other meanings. For example, it can mean “befit,” so that good fruit is seen as borne by one who has repented and been moved by grace. When we have experienced God’s grace, we see life as gift and in turn, want to share our gifts with others. Fruit is not the cause of reconciliation; it is the result.

John the Baptist clearly communicates that whatever fruit the Pharisees and Sadducees are bearing, it isn’t worth harvesting. Later in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus describes this “bad fruit” of the Pharisees: “They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others ... they love to have the place of honor at banquets ... [they] lock people out of the kingdom of heaven ... [they make] gold sacred ... [they] have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith” and so on (23:4-23). In nearly all the “woes” Jesus ascribes to them, the central problem is that they have tended their fruit for show and not for the good of their neighbors.

If that is what bad fruit is, what is good fruit that “befits” repentance? We get a hint from Isaiah, whom John the Baptist quotes. The Old Testament prophet describes “a shoot from the stump of Jesse” on whom “the Spirit of the Lord shall rest” (Isaiah 11:1-2): “with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth” (11:4). Through him, will come a peace so complete that “the wolf shall live with the lamb” (11:6). What kind of fruit is produced by those reconciled to such a One?

By grace we are set free from the “heavy burdens” of the law. Martin Luther, though, makes clear that this freedom has a purpose and that purpose is found in the well-being of the neighbor. Our “fruit” is succulent and sweet, nourishing those God brings to our orchard. “This demonstrates that we are children of God,” he writes, “caring and working for the well-being of others and fulfilling the law of Christ by bearing one another’s burdens.” The fruit that “befits repentance” is fruit that grows as gift – tended by God’s grace – and that is harvested as gift – offered for the good of the neighbor. When we support ELCA World Hunger through gifts of time, talent and finances, we join neighbors around the world and across the U.S. bearing good fruit.



Week 2: Bearing Fruit



Reflection questions:

- 1) What does it mean to be reconciled to God?
To our neighbor?
- 2) Where do we see good fruit being borne in our congregation?
- 3) Advent is a season of hopeful longing for the coming of Christ. How does this church respond to the other “hopeful longings” within our community – for peace, justice and wellness?



Prayer

Gracious God, through whom all creation blooms, remind us, as we await the birth of Christ, of the expectant longing of our world for your good fruit. Tend us and form us to be a church whose fruit befits your gift of reconciliation, peace and justice. In your gracious name we pray, Amen.



Hymn suggestions

Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Sounding ELW 246
On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry ELW 249
Blessed Be the God of Israel ELW 250



Week 3: Healing of the Whole World



Isaiah 35:1-10
Matthew 11:2-11

Eunice is a subsistence farmer in a small town in South Africa. Without other means of employment, Eunice is dependent on the natural environment around her. She may not know soil science, but she does know that the once fertile soil that produced bountiful crops is now bone dry. “The ground,” she says, “used to be soft and easy to dig by hand; water was freely available just under the surface and food was plentiful. But now the land is dry and hard and there is no water under the surface; even our small lake has dried up.” She has also noticed that the rains have become more erratic. They are less frequent, but when they do come, the rain is so hard that their fields flood, washing away valuable crops and seeds. And Eunice is not alone. In western Uganda, for example, farmers find themselves in the same climate situation, unable to grow cassava, bananas or soy beans. In recent years, Nicaragua has faced the worst drought it has seen in more than four decades, causing extremely high rates of hunger.

In Scripture, we hear God’s invitation to enjoy the fruits of creation. We hear God’s call to be tenders of the garden. And, with Paul, we hear creation “groaning,” “longing for the revealing of the children of God” (Romans 8:19-23). But we also hear the promise of our Creator whose creation is a gift, and this is our starting point. We do not see the world

as a treacherous terrain of challenges to be navigated but rather as a bountiful garden, which we are called to tend. The things we hear and see don't highlight a problem we must solve; rather, they remind us of a vocation to which we are called and the place we have been set to do so.

At its root, this vocation is a collaborative partnership in which we come to see the presence of God in, through, around and with us – enriching our labors and shaping our world. Martin Luther writes, “God is entirely present, personally and essentially, in Christ on earth in his mother’s womb, in the crib, in the temple, in the wilderness, in cities, in houses, in the garden, and in the field.” The call to care for creation is the call to draw near to the presence of God in the world around us, in the restored relationships between us and our neighbors, and in the life-giving relationship between humans and the land.

Through ELCA World Hunger, our church is accompanying our neighbors as we learn together what it means to be stewards of God’s good creation. In Bangladesh and Malawi, where water levels are dropping at alarming rates, ELCA World Hunger and local partners are helping small farmers cultivate drought-tolerant rice that requires 30 percent less water to grow. In Nicaragua, one of the countries hardest hit by climate change, ELCA World Hunger and the Lutheran Church of Faith and Hope in Nicaragua are helping families learn new ways to grow and irrigate crops, as well as practices to protect themselves from natural disasters.

Good news for creation is good news for people in poverty, who are particularly vulnerable to the worst effects of climate change. God’s promise, as Isaiah makes clear, is for reconciliation of all of creation, of a time when “the desert shall rejoice and blossom” (Isaiah 35:1-2) and when “waters shall break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert” (Isaiah. 35:6). Through ELCA World Hunger, this church is helping make this transformation visible in communities like Eunice’s, where “the burning sand” can often mean hunger and hardship.



Reflection questions

- 1) How do we experience God’s graciousness through the natural world? How might a view of creation as “gift” shape our actions today?
- 2) What can farming and agriculture reveal about God’s grace, God’s work in the world, and humanity’s relationship to the environment?
- 3) How might our congregation remain attentive to the environment and nature, even during cold, winter months?



Prayer

Gracious God, even in winter, your love is at work preserving, protecting and tending your creation. Forgive us for the ways in which we have neglected our responsibilities as stewards of creation. Lead us to awareness and concern for the environment in which you have made us, and for our neighbors called to work with the land – for farmers and field hands, gardeners and growers. We give you thanks for the bounty we enjoy today, and we look with longing toward the fruitful spring to come. Amen.



Hymn suggestions

People, Look East ELW 248

Comfort, Comfort Now My People ELW 256

On Jordan’s Bank the Baptist’s Cry ELW 249

All Earth Is Hopeful ELW 266



Week 4: God in Unexpected Places



Isaiah 7:10-16

Matthew 1:18-25

To say that Joseph must have been surprised when his fiancée “was found to be with child” is an understatement. An anticipated baby can be a special thing, but for Joseph, Mary’s pregnancy was more confounding than cheerful. In the midst of his confusion, he is visited by an angel in a dream. The mystery of the soon-to-arrive baby wouldn’t end there for Joseph, but the message from God was clear: There is something special about this one. He will not be like other children.

Congregations in southeast Michigan used to host a rotating homeless shelter for weeks at a time in November, just as the weather was turning cold. During their week of hosting, cots filled the Sunday school rooms. The narthex was transformed into a dining room and gathering space, and the office became a small medical clinic. As guests arrived at one congregation, Thomas drove with his parents to a parking lot to pick up a family that was living in their car. They had a son who, like Thomas, was only 10 years old, and they quickly discovered a mutual interest in comic books and football. Throughout the week, Mark and Thomas played games together, wandered the church, and developed as much of a friendship as one can within such a short time.

But for all their similarities, Mark and Thomas were very different boys. They both loved comics, but Mark had never owned one. They both loved football, but only Thomas had ever seen it on a big screen television. A motel to one boy was a strange, new place to return each night after a fun-filled vacation day. A motel to the other was a strange, new place to go on those rare occasions when his parents could afford a room.

Thinking of family road trips, Thomas lamented to his new friend how he could never sleep in a car. The other boy quietly responded, “You can when you don’t have a choice.”

Many of us eagerly serve in shelters, soup kitchens and food pantries, looking forward to bringing God to the lives of the people we might meet. What many of us are not prepared for is the God that others often bring to us. In the Gospel lesson, Joseph, raised on stories of the Hebrew Scriptures, did not expect to find God in the scandalous pregnancy of his soon-to-be-wife, Mary. Even Mary did not expect this (Luke 1:46-55). Yet, God who spoke on mountaintops and through burning bushes also came to an unmarried pregnant teenager. In a dream, Joseph encounters a confounding truth, that sometimes God is revealed in unexpected ways and through unexpected people.

During that week with Mark, Thomas had expected God to show up through himself and to reveal how good it felt to serve others. Instead, God showed up through Mark and his family and revealed to Thomas and the rest of the congregation the more sobering truth of their own privilege and the harsh reality of a world in which some have so much and many have so little.

God is revealed to us in other ways, too – in the hope we gain through stories of families finding stable homes and in the impelling dissatisfaction with injustice and inequity that drives people of faith to work tirelessly to end hunger, poverty and homelessness. This work comes to life each day through ELCA World Hunger, the ELCA’s signature response to hunger and poverty around the world.

Sometimes God is revealed on a mountaintop, with flashing lightning and descending doves. But sometimes, God is revealed in an unwed, pregnant, teenage girl, and sometimes through a sandy-haired 10-year-old boy living in a beat-up Chevy. As we wait for the birth of Christ on the expected Christmas morning, we keep our eyes open for the presence of God in our midst in the unexpected, too.





Reflection questions

- 1) When have you encountered God in unexpected places?
- 2) In Scripture, God often chooses unexpected people to be instruments of God's revelation: a shepherd boy, a stuttering prophet, a pregnant teenager. What does this say about God? What does this say to us about what it means to be people of God?
- 3) How can our church remain open to God's presence among people in poverty without making poverty itself seem blessed by God?



Prayer

God of all our hopes, we wait with expectation for the coming of your son into our world. Forgive us for the ways in which we have closed our eyes and hearts to your word and presence. As we long for Christmas Day, keep our eyes open to your presence in our midst – in one another, in our neighbors, in the people at our doors. Open our hearts to receive the truth and promise you reveal to us through each other and all creation. In your name we pray. Amen.



Hymn suggestions

Awake! Awake, and Greet the New Morn ELW 242
My Soul Proclaims Your Greatness ELW 251
Unexpected and Mysterious ELW 258
All Earth Is Hopeful ELW 266

Blessings

Blessing of food baskets

Today, we ask God's blessing on these baskets of food,
That they may nourish those who receive them,
That they may display the bounty of God in their contents,
That they may show the fruits of love of neighbor,
That they may open our eyes to our dependence on one another,
That they may be reminders of the goodness God has promised us all.
Amen.

Blessing of clothing

Mighty God, our shield and protector, by your hand we are sustained and sheltered. We confront our vulnerability with trust in your promises to us and with faith in your abundant provision for our every need. When the first humans discovered their nakedness and vulnerability to one another and to creation, you crafted them clothing to protect them from the elements. As we face a cold and unpredictable winter, keep our eyes and hearts open to our neighbors who today are vulnerable. Bless these gifts of clothes that they may bring comfort and warmth to those in need. Let these gifts be symbols of the perfect clothing of Christ, which unites us as one community in Jesus Christ and heirs of his promise. Amen.

Blessing of offering

Abundant God, all creation displays your goodness. For the hungry, you provide food. For the thirsty, you give water. To the wandering, you promise a home. You have blessed us with your gifts that we may be your hands and feet to share these gifts with our neighbors. Bless these offerings, that they may be signs of your grace in our world. As we share with others, keep us mindful of our own need – for food, water, shelter and community. May our gifts be an invitation to a deeper relationship with each other and with you. In the name of Jesus Christ, your gift to the world. Amen.



As members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, through ELCA World Hunger, we commit to pursuing a world of justice where all are fed. Your gifts to ELCA World Hunger support effective programs in nearly 60 countries, including the United States.

Through your gifts, this church is empowered to accompany our companions and neighbors responding to hunger and poverty around the world.



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