

Rebuilding Bethany: An Investment in Future Generations

An Advent Bible Study



This Advent, LSS invites you into this season while connecting with a very real need of providing help and hope for our neighbors across Minnesota.

For over 100 years, Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota (LSS) has provided safe shelter for children when a parent's life has been disrupted by a crisis – including unforeseen events, such as a job or home loss, divorce, illness, or death. One of the most vital ministries in this regard is Bethany in Duluth; what started as a Children's Home in 1916 is now a Crisis Shelter, and is being transformed yet again to meet the changing needs of children, youth, and families in Northeast Minnesota.

To build on 105 years of Bethany's work, LSS is thrilled to be expanding the services there to include not only a crisis shelter, but also a family resource center. This center will offer family services to support family resiliency, stability and child well-being.

LSS, a ministry of the ELCA in Minnesota, and serving all our neighbors, is uniquely poised to reach more children, youth, and families than ever before. Serving together, we can truly change lives.



– 1916–



– 1973–



– 2022–



ADVENT 1: The Love of Christ Is Contagious

Opening Prayer

Gracious God, in this season of Advent, we welcome you to come. Be among us now. Increase in us great love and compassion for our neighbors. Stir our hearts and activate this community so that your love and compassion overflow, giving all people hope. Amen.

Read: 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 (NRSV)

⁹ How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? ¹⁰ Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. ¹² And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. ¹³ And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I have found myself holding my breath – literally holding my breath. Knowing that the virus is airborne, I suppose I have unconsciously held my breath over fear of contracting the illness. I've held my breath off and on while at the grocery store, while walking down the sidewalk past a group of people, and while waiting in line for a doctor's appointment. I am often unaware that I've held my breath until I feel my chest tightening, shoulders squared, and abdomen taut until at last I am forced to exhale. Whoosh. The stale breath inside my lungs exits, making room for the next, life-giving inhale. Ahhh.

These are unsettling times. At the same time, amazing moments of joy can take our breath away when

we experience a stunning sunset, welcome a new grandchild into our world, land a new job after a time of unemployment, or see God at work in our midst.

Even as we walk through times of challenge in life, Advent reminds us that we are not alone and that God is with us to breathe God's life-giving Spirit into our lives. It is a joyful season of waiting and hoping. Advent is about preparation – it's a season of expectant hope. In Advent, we reflect upon the coming birth of Jesus into a world that was not prepared to receive him, born to young, inexperienced parents who must flee their home country to protect their young one. Before these parents can dream about their child's future, they must first leave kin and community to ensure there is a future to be had for

young Jesus. Before their leave-taking, gifts are bestowed: out of a chilly, desert night blooms generosity, kindness and the friendship of unlikely strangers who provide gifts.

Children who arrive at Bethany Crisis Shelter in Duluth need a safe place and a compassionate response to times of crisis and trauma. Children and youth age 17 and younger are referred to the shelter by county social service providers, the court system and area law enforcement. Youth can also self-refer. Bethany provides the stability and care that children need until they can safely be reunited with their families. When reunifying families is not a viable option, LSS works to find alternative, safe living arrangements for children. These may include staying with extended family members or friends of the family, foster care or the LSS Renaissance transitional living program in Duluth.

Our approach is strengths-based, recognizing the unique reality of each young person's situation. "I think kids do better when they're in an environment that communicates that they're cared for and loved," said Duncan Gregory, program director at Bethany.

In the first letter to the church in Thessalonica, the Apostle Paul encourages a community of Jesus followers who, while young and inexperienced in their faith, are already bearing fruit. Paul is ecstatic because he sees the love this faithful community is producing for one another. He sees their commitment. That's why Paul encourages them to continue to grow in love – not just for one another, but beyond their own community. He knows that love is contagious. The fruits of the Spirit, you may recall, are "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." (Galatians 5:22-23) It is this kind of love in action that Paul asks these Jesus followers to spread so that the love of Christ becomes contagious.



Discuss:

1. How has the pandemic impacted your life – and faith? How have you seen the lives of some of our neighbors in Minnesota impacted by the pandemic?
2. What are some new ways that you or your church have reached out to neighbors during this challenging time?
3. Paul was overjoyed to see the church in Thessalonica growing in faith and service. Name a time when someone else's joy was "contagious" and caused you to experience life in a different way.
4. Paul encourages the community in Thessalonica to have love for people beyond their own community. How has God's love challenged you to love and have compassion for people beyond your community or for those whose experience of life is very different from your own?
5. What steps will you take right now to share the love of God with others beyond your community?

Closing Prayer

God who breathed the first breath of life into humanity, help us to spread your love and compassion to those beyond our community. Show us ways to support those who hold their breath out of fear: fear that there is not enough, fear for their safety, and all that causes anxiety. Let us share their burdens so all our neighbors may experience the fruit of the Spirit fully, through Christ our sustainer and redeemer, Amen.

ADVENT 2: Hear the Voices Crying Out

Opening Prayer

Gracious God, in this season of Advent, we welcome you to come. Be among us now. Increase in us great love and compassion for our neighbors. Stir our hearts and activate this community so that your love and compassion overflow, giving all people hope. Amen.

Opening Hymn

Prepare the Royal Highway (ELW 264) Sing or speak all four verses of this hymn as a prayer.

Read: Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

*'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.*

*⁵ Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;*

⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

John's proclamation speaks of God's people crying in the wilderness; he says God hears the cries of those who suffer. The prophet Isaiah, who John quotes, says that God does not simply hear the cries of the people, but acts on those cries. Sometimes, that action comes through prophets like John and Isaiah. Sometimes, God acts alone, but most of the time God's promises are fulfilled through the people -- ordinary, unassuming people like you who put their faith into action. Scripture is full of examples of humble, ordinary people who, through living out their faith, prepare the way of the Lord.

In the story of the birth of Jesus, we see the courage of Mary and Joseph, who risk everything and flee to Egypt to keep their child safe. Throughout scripture, we see God working through humans to improve the lives of one another. From Moses, to Ruth and Naomi, to John the Baptist, we are given examples of what happens when people pour out God's love in a compassionate and generous response to their neighbors.



Video: Equipping Youth to Push Past Barriers

https://youtu.be/0K_5oxfJOpM

The prophet Isaiah, quoted above in the Gospel of Luke, proclaims that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God." (Luke 3:6). Lutherans understand the *now and not yet* nature of salvation: God cares about suffering in this lifetime and provides a path to liberation (*now*), while also promising salvation in the next life (*not yet*).



Discuss:

1. Think about people who are not part of your well-known group of friends, neighbors and family. Which of those neighbors are not currently experiencing the fullness of life that God desires for them now?
2. Human-made barriers are often the cause of suffering among our neighbors. For example, the high cost of housing has made it difficult for many people to find safe, affordable housing. Name some of the valleys, mountains, and rough paths (barriers) that stand in the way of your neighbors experiencing abundant life.
3. What are some ways, both big and small, that you and your faith community can participate in preparing the way of the Lord?

Closing Prayer

God of all flesh, we await the advent of the Promised One in a newborn. We know you hear the cries of all your people in the wilderness. Help us to hear the cries of our neighbors and continue the work you have already done to remove barriers and prepare the way of the Lord for all. Show us the places where the valleys are low and the paths are rough in our neighborhoods, and more importantly, help us act on the opportunities to level them. In the name of the Child we await, Amen.

ADVENT 3: All Under One Roof

Opening Prayer

Gracious God, in this season of Advent, we welcome you to come. Be among us now. Increase in us great love and compassion for our neighbors. Stir our hearts and activate this community so that your love and compassion overflow, giving all people hope. Amen.

Read: Luke 3: 7-18 (NRSV)

⁷ John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" ⁸ Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹ Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" ¹¹ In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." ¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" ¹³ He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." ¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation and be satisfied with your wages."

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

¹⁸ So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

John the Baptist chastises the crowd with the haunting rebuke, “You brood of vipers!” This shocking launch of John’s ministry leads exactly where John intends – to the question: How can we bear fruit – good fruit – into the world? The people ask John to tell them how to manifest this goodness, asking, “What then should we do?” John lays out a menu of generous responses – a multiple choice with no wrong answers: if you have an extra coat or extra food then give it away, be honest and ethical in your work, and be grateful and satisfied with your wages. Beyond a mere checklist for a holy life, John’s goal is for the people to repent – to turn to a new way of living that requires humility, gratitude, generosity and genuine concern for their neighbors.

Since 1916 Morgan Park has had a welcoming place for children in need of a loving community. Over the years, the Bethany structures that house children have changed, and while some of the needs of children and families have changed through the years, what has remained steady is the community’s generous response.



LSS employees at Bethany have noted that children are arriving at Bethany with more significant challenges and trauma than ever before. Unforeseen events in families, such as a job loss or home loss, illness or death are traumatic for children arriving at Bethany. They will need compassionate care, as well as the emotional, developmental and behavioral support of trained staff.

The new Bethany facility, set to open their doors in the summer of 2022, will provide a new space that will include a Family Resource Center providing preventative services such as: parent coaching, supervised visitation, and family counseling. LSS will also have crisis nursery services including emergency child care and a clothing room with supplies, such as diapers and wipes. Housed under one roof, services are designed to equip more children and their families to stay healthy, remain together when possible, prevent crisis from occurring and prevent youth from experiencing homelessness.



Video: Bethany Crisis Shelter (2:29) –
<https://www.lssmn.org/get-involved/donate/bethany>



Discuss:

1. What surprises you about the needs of children and families who come to Bethany?
2. What do you think families need most to be strong and healthy?
3. What support do you think children might need to feel safe, loved and cared for when they arrive at Bethany?

Closing Prayer

God who created us to be one family, we thank you for providing places like Bethany to serve families and provide them with necessary resources to be strong and healthy. Help us to see the needs of those families and show us how to love and support them as you do. Use us as your loving hands in the world to uplift these beloved children and all our neighbors, that they may live full and abundant lives. This we pray in the name of the Child who came into this broken world and whose presence continues to guide us. Amen.

ADVENT 4:

Opening Prayer

Holy One, as Christmas draws near, we pray for expectant parents like Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary and Joseph. Prepare and protect all families and provide them with the love, generosity and compassion of their community. Join us together with our neighbors so that your joy may be shared by all. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Read: Luke 1:39-45

³⁹ In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

In those days, Mary and Elizabeth would have been two people that society would least expect to be chosen by God for a higher calling. They were poor, and as women were situated on the margins of society. Their stories are in contrast. Elizabeth was very old, while Mary was quite young.

Often, this story is presented as a lovely family story. Elizabeth and Mary, both pregnant, seek companionship and kinship from one another. Just a story about family members visiting one another. That portrayal ignores the reality of the circumstances of these women and the children they were to bear. Both Mary and Elizabeth would have been ostracized by their communities, to the point of their safety being in danger. Mary, unmarried, young, and expecting a child, Elizabeth, past or beyond child bearing years and pregnant, her husband Zechariah had lost the ability to speak and perhaps make a living. They had to seek support from one another. They had no one else to turn to, no other safe place to go. They were desperate and their situations dire. Fortunately, they did have someone to turn to and a place to go. They had one another, someone to receive them as they were and believe their realities, without judgment.

Those who seek shelter at Bethany have no other place to go. Unlike Mary, they may not have an "Elizabeth" - a friend or family member with whom they can take refuge. Their safety, or their very life, may be in jeopardy, not unlike Mary.

As followers of Jesus, as we await the advent of the Promised One, Jesus, we have the opportunity to do what Mary and Elizabeth did for one another. Through

the Bethany project, we have the chance to faithfully live out our call to love one another as we have been commanded. We can model Mary and Elizabeth, being extended family for those families who are in jeopardy.



Discuss:

1. When have you seen or known people whom society least expects rise up to exceed expectations? What has their example taught you?
2. When have you thought you had nothing to give, yet God had other plans?
3. Just as Elizabeth's baby "lept for Joy" at the arrival of Mary, how has your spirit been buoyed with hope even in these difficult times? How can you share that hope with others this season - including the children, youth and families who seek shelter and safety at Bethany?

Closing Prayer

God of comfort and protection, we see the ways you provided safety and support for Mary and Elizabeth. We see the way you provide places like Bethany to support families here in Minnesota. Help us to love and support one another as you have done for us. Guide our lives and our hearts as we seek ways to provide stability for families with resources they need to provide for themselves. Let us comfort and empower our neighbors, children and families. In the name of the Christ Child whose advent we await, Amen.

Music Video: Hope for Everyone

<https://youtu.be/X-ThP8qEio4>



We are grateful to 76 faith communities and hundreds of individuals who came together to build the Center for Changing Lives in Duluth. The new Bethany facility is an important next step in our work to ensure that children and youth have safe and stable homes and avoid homelessness in our region by providing family stabilization and supportive services.

We invite you and your faith community to make a gift to help build this new resource in Morgan Park. The new center will be a tremendous asset that strengthens families and supports child well-being.

Please send your gift to Lutheran Social Service, Attn: Bethany, 2485 Como Avenue, Saint Paul, MN 55108 or online at lssmn.org. Please note "Bethany" on your check.

If you would like to learn more, invite a speaker or to request additional resources, please email congregations@lssmn.org. Thank you for your partnership in serving all our neighbors.

