

Bishop Constanze Hagmaier's 2024 Christmas Message

Dear South Dakota Synod,

Grace and peace to you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit! One of my favorite Advent hymns is "All Earth is Hopeful," in the ELW number 266. The rich imagery of God breaking into creation to permeate it with his powerful love strengthens my walk of faith. The words in the hymn remind me that while I am the Lord's servant, my hope and trust are in God; he alone is my strength, courage, and confidence.

Hope, though, is a curious thing. You may have heard me say that the Church is not the 'Make-A-Wish Foundation.' What I mean by that is that the Church is not built on our vision and values but on God's. We are invited to participate but don't get to shape it according to our desires since human desires are fickle. On the other hand, hope is a certainty grounded in divine promises echoing throughout the ages. And the outcomes are not temporal or material but spiritual and eternal. This eternal nature of hope should reassure you, knowing that it transcends the limitations of this world.

Wishes focus on short-term selfish desires. I remember wishing for a talking and walking doll for Christmas when I was young. Not even remotely connected to the depth we encounter in the babe lying in the manger on Christmas Eve that was born because God so loved the world to save it mostly from its own destruction. Hope, on the other hand, is an intense longing from the depth of our soul that yearns for the world to be at peace, for wars to cease, for death to be defeated, for every creature's longings to be met, tears to be dried, fears to be no more, relationships to be healed, creation to sing and the lion to finally lay with the lamb.

Along with all the saints gone before us and the shepherds, on this Christmas Eve, we step up to the manger with great hope. We hope that the deep sighs of our souls, for which we run dry on words and the ancient scripture promises echoing throughout the ages, will find a resolution. And here it lies in the manger right before us. A helpless infant, born tonight, the Savior of the World, the Prince of Peace, the Son of Man, God's beloved, his plan to silence our yearnings and bring resolve. Indeed, hope this Christmas Eve has been born in our midst.

We may have wished for something more impressive, glamorous: something that brings immediate gratification to our restlessness, but, dear Church, tonight is only the beginning of another chapter in God's incredible salvation story. It's a tender beginning, but as the child grows in years, God's marvelous love story with the world matures. Eventually, we hope and know all tears will be dried on the day of the second coming of Christ. For now, we wait in hope. We might wish the Church to grow or to go back to the good old days, for our will to be done now, but the fulfillment of the promise of a Savior to be born ends all wishful thinking and acting. Instead, we are filled with great hope and anticipation for Christ to return at the end of the age. This anticipation should fill you with excitement and joy. Until that day, may the peace that passes all understanding stir up our hearts and minds to tell about the hope in our midst born this Christmas Eve. Merry Christmas!