

## Bishop Constanze Hagmaier's 2023 Christmas Message

Dear South Dakota Synod,

Grace and peace to you in the name of Emmanuel, God with us!

I have to admit that the seasons of Advent and Christmas are every year emotionally taxing on me. I want to join the rest of the world in its cheerful celebrations of these seasons, but my joy is tempered. The lightheartedness of carefree summer days seems to have vanished and has been replaced by a heavy and confining cloak of sadness.

Of course, one could rationalize that I suffer from seasonal depression, due to the limited hours of daylight my skin is exposed to; something that can easily be cured by adding a vitamin D supplement to my daily diet and some light therapy. And just like that, I should be ready to join the seasonal parties with the rest of the world.

But maybe, melancholy isn't so much a vitamin D insufficiency as it is a tender openness towards the brokenness of our world, which stands in stark contrast with the shallow cheerfulness of the world during this time of the year. I realize that no matter how many winter clothing drives I support, there will be someone freezing to death during these harsh winter months. I am painfully aware that while I drop a toy in the "Toys for Tots" bin at a local retailer there are children that don't need toys, but an emotionally stable and safe home along with a caring, committed and safe adult. I preach and champion peace, but while sincere and authentic, peace in families, our own communities and the world seems out of reach.

Madeleine l'Engle in her poem "First Coming" gives me hope every year during the seasons of Advent and Christmas. She writes:

He did not wait till the world was ready,  
Till men and nations were at peace.  
He came when the Heavens were unsteady,  
And prisoners cried for release.

He did not wait for the perfect time.  
He came when the need was deep and great.  
He dined with sinners in all their grime,  
And turned water into wine. He did not wait  
Till hearts were pure. In joy he came  
To a tarnished world of sin and doubt.  
To a world like ours, of anguished shame  
He came, and his Light would not go out.

He came to a world which did not mesh,  
To heal its tangles, shield its scorn.  
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh

The Maker of the stars was born.

We cannot wait till the world is sane  
To raise our sibs with joyful voice,  
For to share our grief, to touch our pain,  
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!

Dear South Dakota Synod, no matter where you are in your life's journey, whether you are all on board celebrating these seasons with great joy or can't wait for it to be done and over with, Christ's birth celebrates God's love. And at Christmas love came down in the form of a baby. God himself became vulnerable. Ready or not he came to a world, much like today, that was broken by sin. Christmas is the beginning of God setting us free from the bondage of sin. And looking at it lying in the manger may make us wonder what he is up to, but Christmas is also an invitation to trust that God will do what God has promised to do, and that is to set captives free. That is reason to rejoice – love has won, the light has come, and darkness will only be temporary. May this promise of light shine in the dark places of your life and the dark places of the world to bring hope where there is none.

Merry Christmas, dear SD Synod.