GOD WITH US
An Advent devotional from the ELCA Homeless and Justice Network
The Homeless and Justice Network of the ELCA is a coalition of ministries called to serve with those on the margins who are struggling with homelessness, poverty and justice issues. This unique network is a ministry with, rather than for, those experiencing poverty, homelessness and injustice. The network believes that all God’s children deserve an opportunity to gather and be the church together, inside or outside the church walls. The HJN gathers the pastors and leaders of these ministries to connect, refuel, bring new ideas to the table, share the stories that ignite passion, and equip leaders from within so that, as we stand on the margins with Jesus, all are included. A special thank-you to all HJN friends who wrote devotionals for this book!

How appropriate is “with” as a theme word this Advent season? Emmanuel, God with us. Or how about this one: “He rules the world with truth and grace and makes the nations prove.” (You just sang that in your head, admit it!) “With” is a magic word during this time of year.

We invite you to enter into this devotional journey with us as we share stories from our communities.

The devotions are organized by the Advent themes of hope, peace, joy and love.

Each devotion has everything you need: a verse, a personal reflection from the contributor, a thoughtful quotation, a reflective question and a closing prayer. It’s set up so that anyone can easily lead themself or others through a meaningful time of reflection and conversation.

Enjoy this devotional as a gift from the Homeless and Justice Network! Our love and prayers are with you as you journey through this Advent season.

—Rebeca Malmgren, ELCA Coordinator for Economic Diversity, blessed to care for the ELCA Homeless and Justice Network
MINISTRY
The Dwelling is a community of faith intentionally, but not exclusively, with our neighbors who are or have lived the experience of being unhoused and the often intersecting identities of addiction/recovery, severe and persistent mental illness, incarceration reentry, hunger, generational poverty, and other marginalized experiences. We are without a doubt a holy gathering of misfits on the margins. Because we affirm and celebrate the inherent dignity of all people, folks find our community to be a place where they can come, just as they are, without worry or fear of judgment. This authenticity leads to a genuine community that knows that our brokenness belongs. We know it’s the place where we can see and feel and experience the inbreaking of God. Community and the inbreaking are where our cracks begin to mend.

BIBLE VERSE
“The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

REFLECTION
I have seen the Lord dwelling among us. With my own two eyes I have seen them. Like the Saturday in August when we celebrated the life of one of our brothers. It was our first organized funeral as a community of faith at the Dwelling. It was hot. So, so hot. We were outside in a borrowed space, gathered for worship. As the sweat dripped from my forehead, running into my eyes, which made them burn, I wondered if anyone would come. Not because of a lack of love for our brother but because of the heat that made it nearly impossible to exist for too long. I paced the blacktop parking lot in heels, a decision I ultimately regretted, and prayed that people would show up.

When I reached the end of the parking lot, I looked to my right and saw Jesus marching toward me. Coming down the street with homemade red dancing streamers was a parade of people entering into the borrowed holy space we had created to celebrate the life of our brother. It was breathtaking.

While we most certainly celebrated his life with joy that day and shouted of the love given and shared, and we found comfort in the peace of Christ, what danced toward us that day was hope. Hope in the resurrection. Hope celebrated through authentic, messy community. Hope that we too will be remembered and celebrated in death despite so often being forgotten by this weary world in life. What I saw dancing toward me was hope magnified, hope restored, hope radicalized and, most important, hope for the future of this wild and holy church. I have seen the Lord dwelling among us. With my own two eyes I have seen them.

QUOTATION
“What I’m trying to cultivate is not blind optimism … but radical hope.”
—Junot Diaz

REFLECTION QUESTION
How and where have you found hope in perceived places of death?

PRAYER
God, we give you thanks that in the middle of our humanness, in the center of our cracks, you choose to amplify our hope. Lord, help us to have wide eyes and receptive hearts to see and receive the way of hope, to join the ongoing dance with your insistent presence. Amen.
We met Lee in the park years ago. He did not join us then, but he came back, and we rejoice with him. Even when hope is deferred for a time, it brings joy and happiness as God brings new people into our spiritual community.

**QUOTATION**

"You may say I’m a dreamer, but I’m not the only one. I hope someday you’ll join us, and the world will live as one.”

—John Lennon, “Imagine”

**REFLECTION QUESTION**

The work God has called us to will seem difficult at times, but faith involves hope for the future as well as the present. The fruit of your work won’t always be evident immediately, maybe not even for years. But that hope will come, and others that succeed you in ministry may enjoy the hope deferred. Are you willing to rejoice in that hope, even if it is a hope deferred?

**PRAYER**

We thank you, God, for the hope that is in our hearts, the hope that we long for, the hope for things not yet seen. We believe that hope will find fruit in our lives and in the lives of others. Give us faith to believe in a deferred hope, that others who succeed us may share in the fruits of our labor. May the works or our hands and the ministry we share find hope in others, both now and in the future. Amen.

**MINISTRY**

The Welcome Church is a congregation made up predominantly of people who have experienced chronic street homelessness. The Well, an overnight shelter for 12 women, was founded by the Welcome Church in 2016 to meet women in the fullness of their needs.

**BIBLE VERSE**

“[Jesus] told them a parable: ‘Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near’”


~Reinhold Niebuhr

**REFLECTION QUESTION**

Describe your soil, your roots, your fruit, your source of light and your watering schedule.

**PRAYER**

Dear God, we thank you for the diversity of your creation, and we know that your redemption comes forth even in places of utmost pain. In the places where we can be trees demonstrating your glory, refresh our aquifers, deepen our roots and inspire our fruits as you work out your purposes in the world.

~Reinhold Niebuhr
Deacon Dave Larrabee  
Pastoral Director, The Lamb Center, Fairfax, Va.

MINISTRY
The Lamb Center is a daytime drop-in for those experiencing hunger and homelessness. We average about 115 guests per day, providing people with breakfast and lunch, shower services and laundry, a mailing address, limited storage for clothing, medical and dental services, case management, a workforce development program, and various support programs.

BIBLE VERSE
“‘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 NIV).

REFLECTION
At the Lamb Center, new guests come to us almost every day. They fall into homelessness for many reasons and often share a common sense of hopelessness, not knowing how to get out of this despair. It can seem overwhelming, not knowing what steps to take first. These questions can increase a sense of hopelessness. We provide many services and also a community to walk this journey with them. While this journey may be a long one, I’m reminded of the words of Jesuit theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: “Above all, trust in the slow work of God.”

Jose came to the Lamb Center about 10 years ago. He had a reputation with a restaurant chain as a talented chef and a hard worker. Jose lost all this, plus his driver’s license, because of alcoholism. Initially Jose wanted to return to his family in Texas, since he had burned bridges in Virginia, but because of his drinking, they didn’t want him either. Jose felt completely hopeless.

Eventually our community helped Jose along this long journey of restoring hope. Jose got sober while he was still without housing. Now celebrating seven years of sobriety, Jose has housing, two food service jobs and a new driver’s license. He has reconciled with his family. Jose now is a source of hope to other Lamb Center guests. He recently delivered food to one of the police officers who had arrested him. This was a wonderful witness to the officer and gave her a sense of hope in the possibility of transformation.

QUOTATION
“‘Above all, trust in the slow work of God.’”
—Rev. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

REFLECTION QUESTION
How can we, with God’s help, restore hope in the lives of those experiencing homelessness and feeling hopeless?

PRAYER
God of hope, those who are experiencing homelessness often have a sense of hopelessness. Work through our hands, feet and words to restore hope for their lives.

Tom Scornavacchi  

MINISTRY
Common Ground Recovery Community is a community in ministry with folks living with addiction and with food and housing insecurity. Some are in recovery, others are not, but all are welcome in our radically inclusive communities, in two locations.

BIBLE VERSE
“When Jesus saw [the invalid] lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, ‘Do you want to be made well?’ The ill man answered him, ‘Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am making my way someone else steps down ahead of me.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Stand up, take your mat and walk.’ At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk” (John 5:6-9).

REFLECTION
Jesus asks a simple question: “Do you want to get well?” I would expect that the man would respond with a resounding “Yes!” But that is not his answer; in fact he never really answers Jesus’ question at all. Instead his response seems to be defensive: “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am making my way someone else steps down ahead of me.” I wonder if his real answer is “I’m not sure. I have been this way for so long that I have grown accustomed to it; it has become my identity. I cannot imagine what my life would be if I were free from my infirmity.” There’s a familiar saying: “There is a distorted sense of comfort in familiar pain.”

PRAYER
Healer of our every ill, help me to let go of theGifts of Imperfection

QUOTATION
“Faith is a place of mystery, where we find the courage to believe in what we cannot see and the strength to let go of our fear of uncertainty.”
—Brené Brown,
The Gifts of Imperfection

REFLECTION
How often do we bind our identity to the infirmities and challenges in our lives? Jesus asks each of us, “Do you want to get well?” How do you answer that question?
Deborah Anna Luepnitz, Ph.D.
Insight For All, Philadelphia, Pa.

MINISTRY
Insight For All is a group of psychotherapists working pro bono with adults who have experienced homelessness.

BIBLE VERSE
"Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you; I will help you; I will uphold you with my victorious right hand" (Isaiah 41:10).

REFLECTION
Mike grew up in a poor neighborhood with a single mom after his father left. His home life became so toxic that he walked out of the house at 19 and kept walking, sleeping under a bridge for a year. A kind construction worker took notice, fed him and is probably the one who called for help. Doctors found Mike's feet so gangrenous that they had to amputate all 10 toes and both forefeet. When told he might never walk again, he almost gave up.

Mike had no connection to God back then, but now he believes there must have been an angel watching over him. He moved into the Project HOME community in Philadelphia and made friends. Staff helped him write his life story, start a movie night group and launch a Bible study group. He got counseling. With prosthetic shoes he now walks several miles per day, all over the city.

Mike has also lost a number of people dear to him — family members and beloved friends. While waiting for his grief to end, he found a quote that he remembers as follows: “You never get over someone you love that much. Never. You just learn to live without them.” This resonated so much with his experience that it gave him hope. And his resilience stirs hope in the souls of all who know him.

Mike proudly offered his story to this devotional.

QUOTATION
Mike’s remembered quote (above) is a paraphrase from On Grief and Grieving (Scribner, 2005) by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler:
“You will not ‘get over’ the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it. You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again but you will never be the same. Nor should you be the same, nor would you want to.”

REFLECTION QUESTION
What does it mean to say that we never get over a loss, we just learn to live without our loved ones, our health, etc.? How can this be a very hopeful thought?

PRAYER
Great God, give us hope. Remind us that without a house, we have a home in you. Without success, we succeed in you. Without strong feet, we walk toward you and eternal life.

Rev. David L. Madsen
Mission Developer, Welcome Ministry of El Cajon, El Cajon, Calif.

CHURCH
Welcome Ministry of El Cajon is a twofold ministry working with people who suffer from homelessness and with newly arrived refugees and asylum-seekers.

BIBLE VERSE
“If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (James 2:15-17).

REFLECTION
I have known for 50-plus years my calling to bring hope. If you were to ask me when I realized this calling, I could point back to multiple occasions, but the earliest event that changed my life is when I met Rick on the streets of downtown Denver.

I can picture it like it was yesterday. I was a young man representing the “Jesus Movement” of the early ’70s. I thought my goal in life was to bring people to a saving grace, preaching “hope” for the future. Rick was a runaway, roughly 14 years old. As we talked under a streetlamp on a corner, I sensed his real need was hunger. We stepped into a diner. I ordered Rick a hamburger and a glass of milk. When Rick was served his meal, he started crying. I sensed a revelation about sharing hope.

The message to Rick was this: God loves you just the way you are. Not for things that maybe you have done in the past, and not for what you do in the future, but right here and right now, God loves you just the way you are. Rick knew I was a Christian, but I did not have to share with words. I really don’t know what happened with Rick, but I remember that day because, as a young man of 18 years old, it changed my life and perspective about sharing hope.

QUOTATION
“Preach the gospel at all times, and sometimes use words.”
—Francis of Assisi

REFLECTION QUESTION
Think about different points in your life when you needed to hold onto hope. What are the unique ways hope manifested in those moments?

PRAYER
Dear God, I thank you for the hope that burns within me when I share your love. Open my eyes that I may discern the aches, longings and needs of others as you see them. Allow me to see others as you do. Amen.
Rev. Violet Cucchiello Little  
Pastor, The Welcome Church,  

MINISTRY
The Welcome Church is a “church without walls” proclaiming the love and mercy of a gracious God to all people and especially to folks who are unhoused and living on the street in Philadelphia.

BIBLE VERSE
“The Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14).

REFLECTION
A funny thing happened to me several years ago, during our Welcome Church service. I was getting ready to distribute communion when I noticed a piece of soft pretzel on the plate sitting atop the thin wafers. The pretzel wasn’t on the plate before I started the service — really — and when I asked who put it there, no one seemed to know or care. Still, it was strange. I distributed communion, wafers and pretzel included — quite different from having grown up in a tradition where I wasn’t allowed to scrape the sticky wafer off the roof of my mouth for fear of disrespecting Jesus. Back then it was better to choke than have my fingers touch the body of Christ. Decades later, even in the church of my childhood, communion is to be touched, cradled and taken within — the reality of incarnation, the Word made flesh and living among us and in us.

When we first started celebrating communion together at the Welcome Church, communion was whatever bread I had in my house. Sometimes it was stale Italian bread, sometimes leftover French, and sometimes it was even naan. This time Jesus took the form of a Philadelphia soft pretzel.

What would Jesus look like if he came into the Welcome Church today? Jesus does come, every day, everywhere. We just need to open our eyes and our hands to receive him. Wafer or tortilla, cracker or pretzel, even during this time of holy waiting, the Word made flesh lives among us, showing up in all kinds of unexpected ways. Take, eat and savor the grace.

QUOTATION
“Love has pitched his mansion in the place of excrement.”
—William Butler Yeats, “Crazy Jane Talks With the Bishop”

REFLECTION QUESTION
Where have you met Jesus today?

PRAYER
Open my eyes, Lord, that I may see you in my midst this day. Open my heart, Lord, to receive your love, grace and mercy. Help me, Lord, to point the way to you.
Rev. Mary Martha Kannass
Pastor, Hephatha Lutheran Church,
Milwaukee, Wis.

Deanna Branch
Writer, Advocate, Coalition on
Lead Emergency, Strong Baby
Sanctuary

MINISTRY
Hephatha Lutheran Church is a Word and
Sacrament neighborhood congregation
serving the north side of Milwaukee with
deep commitment to direct service and
advocacy for children. Our ministries
include Strong Baby Sanctuary (SBS) and
Coalition on Lead Emergency (COLE).

BIBLE VERSE
Matthew 1:18-23

REFLECTION
As we wait and anticipate the coming of
baby Jesus, we can imagine the uncertainty
of the moment. Where did the family find
sanctuary and supplies? Where did they
find peace? This is what a strong baby
sanctuary can do, offer some peace in a time
of uncertainty.

The following is from Ms. Branch,
Hephatha SBC advocate: “Gather around,
little boys and girls, mothers and fathers,
as we prepare for the arrival of Emmanuel.
Free formula, diapers, wipes and warm
blankets for the babies of every family.
Let’s all do our part and share what we
have for the birth of Christ. Just imagine
the mothers and fathers in the city of
Bethlehem preparing to make do with all
they have gathered together with other
families in a loving, warm embrace. They
come together in unity to give and share
with each other all the blessings and gifts
of life. Thank you, Lord, for creating this
moment in this impoverished community
when families can come together as one to
make a small sacrifice from each family for
the greater good of every baby, for every
mother and child. We want to be a strong
baby sanctuary in the heart of our city.”

QUOTATION
“Every child’s life is sacred and it is long
past time that we protect it.”
—Marian Wright Edelman

REFLECTION QUESTION
How can we all be a strong baby sanctuary
for the Christ child in our midst?

PRAYER
Lord Jesus, Emmanuel, you come among
us as God and human. We receive you
in the form of a baby in a manger who is
Emmanuel, “God is with us.” Guide us, we
pray, to tend you as you come to us in the
face of the children of today. May love and
justice be our way with the little ones. In
your holy name we pray. Amen.

Rebeca Malmgren
ELCA Coordinator for Economic
Diversity

MINISTRY
ELCA Homeless and Justice Network and
ELCA Vital and Vulnerable Congregations

BIBLE VERSE
“Greet one another with a holy kiss”
(Romans 16:16).

REFLECTION
The mock wall at the edge of the church
parking lot loomed over the top of the hill,
solemnly keeping watch over the Mexico-
California border. I watched as pastor
after pastor tied a rainbow ribbon through
the metal holes of the wall, each ribbon
representing love and prayer and desired
peace for the families separated at the
border. In the end the wall was covered with
colorful ribbons!

This was just a fake wall, a statue to help us
remember the very real wall below and the
realities that immigrant families face.

Our leader explained to us that the border
tall has very tiny metal holes across the
facade, too small for anything to be passed
back and forth from one side to another.
However, loved ones can fit their pinky
fingers through the holes and often will
stand there, one on each side, with their
pinkyies locked for hours, talking and
“embracing” in the only way they can. This
has been named “the pinky kiss.”

As we worshiped together in that parking
lot, we used “the pinky kiss” when sharing
the peace. Instead of shaking hands, we
walked around, locking our pinky fingers
together, saying, “La paz del Senor” — the
peace of God be with you.

QUOTATION
“The opposite of war isn’t peace, it’s
creation.” —Jonathan Larson, Rent

REFLECTION QUESTION
How can you share peace with others this
week? Considering the above quote, what is
the connection between peace and creation?

PRAYER
God of peace, lead us and guide us into
beautiful peace for ourselves and for others.
Let us be the hands, pinkies and feet of
Christ to all people. Amen.
MINISTRY
Peace Lutheran Church is a multiethnic, economically diverse congregation in the Hilltop neighborhood of Tacoma, journeying toward God’s vision of a diverse community of faith that is Spirit-filled, compassionate, healthy, reconciled and just.

BIBLE VERSE
“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).

REFLECTION
As soon as Vertisel saw me walking toward his house, he’d yell out his trademark phrase: “Who ya wit?”

Vertisel lived half a block from the church. His mom, a neighborhood matriarch, and Vertisel attended worship together until she died. Vertisel himself died this year, and throughout his memorial service, cries of “Who ya wit?” echoed in the sanctuary. His mom, a neighborhood matriarch, and Vertisel attended worship together until she died. Vertisel himself died this year, and throughout his memorial service, cries of “Who ya wit?” echoed in the sanctuary. His mom, a neighborhood matriarch, and Vertisel attended worship together until she died. Vertisel himself died this year, and throughout his memorial service, cries of “Who ya wit?” echoed in the sanctuary. His mom, a neighborhood matriarch, and Vertisel attended worship together until she died. Vertisel himself died this year, and throughout his memorial service, cries of “Who ya wit?” echoed in the sanctuary. His mom, a neighborhood matriarch, and Vertisel attended worship together until she died. 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Rev. Mike Hanck  
*Pastor, Salem Lutheran Church, Toledo, Ohio*

**CHURCH**  
Salem Lutheran Church is a mission congregation in Toledo’s North End neighborhood.

**REFLECTION VERSE**  
“Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes in the morning” (Psalm 30:5).

**REFLECTION**  
In our neighborhood, the North End, we have the joy of walking alongside our neighbors. Our neighborhood benefits from the connections and relationships we all build at Salem. For eight years we have been gathering with neighborhood teenagers twice a week during the school year. In that amount of time we have seen children become teenagers, and we have seen our teenagers become young adults. One of our young adults, whom we will refer to as Donte, has gone from being quite the jokester to someone who excels as a role model for his peers.

One day federal marshals burst into his mother’s house looking for one of Donte’s relatives. The oldest person in the house at the time, Donte wanted to insist on their rights, and he asked to see a warrant. The marshals, not prioritizing this, simply burst into the house and took Donte down, eventually shuffling him out to the police car. Frustrated at being violated, Donte damaged the door of the vehicle by kicking it. The charges that they wanted to give to him included a felony.

The idea of one of the neighborhood’s most responsible teenagers having his life ruined by this awful experience, which quite simply came to him, repelled all of us at Salem. Our members and partners ended up advocating for Donte, and given how poorly he was treated, all the charges were dropped, though he was responsible for paying for the damage to the car door. We all agreed on doing this, as his siblings in Christ, because we valued him, recognized the injustice of what had happened to him, and wanted to show him the realness of our respect and admiration. Like many episodes in our neighborhood, this one has moments of shadow, but together we live on to see the sunshine and to partake in the joy of living into God’s promises when we are brought together as God’s church.

**QUOTATION**  
“The joy of living is his who has the heart to demand it.”  
—Theodore Roosevelt

**REFLECTION QUESTION**  
What else may it look like when God brings us together as siblings? How do we walk with our neighbors as beloved partners?

**PRAYER**  
Lord, keep us open to other people. Let our faith be not about ourselves alone but about all people. Teach us how to listen, how to feel and how to care. Teach us how to be a group and how to be a church, and lead us into your ways of love. We thank you for the gifts you have given us in meeting, learning from and standing with one another. Thank you, good and gracious God.
volunteers signed up to help, but 100 showed up in the kitchen at St. Francis House. Thirty volunteers signed up to help, but 100 showed up — including synod committee members, partners from congregations near and far, and our precious ecumenical partners. That day, joy was abundant as we were truly church together — reading the Easter gospel and sharing the story of Jesus from his birth in Bethlehem to that Easter morning to today, when our Savior continues to freely love us and calls us to be his body in this time and place, loving and serving each other through the power of the Spirit.

BIBLE VERSE
“Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay’” (Matthew 28:5-6).

REFLECTION QUESTION
This story shares a glimpse of the kin-dom of God that Jesus has promised to bring and that we anticipate each Advent as we wait for Christ to return. Where have you experienced a glimpse of God’s kin-dom?

PRAYER
O God, you gave your only Son to suffer death on the cross for our redemption, and by his glorious resurrection you delivered us from the power of death. Make us die every day to sin, that we may live with him forever in the joy of the resurrection, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

QOTATION
"Joy is the serious business of Heaven." — C.S. Lewis

PRAYER
To understand where God is arriving in your life and ministries, ask any of these questions: Are you excited about anything at this time? When have you had a chance to be yourself? Are you feeling any new or renewed strength? What activities that you participate in are flowing? Where have you made a connection (in your family, the church or the community)? What have you learned recently? How have you changed? What does God’s word have to say about what you are energized for, what you have learned or how you have changed?

PRAYER
Prayers help us to be aware that God is in the center of us. Suggested prayers are simply “Thy will be done” in question form: God, of all the things we could say, what would you have us say? God, of all the things we could do, what would you have us do?
I received many gifts from Jimmy, including a string of pearls he found and was given when cleaning out someone’s basement. The pearls were in a pink box from the Blum Store, an old Philadelphia store that no longer exists. They are the kind of pearls that are individually knotted so that if one breaks, all the others won’t fall apart. It was the first time I had ever received pearls from anyone, but in the Welcome Church we give what we have. For Jimmy it was pearls. Jimmy is gone now, but I often wonder what would have happened if our sexton, like the words Jimmy sang, had just “passed him by.” Not only would I have missed my pearls, but more important, I would have missed the joy this unhoused and hungry man brought to my life. I was the one who was fed by Jimmy that day.

**QUOTATION**

“Pass me not, O gentle Savior, hear my humble cry. While on others Thou art calling, do not pass me by.”

—Fanny Crosby, “Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior”

**REFLECTION QUESTION**

Where can you embrace joy this day?

**PRAYER**

Open my eyes, Lord, that I might see your light in all I meet this day.

**Rev. Anna-Kari Joy Langseth Johnson**

ELCA Christian Community and Leadership, Member of Pilgrim Lutheran Church, Chicago, Ill.

**CHURCH**

Pilgrim Lutheran Church offers hot meals and community communion, and partners with Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights.

**BIBLE VERSE**

“[Jesus] said to them, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation’” (Mark 16:1).

**REFLECTION**

We are fools for love! We are fools for Christ! Every Advent and Christmas, I feel Jesus embracing all our propensities for foolishness, an overflow of joy, with generosity and creativity to proclaim the good news to every creature. I feel God overflowing rivers of joy and calling for my soul to help as many people as possible, to be part of as many Advent, Christmas and Epiphany pageant retellings as possible. Our pageants are meant to be as fun, joyful and easy to join as possible. As you walk into our church gatherings, we stand in the back with youth helpers, handing out very simple halos we make, rings of fuzzy tinsel garlands taped together to sit on the heads of any volunteer who feels like being part of the angels. We have 25 pairs of angel wings. More fun props include large wooden walking sticks for every person who wishes to be a shepherd, a large sparkling star for anyone who wishes to hold it high and a beautiful, brown-skinned baby doll for anyone who wishes to carry Baby Jesus. If a family with a baby or a young child are willing to serve as a living Holy Family, the living nativity pageant becomes even more alive. To begin, we all line up behind the processional cross in the back of the sanctuary, process to the front of the church, then continue processing in figure eights around all the pews of the congregation, handing out additional halos and stars. We joyfully “perform” our pageants in the last week of Advent, continuing through Christmas Eve and Christmas services and into our Epiphany celebrations, recruiting even more people to serve as wise ones searching for and finding Christ. God always surprises us with people young and old, willing to join Christ’s story, volunteer and bring friends. We live this great mystery: Jesus Christ is Godself in our arms. Jesus is just as close to each of us now as Jesus was to his mother, Mary, in the first Christmas birth. Time cannot separate us from our loving Savior. Our lives on earth are just as dear, important and connected to God as the first Holy Family. We are not spectators. Jesus is born to us, to bring our lives right into God’s action. Emmanuel! God with us! Go tell it with joy.

**QUOTATION**

“I’ve got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart!”

—George William Cooke, “Joy in My Heart”

“Joy to the world, the Lord has come!”

—Isaac Watts, “Joy to the World”

“Joy is the serious business of Heaven.”

—C.S. Lewis

**REFLECTION QUESTION**

What Advent/Christmas traditions bring you joy? What are some ways you have been joyfully brought into “God’s action?”

**PRAYER**

God of joy and laughter, help us to be fools for love this Advent and Christmas season. Let our joy overflow into our communities so that everyone knows there is an angel wing, a walking stick, a baby doll or a sparkling star waiting for them in God’s church. Amen.
Rev. Giselle Coutinho  
*Bridge of Peace Community Church, The PEACE Center, Camden, N.J.*

**CHURCH**

Bridge of Peace Community Church and the PEACE Center are ministries of the ELCA serving in Camden, N.J. We are a multiracial and multilingual ministry that welcomes and affirms all God’s people regardless of any human-created identity. We commit ourselves to advocacy, anti-racism and seeking justice in our community and world.

**BIBLE VERSE**

“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh — my adversaries and foes — they shall stumble and fall” (Psalm 27:1-2).

**REFLECTION**

One of our PEACE Center guests knocked on the door. He had that glassy, faraway look in his eyes. I said, “Good morning, Zachariah” (name changed to protect privacy). He looked at me and said, “Is that my name?”

I had him come in, gave him his favorite color ice pop, and sat him down for pastoral care. He said, “What’s your name?” I said, “People here call me Pastor Giselle.” He said, “Is Pastor your first name?” I explained “pastor” was a title and it was attached to a calling from God to serve and shepherd God’s people. I spoke of Jesus as being our shepherd and of his love and forgiveness for all of us.

He asked lots of questions as we talked, and then he laughed and said, “Just today I told somebody to call me ‘mister’ because I couldn’t remember my name.” Zachariah then said, “Oh, thank God, I am somebody.

God knows my name through you. I know this place — the friendly door and the light always call to me — and I know, here, someone will love me. At night, when there is no moon and I get scared, I come and sit near this door because I know God will be my light and protect me. See, here I am somebody, and I am loved. Thank you!”

**QUOTATION**

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

—Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter From a Birmingham Jail”

**REFLECTION QUESTION**

God is our light and salvation, and there should be nothing we fear, yet there is much we fear. What do we fear, and what are we struggling with? What strengthens us? How do we use a web of mutuality to impact our lives and the lives of others? What are visible signs of God’s love and grace in your life?

**PRAYER**

Gracious Lord, our light, hope and salvation, come to us amid our fears and struggles and shine your love brightly in our lives. Be our stronghold, the one who calls us by name, claiming us as precious and beloved children. Come, Lord Jesus, come! (Sing the hymn “The Lord Is My Light and Salvation.”)
Rev. Matthew Best  
Pastor, Christ Lutheran Church on Allison Hill, Harrisburg, Pa.

**CHURCH**
Christ Lutheran Church on Allison Hill, located in Harrisburg, Pa., offers free medical and dental health clinics to those in its neighborhood.

**VERSE**
“I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (Matthew 25:35-36).

**REFLECTION**
The words of Matthew 25 are probably familiar to anyone who does hands-on ministry. For me this is a favorite passage. But it’s not just a personal guide for how I should live. No, this is about more than what any one person is doing. Rather, this is a message of hope and love. Just like Jesus’ miracles, there is a focus on more than just individuals receiving something with this passage. When someone is fed or given a drink, it’s not just one person that is impacted. When a stranger is welcomed or clothes given, it is more than just one person. And when a sick person is cared for or those in prison visited, it impacts more than just that person. It has a communal effect. Jesus never heals just one person; in the physical healing he also restores relationships, families and communities. Receiving and giving love is how individuals, families and communities receive hope. They find out firsthand that their best days are ahead of them.

**QUOTATION**
“If our church is not marked by caring for the poor, the oppressed, the hungry, we are guilty of heresy.”
—Ignatius of Loyola

**REFLECTION QUESTION**
So often we get caught up in our ministries. In what ways does your ministry spark hope in others beyond those directly served?

**PRAYER**
Hope-filled God, open our eyes to see and our hearts to know your hope as it spreads outward with each interaction. Thank you for touching our lives. Amen.

Rev. Kristy Daniels  
Pastor, Church of Steadfast Love, Seattle, Wash.

**CHURCH**
Church of Steadfast Love (COSL) is a small, bilingual (Spanish/English) congregation that meets in the Compass Center of Compass Housing Alliance, Seattle. We are a congregation of adults from all walks of life and from all over the world. Many of us have experienced homelessness or are currently experiencing homelessness.

**BIBLE VERSE**
“O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever” (Psalm 136:1).

**REFLECTION**
This verse speaks to us of the loving-kindness of God. A God who seeks us out, who knows our names, our needs, our joys, our shame. A God who calls us into faithfulness, into relationship, into community and wholeness. A God who does not forsake or abandon us but calls us to repentance for our sake and for the sake of all creation. A member at COSL is a witness to me so often in his ability to experience the steadfastness of God. All that he has, whether scavenged or found — food from a dumpster, a dry place to sleep, a friend — are all gifts from this steadfast love. He never blames God for the many hardships in his life, nor does he even frame them that way. This is life. God is present. Thanks be to God for God’s steadfast, eternal, never-changing loving-kindness.

**QUOTATION**
“Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends” (1 Corinthians 13:4-8).

**REFLECTION QUESTION**
Remember a time when you experienced the loving-kindness of God. What did that look and feel like?

**PRAYER**
Gracious God, thank you for your gifts of steadfast love and mercy. Help us to love ourselves and others as you have loved us, faithfully and well. Amen.
CHURCH
Pilgrim Lutheran Church offers hot meals and community communion, and partners with Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights.

VERSE
“For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders, and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Almighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:5).

REFLECTION
As Christians we are called to let our hearts be broken with compassion for what breaks the heart of Christ. Especially during Advent, we hear calls for every heart to prepare Christ room. My heart feels Jesus calling me to care for and find ways to join people who are experiencing homelessness, as refugees or immigrants or for any reason. A couple years back, we felt God calling us to gather at both sides of the border wall between the United States and Mexico. We held a prayer and worship service together, on both sides, with hundreds of leaders during our ELCA training for mission developers, church planters and renewers. At the time for prayer, we laid our hands on the hard metal of the towering wall, which felt so unyielding. Suddenly a leader called out, “Pray for Jesus to transform this wall! Let this wall become an altar of prayer!”

I still feel the wind of the Holy Spirit, and God’s victory. Suddenly the wall is an altar of prayer to Christ in our midst. Suddenly we are all in the presence of the Wonderful Counselor, Almighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. The God we will all see, standing before us. The One in whose holy presence no racism, sexism, xenophobia, oppression or injustice will be able to stand. The Christ who makes every person part of the royal family priesthood of the living God! One day, in the presence of Christ, there will be no wall. This beautiful earth will be home to everyone, together forever.

Because you, reading these words, are a human like me, I know you have also experienced tragedies and huge challenges. I hope that in some way, with signs and wonders both small and huge, God shows you that our mysterious challenges and sufferings will all become altars of prayer. I have come to believe that Jesus Christ will enter every challenge, every brokenness in our human family, and will bring God’s unstoppable resurrection and love until every mysterious challenge, every person involved, and even ourselves become part of Jesus Christ’s resurrection story, with love streaming through us all.

QUOTATION
“All you need is love.”
—John Lennon and Paul McCartney

REFLECTION QUESTION
Have you ever had a “tower” transformed in your life? How was love part of that transformation?

PRAYER
God of victory, we pray that walls of pain and injustice will be transformed into altars of love, that no oppression or sorrow will be able to stand. We thank you for your loving welcome into the beautiful family of God. Amen.

Rev. Anna-Kari Joy Langseth Johnson
ELCA Christian Community and Leadership, Member of Pilgrim Lutheran Church, Chicago, Ill.

CHURCH
Pilgrim Lutheran Church offers hot meals and community communion, and partners with Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights.

BIBLE VERSE
“She gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room” (Luke 2:7).

REFLECTION
My husband, children and I feel called to follow the prophet Isaiah’s encouraging words to invite people experiencing homelessness to share our home and our roof. Instead of homelessness being a separating wall, this too becomes an altar of prayer. I would say God keeps showing us joyful ways to fit beds or mattresses for up to eight additional people in our home. Getting to know people arriving in Chicago with new perspectives is a sacred gift each day. We are astonished and awed.

As we listen to people’s experiences of walking thousands of miles, everyone has encountered the living Christ. Christ is answering people’s prayers with audible words. Christ is walking alongside people, protecting them in real time. I am converted again and again by how people walking with Christ are deeply committed to take Christ’s saving love and help rescue each other. One young man walking from Venezuela volunteered to help a family with multiple children and babies by carrying their feverish 6-year-old all the way from Panama to Mexico City on his shoulders. Another young couple with a baby of their own took five more children under their wings to make sure these children could safely connect with their parents. Another small group of men were robbed of every penny they had to make the journey. Their Facebook friends donated funds for them to keep going. Another woman heard Christ answer her prayer circle from a prison cell. Christ spoke the words “Take heart, daughters! You will be set free!”

QUOTATION
“God’s love is like an ocean; you can see its beginning but not its end.”
—Rick Warren, The Purpose Driven Life

REFLECTION QUESTION
When have you seen Christ’s love through another person in a moment when you needed it the most?

PRAYER
God who loves and provides, be with all people who are making difficult journeys. We thank you for being a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Help us to walk alongside your people in love. Amen.