



South Dakota Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Advent, 2016

“Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.” - Matthew 24:42

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ whose coming we await with hope!

I am writing this letter for your congregation's annual report in the early days of Advent, when the sun's light is retreating from the world, and text for last Sunday has Jesus calling upon us to prepare and “keep awake.” Jesus was speaking to his disciples who faced a not-to-distant future of witnessing their Lord's crucifixion, cowering as their city was overrun by an angry Roman overlord while enduring persecution in their own families and synagogues. Matthew's community believed they were living in extraordinary times, and they fervently hoped that Jesus would come -- and come soon!

It seems like we, too, are living in such times. A contentious election has left us feeling fearful, or hopeful, or with a sinking ambivalence about our government. Our once-hospitable earthly home now feels fragile as we come to grips with a rapidly changing climate. Protests around the country and on our state's border unveil lingering resentments, racial tensions and past and current injustices. With Matthew's community we cry out, “Come Lord Jesus! Come quickly!” What does it mean to be the church in times like these? Jesus said it has to do with being awake and living in a state of preparedness.

I am grateful for the ways in which I see signs of Christ's coming through an “awoke” church – through you! You prepare for the coming of Christ each time you feed your hungry neighbors with a meal of food or a promise of continued presence in grief or hardship. You stay awake when you declare God's love in Jesus Christ for the child in your midst or the new neighbors in your community. You prepare the way of the Lord when you welcome a stranger whom your wider community might consider “dangerous “other” or “alien.” Whenever, instead of disparaging young people, you celebrate their gifts, gather them in to supportive relationships and share holy conversations, you are living as awakened followers of Jesus. Thank you!

You also prepare the way of the Lord with the counter-cultural act of releasing some of your hard-earned money to bless your local congregation and share God's love with people around the world. Your congregation's mission support teaches new skills to subsistence farmers in Nicaragua, and prepares new ministers of the Gospel in Cameroon. You have made the path a little straighter for our Lord by your generosity, through your congregation, that this year is starting 378 new congregations, two-thirds of them among people living in poverty: scripture continues to be fulfilled – “Good news for the poor!”

Dear church – stay awake! I am grateful for you and your good work, and I pray for you as you gather in your annual meetings.

Yours in Christ,

Bishop David Zellmer