



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America

ELCACL1102



GOD WITH US

An Advent devotional from the ELCA Homeless and Justice Network



Art by the Rev. Toni Robinson

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 themselves 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.

—Rebecca Malmgren, ELCA Coordinator for Economic Diversity,
blessed to care for the ELCA Homeless and Justice Network

HOPE



Rev. Emily Harkins Norris

*Lead Pastor, The Dwelling,
Winston-Salem, N.C.*

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.

Rev. David L. Madsen

Mission Developer, Welcome Ministry of El Cajon, El Cajon, Calif.

CHURCH

Welcome Ministry of El Cajon is a twofold ministry that works with people suffering from homelessness and with newly arrived refugees and asylum-seekers.

BIBLE VERSE

“Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life” (Proverbs 13:12).

REFLECTION

Debbie, who is now housed, told Lee that she was working with Welcome Church, a division of Welcome Ministry. Lee asked Debbie if we would be willing to help him too. Lee and I met and talked. He began his involvement with our campus and community garden. He eventually became our buildings and grounds keeper.

Lee does not come to worship services. That has never been a requirement. Even so, Lee began bringing friends who were part of his close-knit community of “unsheltered” folks, who are now in our Welcome Church community. We can’t provide everything needed, but we can share God’s love, accept others for who they are and welcome them, just as they have welcomed us into their lives.

Lee asked me one day if I had one of those Ecclesia crosses, a cross necklace that we use in Homeless and Justice ministries. The next day I put one of our special crosses around his neck. I encouraged him to wear it and, if things are tough, to put a hand over his cross and say a prayer to Jesus, spoken or unspoken.

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 of our hands and the ministry we share find hope in others, both now and in the future. Amen.

Schaunel Steinnagel

Co-pastor, The Welcome Church, Philadelphia, Pa.

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’” (Luke 21:29-30).



Art by Jibril Bey, The Welcome Church

REFLECTION

At Christmas we think a great deal about trees. In the Bible there are many trees, helping us to think about the people we want to be.

I know a woman who has experienced homelessness but has now been in her own housing for over 10 years. She is a generous, consistent sharer of so much of herself with the Welcome Church. One year, shortly before Christmas, this person had me come by her place to pick up some donations for our women’s shelter, the Well. I thanked her for being such a strong part of the effort. She replied, “I have to keep involved. These ladies are a part of me. If I ever stopped thinking about them, if I ever tried to forget about when I was homeless, I might just try to get too far away from it, and then I might slip back in. This helps me.”

A tree needs roots. A tree needs water. A tree needs light. A tree has a life cycle longer than that of most people. God’s time. Trees are called to send their roots down, to not be moved and to bear fruit. I know a woman who, through careful nurturing of her soil and care for her environment, is modeling everything you could want to see from a tree.

QUOTATION

“Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime.”

—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.

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
*Pastor and Mission Developer,
Common Ground Recovery
Community, Wyomissing, Pa.*

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.”

Doug struggled with addiction for many years. He had relapsed several times and been identified as a chronic relapser. As long as he held on to that identity, he was destined to relapse again. When we discussed this very Scripture passage during our worship service, Doug connected with the invalid and wanted to “stand up and walk.” No longer identifying as a chronic relapser, Doug recently celebrated two years of recovery and is a volunteer member of our team.

REFLECTION QUESTION

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?

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

PRAYER

Healer of our every ill, help me to let go of those things that bind me to my past. In you I find the hope of a better future. Amen.

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.

PEACE



Rev. Violet Cucciniello Little
*Pastor, The Welcome Church,
Philadelphia, Pa.*

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 wall 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 pinkies 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 Señor” — the peace of God be with you.

I’ll bet you didn’t think you would have a job to do now! If you’re reading this with friends, get up! Share the peace with each other (on your own is fine too!) using “the pinky kiss,” and while you do this, pray that immigrant families who are separated can soon be reunited and experience holy and fulfilling peace.

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.



Rev. John Stroeh

*Pastor, Peace Lutheran Church,
Tacoma, Wash.*

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. Life is all about that question, isn't it? Who ya wit? Who are your family, who are your friends, who are your neighbors, who are you relating to? Advent helps us prepare to receive the most profound answer to "Who ya wit?" Jesus, God with us, always.

Vertisel was a person of peace. His version of peace was gathering folks in his yard, eating a fish fry, telling jokes, sharing life. In a neighborhood with way more than its share of drug trade, gun violence, police brutality and displacement of longtime

residents (due to gentrification), Vertisel's way of peace broke down barriers, brought people together and created community. He knew peace begins when the hungry are fed, and he knew peace is about much more than food; it's about companionship, joy, justice and faith in God. It's about celebrating God's presence by being present with and for one another. The prophet Isaiah speaks of the birth of a child named the Prince of Peace (9:6) and Immanuel (7:14), meaning "God with us." This Advent I'm grateful for Vertisel for helping me see the connection in Jesus between peace and presence (God's).

QUOTATION

"Peace begins when the hungry are fed." —Dorothy Day

REFLECTION QUESTION

Who in your life has helped you make the connection between peace and God's presence, and how will you join Jesus in feeding God's people with peace?

PRAYER

God of shalom, thank you for coming in person in Jesus to forever answer for us the question "Who ya wit?" In this holy season of longing and hoping, in a world of violence and fear and uncertainty, we yearn for your peace. Help us to see the connection between your presence and peace, and inspire us to join Jesus in feeding your people with peace. Amen.

Rev. Violet Cucciniello Little

*Pastor, The Welcome Church,
Philadelphia, Pa.*

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.

BIBLE VERSE

"A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But [Jesus] was in the stern, asleep on the cushion, and [the disciples] woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' And waking up, he rebuked the wind and said to the sea, 'Be silent! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm" (Mark 4:37-39).

REFLECTION

Jibril is a talented artist who spent years living on the street. His art and his strong faith carried him through many difficult times that include sleeping outside in the cold and often wet Philadelphia winters. Jibril's resilience and resourcefulness was matched only by his generosity and kindness. I have a number of pieces that Jibril gifted to me over the years, including a beautiful "tree of life" painting Jibril made for me when my mother died, using an old box of Rit dye that he had found in the trash.

One of my favorite pieces, however, was a lightly colored sketch of three people sleeping under a blanket on the street where he slept. On the side of the drawing is a pizza box. Instead of the word "pizza" or any of the traditional designs we might find on a pizza box, Jibril wrote the words "Love and Peace." When I asked Jibril about this he said, "I try to bring a little love and peace in everything I do." I thought of how Jibril was able to share a message

of peace even as he struggled with all the challenges of being unhoused; then I thought of how Jesus brought peace to the disciples even in a terrible storm. For me Jibril's painting was a powerful reminder that, even when the storms and chaos of life continue, God is with me to bring peace and calm into my anxious heart.

QUOTATION

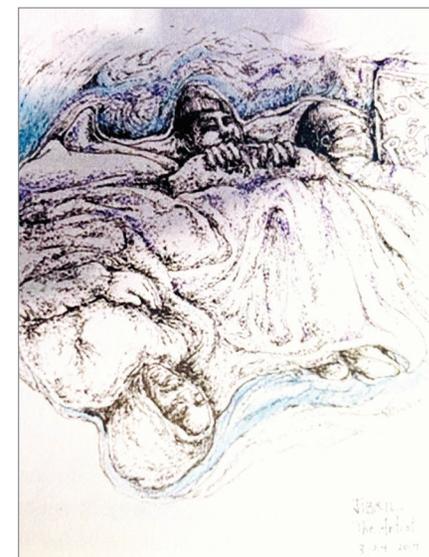
"If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other." —Mother Teresa

REFLECTION QUESTION

What storms are you facing this day? Where are the signs of calm that carry you through?

PRAYER

God of peace, you soothe us with your arms of love and understanding. Be with us this day, that we may be a source of calm to others.



Art by Jibril Bey, The Welcome Church

JOY



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 to have Salem pay the cost of the door so that Donte would no longer have the effects of that sordid affair hanging over his head. We insisted 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.

Rev. Chris Matson

*Pastor and Mission Developer,
Church on the Street, Sioux
Falls, S.D.*

CHURCH

Church on the Street is a ministry with folks experiencing homelessness and poverty.

REFLECTION VERSE

“The angel said to the women, ‘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

Gathering to worship our risen Lord on Easter is a big, joy-filled celebration for most congregations. Church on the Street happens to worship monthly, so we pick the second Saturday nearest Easter to shout “Alleluia” together. When I realized that our Easter worship this year would be on the Saturday before Easter, I was simultaneously excited and concerned about finding a worshiping community that could bring 20 volunteers and a meal for 200 people.

Fortunately, Bishop Constanze Hagmaier said she and the South Dakota Synod staff were up for the task. From there, the joy of serving and being church together grew as more and more partners volunteered to help. A pastor donated the beef for sloppy joes. St. Dymas, a prison ministry, paid for the sauce, and the sloppy joes were prepared 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.

QUOTE

“Joy is the serious business of Heaven.”—C.S. Lewis

REFLECTION QUESTION

This story shares a glimpse of the kingdom 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 kingdom?

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.

Rev. Dr. Lisa Arledge

*Pastor Developer,
Oasis Outreach, Akron, Ohio*

MINISTRY

Oasis Outreach is an open, accepting space where people in relationship with God and others gain strength. We connect and collaborate with youth and young adults.

BIBLE VERSE

“At that very hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, ‘I thank you, [God], Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, [God], for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by [God], and no one knows who the Son is except [God] or who [God] is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal [God]’” (Luke 10:21-24).

REFLECTION

God is always arriving through Jesus Christ. Because of the creative and spirit-filled action of God in us, grace allows new things to unfold. Jesus rejoices at the fresh movement of enthusiasm created through the disciples when the 70 he sends out return in joy. When we understand that the energy and joy inside us and our ministries are released by God, we can tap into where God is leading us. Energy depicts Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit creates enthusiasm.

Sometimes no one feels energized to say or know anything for sure or to move forward in any way. One time, when our staff was feeling completely depleted after a murder in the house next door, we still sensed energy around the girls’ mentoring group. The high school participants were gaining strength to graduate because they had a place to gather. We knew then to support them by offering them expanded spaces and meeting times. We assured them that we were open to giving them more freedom to gather safely so they could gain strength to

follow through on their life plans. People in relationship with God and each other can become aware of God’s action in us and gain strength to take steps. We can connect to what God is already doing, then simply and easily make the next move. Holy change is propelled by a Spirit-led movement among God’s people. God is always arriving so that we, like those disciples, can check in continually with the energy of the Holy Spirit, to help us discern our way in joy.

QUOTATION

“But, as it is written, ‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him’ — God has revealed to us through the Spirit, for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what human knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God’s except the Spirit of God” (1 Corinthians 2:9-11).

REFLECTION QUESTION

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?

Rev. Violet Cucciniello Little
*Pastor, The Welcome Church,
Philadelphia, Pa.*

MINISTRY

The Welcome Church is a church without walls, proclaiming the love of a gracious God to all people but especially to people experiencing homelessness.

BIBLE VERSE

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13:2).

REFLECTION

Sometimes it can be so easy to miss joy. I almost missed the joy that was brought into my life by Jimmy.

Jimmy showed up at the Welcome Church one day when he was pretty down on his luck. The sexton at the place where we had gathered that day for Bible study invited Jimmy to come inside and have some lunch. Jimmy said that what he really wanted was to play the piano. Jason brought Jimmy into the chapel, where we had a keyboard, and Jimmy sat down and played. He was amazing! Soon a small crowd of us gathered around, and Jimmy began to sing. He sang “Pass Me Not,” and we were mesmerized. His voice brought us to another place, a place of peace and beauty, but also to a place of one who knew the deepest suffering. Peace and suffering, both at the same time.

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.

QUOTATIONS

“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

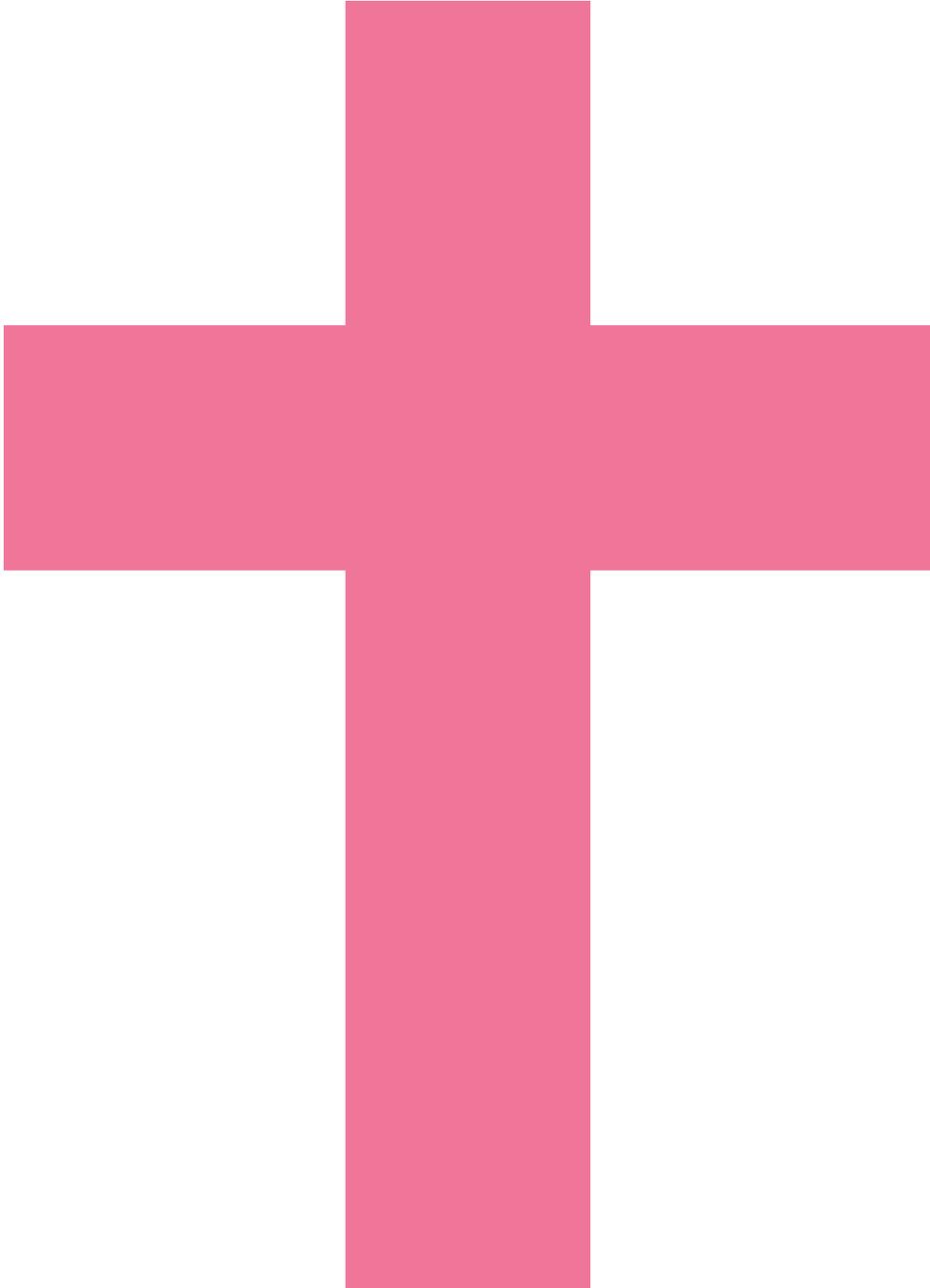
REFLECTION QUESTION

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.

LOVE



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 sakes 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.

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.

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!”

Christ is with you, too. In love Christ will connect you to more beloved people throughout your life. Christ will set you all free! I love the setting free, starting now!

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.

HOPE

PEACE

JOY

LOVE