



Filled With Good Things

Advent Devotional





Dear neighbor,

Advent greetings from all of us at ELCA World Hunger! We are delighted that you are sharing this season with us.

You will see the word “neighbor” all over this year’s Advent devotional. For those of us who belong to the church, “neighbor” can carry tension with it. Certainly our community members are our neighbors. But God keeps calling us to care for every child of God, our creeds stress the importance of a universal church, and the interrelatedness of a globalized world continues to show us that “neighbor” means more than familiarity or proximity. Gifts to ELCA World Hunger and direct action with our neighbors similarly draw us into relationship with one another.

To that end, we hope that, this Advent, you will take time to explore what “neighbor” means to you. Each devotion in this guide includes ideas, rooted in Scripture, for ways to take action that will draw you closer to your neighbors, those you see regularly and those you may never meet.

The devotions can be read individually, with your household or as part of a study group. Each reflection ends with ideas for including kids in the devotion. We recommend that you pick the same day each week of Advent to read the devotional reflection and to complete the actions suggested at the end.

Whether you are advocating, organizing or serving, we hope to challenge, stretch and enrich your understanding of who your neighbor is.

Your neighbor,

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Program Director
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P.S. All resources in this devotional can be found at [ELCA.org/WHAdvent](https://www.elca.org/WHAdvent).



First Sunday in Advent

Theme Verse: Isaiah 64:1-9

Discussion

This first passage for our Advent devotional series is a direct appeal to God on behalf of a people alienated from their home, forced into exile by the Babylonian Empire. The prophet addresses God intimately — “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down” (Isaiah 64:1) — while naming God’s wonders, unappreciated by the people. While this call for mercy is clear that God alone can bring justice (4), it comes from a very specific party, represented throughout this passage by a pronoun: “we.”

The prophet singles out no individuals responsible for the suffering of their people, absolves no one from blame and requests relief for all. More than that, “we” are all worthy of deliverance: “Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand” (8).

As God’s people, all of us are connected as a “we.” Every day, we see our neighbors around town, in our schools and workplaces, in worship. When First Lutheran Church of Columbia Heights, Minn., an ELCA World Hunger partner, saw its immigrant neighbors afraid to leave home, even for work, because of aggressive immigration enforcement operations in Minneapolis-St. Paul, the church helped pay their rent.

Our faith also connects us to members of the church globally, neighbors who profess similar beliefs and relationship with us. Our church accompanies small rural communities such as Sua in Sumatra, providing training in beekeeping and business for seasonal workers to give them consistent, predictable income.

Today's reading reminds us that in addition to God's power, "we" have one another.

This Advent, we at ELCA World Hunger ask you to reflect on who your "we" is and to walk alongside them with care, a listening ear and a willing heart. Throughout the season, our Advent calendar will provide chances to engage with your "we" through generosity, direct action, organizing and advocacy. Indeed, these are ways our church responds to the injustice of this world, by seeing and acting for our neighbor as one who is also the work of God "our potter."

In the week to come ...

- Spend a few minutes each day reflecting on who is part of your "we." Who supports you? Whom do you look forward to seeing? Whom do you feel connected to, even though you have never met them?
- Invite members of your community to consider ways to be generous to communities our church accompanies. A great first step is to spend 20-25 minutes with our "Hunger Leader 101: What Is a Hunger Leader?" course (available at [ELCA.org/WHAdvent](https://www.elca.org/WHAdvent)). Here you can explore ways to get involved as a hunger leader and see how ELCA World Hunger partners are working to end poverty in the U.S. and globally.
- With these neighbors, commit to a plan to be generous this season.
- *If you have kids:* Invite them to color the village background, the tree, the chicks and the carolers this week. As you do, read the Bible passage from today and reflect with them on who their neighbors are. Think big: Who is in your "big neighborhood"? If your family is ready for it, consider also an [ELCA Good Gift](#) that you, your neighbors or your congregation might sponsor this season.



Second Sunday in Advent

Theme Verse: Mark 1:1-8

Discussion

In last week's reflection, we invited you to consider who your "we" is and how your neighbors far and near depend on you, and you on them. This week, John the Baptizer bursts onto the scene, unapologetically himself: "Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey" (Mark 1:6). This is how John readies his neighbors for the work of "[preparing] the way of the Lord" (3).

The messianic justice God desires does not come without our work. "Prepare the way of the Lord" is a command. John is not only the man who will baptize Jesus; he is also a character who shows us how we can continue to usher Jesus into our world.

One specific way our church, supported by ELCA World Hunger, brings God's justice into our neighborhoods is through something called advocacy. The ELCA social statement [*Faith and Civic Life: Seeking the Well-being of All*](#) makes clear that humans are "social and political creatures" and that Christians are called to work through the imperfect tools available to us to bring out God's reign on earth (pp. 1-2). Advocacy, the statement continues, is the way we do this, by "pressing civic leaders or public-policy makers to respect the needs and dignity of all people and our common home" (p. 27). This means that we are also called to make Jesus' love manifest through our public life and political power.

Undoubtedly, "politics" can make people feel some way: maybe that word makes you feel anxious, icky, a bit angry, or impassioned. In fact, as the ELCA social statement on civic life observes, "The word 'politics' (polis is Greek for 'the people') ... describes negotiating how the benefits, burdens, rights, and responsibilities of living in a

society are shared” (p. 29). Engaging in politics does not need to be devoid of joy! Just as John did not stop wearing camel skin or eating honey-dipped bugs, you and your neighbors can bring your whole selves to your advocacy.

This week, we invite you to take a daily advocacy action, Monday through Friday, explained below. Find ways to make your advocacy joyful and faithful and to bring your whole self to the act of standing up for your community and being a voice for justice in an imperfect world.

In the week to come ...

- Take time on Monday or Sunday evening to get your bearings around advocacy. First, what do you care about most? Then, either (a) check in with your neighbors on issues they care about and why or (b) explore some of the latest [ELCA Advocacy Action Alerts](#) and identify one or two that resonate with you. Last, take action!
- Tuesday through Friday, make a list of your elected representatives at the state and federal levels. Every day, call or email the office of one of these individuals. When you talk to their staff, make sure they know you are grateful for the representative’s hard work. Then tell them one thing your neighbors and your church are concerned about. Ask what the representative is doing to address that issue.
- However you approach this week, be sure to speak from your experience and in your voice. Though you probably won’t eat bugs for breakfast, you will always be a more effective advocate when you use your authentic voice.
- *If you have kids:* Invite them to craft or color about an issue that is important to them, then send that to your representatives. You could even do this with your church or kids on your block. Check out this example from the [ELCA Advocacy Instagram](#)!



Third Sunday in Advent

Theme Verse: Psalm 126:1-6

Discussion

This week, the psalmist brings back the “we,” as deliverance for this community, brings joy from abject sadness: “May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy” (Psalm 126:5). It can certainly be easy to dwell in hopelessness when we watch our world and our neighbors suffer. When the number of unhoused folks in our communities continues to rise, for instance, we could easily assume that the trend will continue without end. But hopelessness, the psalmist might remind us, is precisely the feeling that prevents the sort of sowing that can reap a harvest of joy.

In the nonprofit world, there is an axiom that successful organizations (including churches) operate with an “abundance mindset” over a “scarcity mindset.” When institutions are afraid of things such as “the bottom line,” political or cultural trends, or workers’ job security, they lose faith in their ability to make change — they lose hope — and often stray from their mission. But when organizations choose to believe in their mission and to trust and celebrate their neighbors, they operate abundantly and share their gifts abundantly. For instance, ELCA World Hunger has partnered with Greater Portland Family Promise (GPFP) in Portland, Maine, where our church has decided that supporting migrants means more than food. Instead, GPFP walks with its immigrant neighbors, mainly from Angola and Congo, with full wraparound services, from housing to education and legal assistance (you can find this story on LivingLutheran.org). We might say that abundance-minded organizations will “sow tears,” knowing they will eventually “reap with shouts of joy.” Our church gets to be part of that work.

What does sharing your abundance look like for you, and what would it look like for you to be generous at this moment? Perhaps your life is at a “sow tears” moment. Are there neighbors — your “we” — that you can sow those tears with and allow to be generous with you?

The reading for today draws together community, sharing and hope. The result is a reversal of fortune, God’s blessing becoming manifest alongside creation. May the abundance of our own “we” be so.

In the week to come ...

- We invite you to share your abundance with your unhoused neighbors. Using the Stocking the Streets resource from ELCA World Hunger, create bags of necessities to hand out to folks who need them. This is an opportunity to share your abundance with those whose lives may currently be on the earlier end of the psalm today.
- If you would like to learn more about housing justice, check out ELCA World Hunger’s [housing guide](#).
- *If you have kids:* Stock the bags together! You can make your list, formulate a budget (so they can learn about giving financially) and shop. Make the bags together. As you do, read the psalm for today. Ask them about times when their sadness gave way to joy.



Fourth Sunday in Advent

Theme Verse: Luke 1:26-38

Discussion

Any neighborly relationship starts with a moment of awkward stumbling, misunderstanding or anxiety. Building trust with someone we have never fully known or have grown distant from is hard; it requires faith. But when we risk vulnerability with someone and open up to their story, we can discover new possibilities for a world changed.

Mary's encounter with the angel Gabriel is not so different from the ways we meet new neighbors. She is "perplexed by his words" — who begins a conversation with "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you" (Luke 1:28)? Gabriel's explanation that Mary's son will "reign over the house of Jacob forever" (33) doesn't make things any clearer.

All the same, Mary decides to trust this person and continues to ask questions; she takes the risk of building a relationship.

By taking the leap of faith necessary to form a neighborly bond, Mary is drawn into God's story of redemptive love. She will be surrounded by God, become part of a never-ending reign and, crucially, be gifted a deeper bond with another person, her relative Elizabeth. In short, by opening herself to a stranger and new neighbor, Mary is bonded to a larger network of people who are dedicated to bringing God's justice into the world.

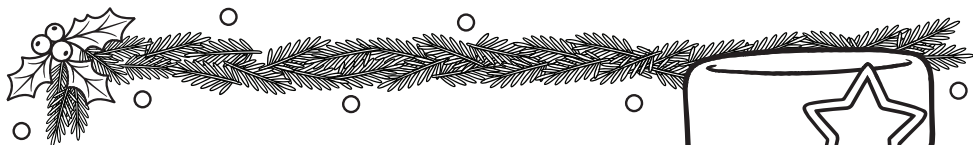
Our church, too, pushes us to form more neighborly bonds. ELCA World Hunger is one way we can do this: by giving and learning, we participate in the work of the ELCA in and for the world. We can also exercise God's mission with our neighbors-by-proximity! We can ask them to share their stories, and we can share our own; we can share

our hopes and worries for our communities and the world; we can also share joy.

Gabriel's call to Mary assures us that this sort of neighboring is a sacred call, a gift.

In the week to come ...

- Plan a gathering with members of your church's neighborhood or larger community. Though the Christmas season is upon us and many of us connect with neighbors, the months that follow are often lonely. Reach out to the people who live close to you and set up a time in January or February to gather and discuss issues close to you.
- This get-together can look however you like, but make sure to do the following:
 - Host it where all people can feel comfortable; it need not be in a home. If your community has families with children, consider pooling funds for childcare.
 - The time does not need to be fully structured, but there should be some structured discussion time.
 - Begin the conversation with introductions and an icebreaker so people can get comfortable with each other. Discuss what you like about living close to each other and in your neighborhood.
 - Discuss any concerns you have about where you live. Discuss what gifts each of you brings to the challenge of making change as "hunger leaders." (Recall our earlier reference to the "Hunger Leader 101: What Is a Hunger Leader?" course.)
- If your group wants to learn more about community organizing, access resources and training from the ELCA's Organizing for Mission Network (organizingformission.org).
- *If you have kids:* Read the story from Luke to your kids and ask them how they feel when meeting new people and why they feel this way. Talk about how they have seen friendships form.



“Stocking the Streets” Bags

Stocking the Streets is an effort by ELCA World Hunger and your community to care for all our neighbors, some of whom lack a roof over their heads. A Stocking the Streets bag includes the items most frequently requested by individuals facing homelessness.



color me!

Post this [list of items](#) next to your Christmas tree or Advent calendar, along with the bag or bags you will fill. Go shopping — together with family, friends or your church community — early in the season for all the items on the list. Starting on the 12th day of Advent, put one item per day in your Stocking the Streets bag. In the days following Christmas, you will be ready to pass out your bags when needed or bring them to a local social services organization that works with unhoused folks.

Some notes as you prepare and give out your bags:

- You can give these bags to individuals you meet who are homeless or donate them to a local organization that works with people facing homelessness.
- Contact local agencies that work with people facing homelessness, and solicit suggestions for items that are more critical in your locality.
- Do not give out money.
- Gallon bags work well, but you can also sew your own.





ELCA World Hunger

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