

2022 Christmas Message from Bishop Constanze Hagmaier

Dear South Dakota Synod,

Grace and peace to you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit! – My husband Dirk and I celebrated our very first Christmas as newlywed college students alone, just the two of us. We had decided that instead of getting swept up by family traditions on either side, we would create our own.

I'm not gonna lie, it was pretty bare bones: a tree, a string of lights, and some straw stars I had crafted. Later that evening we met up with some friends for the candle light service at our local Lutheran congregation. Neither one of the two of us was so sure about our decision to celebrate Christmas Eve away from our families, but by now, it was too late to change plans, so we carried on. Little did we know at the time that our very first Christmas together as newlyweds away from our families would be the first one for the rest of our married life. We haven't celebrated Christmas with our families in over 26 years.

Much has changed in these years since our very first Christmas. Loved ones have died. Children were born. We have moved a few times. Other ornaments have since been added to those first straw stars. But much has also stayed the same. The world is still in turmoil. And we are still marked by sin and brokenness. Tomorrow is uncertain and not guaranteed. And the only sure thing is that nothing will ever stay the same.

During the Advent season we hear how John the Baptist from his prison cell sends his disciples to Jesus to ask if he is really the one John had preached about. You know the one that would come to baptize with unquenchable fire, and that would set the prisoners free. Because as far as John was concerned, he was still incarcerated. And the Romans were still in charge. Not much had changed. At least so it seemed.

As I journey through life, I often take on the role of John the Baptist. I too wonder. And I ask with the psalmist, "How long, oh Lord?" But then I also hear the message from the angel Gabriel in Luke's account of Christ's birth: "**Today**, in the town of David, a Savior has been **born to you**, he is Christ the Lord." And I am reminded that that changes everything. How so? Because hope was born on Christmas.

For thousands of years God's people had hoped for freedom from sin and death. When Mary places the baby in the manger, our hopes and our longings have a destination. We too are invited to lay our restlessness and yearnings into the manger. Our "one days" become "today". The baby in the manger will hold the world's hurts, pain and sin as it matures and walks the earth with his eyes on Jerusalem, where he dies. But in his death, everything we placed in that manger, dies with him. And out of death God calls forth new life. The perishable has been clothed with the imperishable. Thanks be to God!

I invite you to follow Mary's lead when you hear the story of Christ's birth on Christmas Eve from the Gospel of Luke and place your hopes and longings into the manger. I invite you to trust that the words: "**Today**, in the town of David, a Savior has been **born to you**, he is Christ the Lord," are true. At first it may not look like much, it may look like nothing has changed, when in fact everything has, just wait and see. Or in the words from the song "Mary Did You Know", "Did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new; this child that you delivered will soon deliver you. And when you kiss your little baby you've kissed the face of God". Dear South Dakota Synod, the Truth of Christ's birth be yours. Amen!