

# *Nearness*

## **ADVENT STUDY**

2019



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





# Week 1

## "JESUS IS COMING!"

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*"Therefore you also must be ready,  
for the Son of Man is coming at an  
unexpected hour" (Matthew 24:44).*

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The readings for this Advent, appropriately, are full of expectation. In many households, "expectation" has been the theme since the last few days of November. Some folks are digging out dusty boxes of decorations, young children are making early drafts of Christmas wish lists, and local stores ... well, they've been ready for Christmas since Halloween ended. The air is full of anticipation. In the midst of this, it can be difficult to wrap our heads around the idea that "the coming of the Lord" was not always a joyous thing to look forward to.

Thankfully, roadside billboards across the country are there to remind us:

- "Jesus is coming! Are you ready?" (against a background of flames);
- "Repent! Jesus is coming to judge YOU!";
- "I will be back" (with a decidedly angry-looking Jesus on the cross); and
- (the rather specific) "Judgment Day is coming – May 21, 2011."

The last one may have been a slight miscalculation. But the idea is still there – Jesus is coming, and he's bringing the thunder (or fire or brimstone or can of what-have-you). And you thought that sweater from Aunt Myrtle last year was the worst thing anyone could get for Christmas.

As striking as these messages might be, they aren't really that far off from a pretty common thread in Holy Scripture. The arrival

of God into the world is a fairly frightening prospect. The “day of the Lord,” as it is sometimes referred to, is described as “great and terrible” by the prophet Joel (2:31).

In Scripture, it seems, the future is something to fear. And certainly, for many people around the world who are uncertain about their health, their job or the environment in which they live, there are some bleak prospects on the horizon.

But this isn't the only way Scripture describes the coming of God. Certainly, as the prophetic writings in the Bible make clear, God drawing near is always risky business. But the story of Christ subverts our expectations — a humble manger instead of a flaming chariot, swaddling clothes instead of royal robes, a carpenter instead of a king.

Jesus' prophecy in Matthew about the return of the Son to the throne is not a pleasant passage to kick off the Advent season. It is full of dire warnings about the coming days for the people. Jesus admonishes the disciples to watch expectantly for his return, but he also says something about what shape that expectation ought to take. And in doing so, Jesus again challenges assumptions about the end of time.

Jesus makes clear that, first, preparing for the day of the Lord is not about getting ourselves “right with God” so that we might be among the ones taken up rather than left in the field (24:40). By grace, we are saved from dreading the future. In faith, we know that God's salvation of the world has already begun — and that it includes us. The second thing Jesus teaches is that the day to come should not cloud our vision from the work left yet to do before that day. The parables Jesus tells describe servants at work, doing what they can and laboring now, before the return of the “master.”

Jesus' teachings in Matthew 24 are part of a larger sermon that includes Matthew 25. It's in this later chapter that Jesus lays out the labors of the people of God as we await his coming: feeding those who hunger, satisfying those who thirst, showing hospitality to strangers, visiting the imprisoned and caring for those who are sick.

What does expectation of the dreaded “day of the Lord” look like for followers of Jesus? Actively being about the business of caring

for our neighbors. Ultimately, the end is not about our repentance, or our righteousness or our own fear of judgment. It is about accompanying one another, caring for one another, and meeting each other's needs. That is the labor of the expectant servant.

For all the talk about the separation between those who will be "taken" and those who will be "left" (24:40-41), Jesus' warnings about the day of the Lord are not meant to separate us from one another but rather to draw us near to each other in love, hospitality and care.

God has drawn near and commissioned God's people with a holy vocation: to attend to their neighbors. The future is not something to be feared but something to be embraced. As people of faith, we know that our best days are not behind us but ahead of us. We know that the plans God has for us are, in the words of Jeremiah, "plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." We cling to the vision of John, who in Revelation 7 describes the future as a time when all will be sheltered by the one on the throne: "They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them ... for the Lamb ... will be their shepherd ... and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." We know that we have been set free by grace to reimagine our world, no longer beholden to the past or worrying about the future. We are set free to be the church – to be bold and creative and courageous, knowing that we are part of a story God is enacting in our midst, a story of God at work through God's people.

Gustin knows this about the future. A farmer and village leader in the Dowa district of Malawi, Gustin was 57 when he started to get sick. The day started like any other, but working in the field, he was overcome with muscle pain. Too weak to walk, he was helped by a fellow community volunteer, who hired a bicycle to bring them to the nearest clinic, 12 miles away. It was there that Gustin learned he was HIV-positive.

For Gustin, the future could have looked bleak, but he was determined to fight, not only for his own sake but for the sake of his neighbors. Through the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malawi (ELCM), Gustin met with a community health counselor who was trained in an ELCM program supported by ELCA World Hunger. With access to treatment, education and a companion for his long journeys to the clinic or hospital, Gustin got the help he needed. And

now, he works in the community, actively counseling others who are living with HIV and AIDS.

Gustin refused to let his diagnosis become a prognosis for his future or the future of his community. With the right support, his diagnosis does not stop him from working toward a brighter tomorrow for his neighbors. "I know that my life is not over," he says, "and I have a future."

God draws near, and the "day is coming." But for people of faith, the future is filled with hopeful expectation, and the present is filled with active, loving service that draws us to one another.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1) How does your congregation inspire hope for the future in you, your family or your community?**
- 2) In what ways is your church part of building a brighter future within your community?**
- 3) How can the church counter the messages of fear within our communities today?**

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## Week 2

### FROM BAD NEWS TO GOOD NEWS

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*"He shall not judge by what his eyes see,  
or decide by what his ears hear; but with  
righteousness he shall judge the poor, and  
decide with equity for the meek of the earth"*  
(Isaiah 11:3b-4a).

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In many rural villages in Guatemala, families tend to be large, and due to poverty, cultural traditions and other factors, daughters are often given away for marriage early. At 12 to 14 years old, girls are matched with husbands who are at least twice their age and sometimes older. Pastor Karen Castillo of the Augustinian Lutheran Church of Guatemala (ALAG) knows many of the girls' stories well. Pr. Castillo hears their frequent concerns about the lack of educational opportunities that can change the future for girls and women throughout Guatemala. Schools are often far from people's homes, and if instruction is available, boys are often given precedence. When girls are excluded from continuing their education, they are also excluded from new opportunities, including the opportunity to make many decisions about their futures.

Holy Scripture assures us that God hears their stories, too. The promise of Isaiah, indeed the promise of many of the writings in the Old Testament, is that God has heard the people's pleas for liberation and salvation and will deliver them (Exodus 3:7-8). God's intimacy with the people of God is such that God is attuned to the many obstacles that undermine the people's well-being.

God's anger is revealed most clearly in those places where injustice and inequity reign – and God's loving concern is revealed equally clearly when the children of God are blocked from enjoying life abundantly.

In the Gospel of Matthew, John the Baptist echoes this anger when he sees a group of Pharisees and Sadducees gathered among those desiring baptism. "You brood of vipers!" he calls out. "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Matthew 3:7).

John is not the meekest character in the Gospel, but here, he's about to get medieval before there was a medieval to be gotten.

What was it that so incensed the Baptizer? We get a clue about the fault of the Pharisees and Sadducees later in Matthew, when Jesus denounces both groups: "They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others ... they love to have the place of honor at banquets ... [they] lock people out of the kingdom of heaven ... [they make] gold sacred ... [they] have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith," and so on (23:4-23).

The Pharisees often get a bad rap in the Gospels. They serve as foils for Jesus and the disciples so often that the reader might think "brood of vipers" is John the Baptist's way of going easy on them. In reality, the Pharisees were one of several Jewish groups at the time and, in some ways, weren't quite as bad as they might seem. They understood the life of faith as a life focused on obedience to the Law, so they rigorously held themselves to its high standards. The problem was, they held others to those standards, too, even when the Law seemed unclear or when the literal, traditional punishments for violations were downright deadly. For the Pharisees, being faithful meant obeying the Law and tradition, no matter what the consequences were.

Jesus' teachings in the Gospels present a different understanding of faith. For Jesus and his followers, a relationship with God is not meant to be a burden. In fact, quite the opposite: "For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30). Isaiah, whom John the Baptist quotes in Matthew, describes what true righteousness looks like for God's people: justice and equity, particularly for "the poor [and] the meek," those without the social or economic status to demand these things for themselves.

As God draws near through the One prophesied by Isaiah and John the Baptist, the bad news of exclusion is transformed into the good news of hospitality, and the bad news of judgment is transformed into the good news of justice – for them and for the



community. It is from among these people, whose lives are so circumscribed by legalism, tradition and inequity, that Jesus will draw both followers and leaders.

In Guatemala, where poverty, traditions and sexism prevent communities from benefiting from the gifts and skills of girls, the ILAG is helping provide new opportunities. Opened in 2018 at the Augustinian Lutheran Center in Guatemala City, the MILAGRO ("miracle") Women's Education Center is a place for young women from these rural communities to continue their secondary education, faith formation and development of vocational and life skills that will help them be financially independent in the future. With support from ELCA World Hunger and ILAG, the young women at MILAGRO Women's Education Center are part of the work God is doing in their communities, proclaiming the good news of justice, equity and life abundant for all.

**REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

- 1) What does it mean for God to hear the cries of people who face oppression, exclusion or injustice?**
- 2) How does the church listen attentively to the voices of people facing poverty or hunger in the community today?**
- 3) What is the difference between seeing faith as obedience to God and seeing faith as liberation?**

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## Week 3

# THE SIGNS OF THE PROMISE

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*"[John the Baptist's disciples said to Jesus,] 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them'"*

**(Matthew 11:3-5).**

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At only 17, Dawit (not his real name) has already faced a long and harrowing journey. He was born in Eritrea, and in 2017, he and his brother escaped lifelong military service by crossing into neighboring Sudan. On the border, they were intercepted by a group of traffickers. Dawit's brother escaped, but Dawit was held by the traffickers for almost nine months and regularly threatened and beaten while they demanded money.

Eventually Sudanese police raided the traffickers' camp and took Dawit to a hospital in Khartoum, where he found his brother again. During their initial journey, Dawit had broken his leg while jumping out of a car. Although he had surgery in Khartoum, it was too late to fully repair the damage to his leg, and he can no longer put any weight on it.

In 2018, Dawit arrived in Cairo, Egypt, and connected with St. Andrew's Refugee Services (StARS), which is supported by ELCA World Hunger. StARS provided Dawit with a caseworker and helped him meet other immediate needs, such as food, hygiene supplies and, importantly, medical care. StARS also connected him to Doctors Without Borders (Médecins Sans Frontières), which is helping provide Dawit with psychological care and support.

Eritrea, Sudan, Egypt. Dawit's story, like many of the stories of our siblings in Christ around the world, can seem so far away from communities in North America. Even within our own geographic region, communities can seem farther apart than the miles may suggest. Maybe it is the divide between rural and urban cities, or the gulf between affluent areas and areas facing disinvestment and job loss.

Of course, the distance between our communities belies the reality that, as a global community, we share many of the same challenges. Human trafficking, such as Dawit faced, is "a global phenomenon to which no country is immune," according to a 2018 report from the U.S. Department of State. And research reminds us that even the most affluent counties in the United States are home to people facing food insecurity and challenges with access to housing.

Yet, it is not merely our shared problems that connect us. This season of Advent, the Scripture readings remind us that, in Christ, God has drawn near to us and to our neighbors. As God draws near to us, we, too, are drawn near to each other — in hope, in faith and in our mutual need.

Seeing this is easier now than it was for the followers of John the Baptist. Jesus was, by no means, the first to be considered (or to declare himself) the Promised One sent by God. So perhaps no one should be surprised that John and his followers were a bit suspicious. "Are we to wait for another?" is the question of those who have long awaited the Messiah — and may likely have been disappointed before. This isn't the pleading of the psalmist crying, "How long, Lord?" but the cynical question of the skeptic whose faith is sure but whose trust must be earned.

And to some extent, this is our question, too. How do we know that God has drawn near? How can we be certain that the Messiah has come? In our day, we are confronted with promises of salvation from every quarter. Commercials and mass media hold out the pursuit of wealth as the path to new life. Social media seem to suggest that our lives will be transformed once we get enough "likes" or followers. For victims of human trafficking such as Dawit, the promises are more nefarious. Many victims were first lured by their traffickers with promises of resettlement in a new, safe country. Or they were deceived by promises of stable employment.

Jesus understands the skepticism of the question. In response, he shares with John's followers the evidence he knows will convince the Baptizer: "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." Echoing the prophecies of Isaiah, Jesus makes clear the signs of the Messiah's coming, signs John the Baptist would seem to recognize: healing, restoration and hope. John the Baptist can trust that the one interrogated by his followers is the One sent by God because following in Jesus' wake are those characteristics of God's transformation of the world: healing, restoration and hope.

As we look for the promise of God in our midst, we are called to look for those signs of *healing* (physical and spiritual), *restoration* (of relationships with God and neighbor), and *hope* (for those who are poor or vulnerable). Our shared need for each of these is what draws us together with neighbors near and far as we long together for the transformation of the world. And make no mistake, God is with us in our need as well.

We are united in our common need with neighbors around the world. And yet, the miles are bridged by something greater — our shared participation in the promise God is unfolding in our world. The vocation to be a healing, reconciling, hopeful presence in the world is shared across the church universal in every community. United in trust that God is at work transforming the world, the church is called to participate in the signs that inspired the confidence of John and his followers — and inspires the confidence of our neighbors and ourselves today.

To share in the stories of neighbors near and far is to share in the work God is doing through them in the world. It is to seek together — and to be, together — those signs of healing, restoration and hope. In Advent, the expectant longing gives way to bold confidence that God is at work, revealing the promise that all shall be well and drawing us together in mutual need and mutual hope.

There may be much that separates us, but the promise that unites us can bridge any divide.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

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- This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

# *Week 4*

## **GOD IS WITH US**

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*"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us'" (Matthew 1:23).*

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You are loved.

No, really.

That's it.

That is the message of Advent, Christmas – the entirety of the gospel story, in fact.

You are loved.

In the baby – whose name shall be Emmanuel, which means "God is with us" – God has drawn near to humanity in familiarity, intimacy and even identity. God has become human, entering into our world and our very existence. And the message God has brought? You are loved.

Two thousand years of Christian history, and yet that basic message has not changed. God has drawn near, and the message brought to all creation is "you are loved." Scripture is filled with stories of God speaking to God's people. Sometimes God speaks to them directly. Moses approaches a burning bush and hears God "informing him, 'I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt'" (Exodus 3). In the middle of the night, Samuel hears God calling his name (1 Samuel 3). At other times, God speaks through the prophets to the people.

But here ... in this manger ... in this moment ... on this night ...

There is no mountain-splitting, quaking prelude like Elijah heard outside his cave (1 Kings 19). There is no opening in the heavens, no descending Spirit, no voice from the clouds (Luke 3.) The baby in the manger is God's whispered good news: "You are loved."

In the first session of this study, we read a sampling of modern-day billboards warning us of God's coming wrath. The writings of our biblical ancestors reflect a similar level of trepidation about the day God would draw near. What judgment might befall them when God arrived? What word might God speak?

In the manger in Bethlehem, God did show up. And the word was "love."

As gospel people, the church proclaims this message: "You are loved." Obviously, such a simple message doesn't give us the directives that are to be taken in the many complex situations in which the church finds itself in daily life. Such a simple message does not give us all that we need to make the many minute decisions that organizations and individuals must make. But it does give us a clear message and identity.

Who is the church? *The beloved of God.*

Who is my neighbor? *The beloved of God.*

Who is this stranger in my midst? *The beloved of God.*



To be the church, to be people of the gospel, called to spread the good news, is to ensure that every person we encounter leaves knowing they are loved. To be “evangelical” is to be sharers of the good news – and that good news is that we are loved by the very creator of the universe.

This almost seems too simple, and in some ways it might be. But how often does the message the world sends us undermine our confidence in this message? How often are we told that we must make ourselves lovable enough, work hard enough, look good enough, decide wisely enough, or behave appropriately enough to merit the concern or consideration of others around us?

The church has a different message: You are loved because the One who created you has marked you as loved. Christ-centered ministries have this message of Christ at their heart.

Rain or shine, the East Boston Community Soup Kitchen opens each Tuesday without fail, serving up nutritious fare – with an extra helping of love – from the basement of Our Saviour’s Lutheran Church. Volunteers offer weekly breakfast, lunch and dinner to more than a hundred guests, many of whom face the challenges of poverty and addiction. Guests can also pick up hygiene kits or a set of clean clothes and access social services.

“This space is where we all come together and treat each other with love, with that respect and dignity that we all like to receive,” says Sandra Aleman-Nijjar, the kitchen’s lead volunteer. “We give that to everyone that walks through those doors.”

Eddie, one of the guests at East Boston, knows this to be the case. Having lived on the streets since he was 18, Eddie calls the ministry “my home,” a place of belonging and acceptance where his needs – physical, spiritual and emotional – are met. “He feels loved, that someone cares,” says Sandra. “You can see it in [each of] them, that sense of belonging, that sense of acceptance. That someone cares about them, that someone is watching and looking out for their well-being.”

To be “evangelical” is not merely to share the basic facts about faith but to live out a faith that assures us – and our neighbors – that we are loved. For guests at the East Boston Community Soup Kitchen, that means that every plate of food served is a form

of evangelism, a way of sharing the good news that is the very message of “Emmanuel”: you are loved.

God’s love calls us to active love and service of one another. Authentic love — the love God shows through Christ — sets tables where all are welcome, calls religious and political leaders to repentance for their treatment of neighbors facing poverty or vulnerability, and testifies to new life in the face of death-dealing powers. It is not merely a word spoken but a life lived, walking with and standing by our neighbors.

This is the Promised One we have been waiting for, and this is the message we have been longing to hear. Through Mary and Joseph’s journey to Bethlehem, through John the Baptist’s hours of ministry at the Jordan, through our expectant longing in Advent — this is the message we have been waiting for. And the message many of our neighbors continue to pine for.

You are loved.

Now, love one another.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1) When during this season have you felt loved?
- 2) How does your congregation share the message “you are loved” with neighbors in your community?
- 3) Watch ELCA World Hunger’s video “East Boston Community Soup Kitchen” at <https://vimeo.com/293599869>. How does the ministry in East Boston help guests feel “that sense of belonging, that sense of acceptance”?

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## NOTES

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# *Neapness*

## **ADVENT STUDY**

### 2019



**ELCA World Hunger**

**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

God's work. Our hands.

8765 West Higgins Road • Chicago, IL 60631-4101  
800-638-3522, ext. 2616 • [ELCA.org/hunger](http://ELCA.org/hunger) • [hunger@elca.org](mailto:hunger@elca.org)