

An artistic illustration of a nativity scene. In the foreground, a man (Joseph) is kneeling on the left, his hands clasped in prayer, looking towards a woman (Mary) on the right who is leaning over a manger. The manger contains a baby (Jesus) wrapped in swaddling clothes. The background is a warm, golden-yellow sky with a bright sun or starburst effect. In the upper left, several birds are perched on a wooden beam. In the upper right, the fronds of a palm tree are visible. The overall style is soft and painterly.

# Advent Study

2021



**ELCA World Hunger**  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
God's work. Our hands.

# Week 1

***In those days Judah will be saved and  
Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is  
the name by which it will be called:  
"The Lord is our righteousness."***

—Jeremiah 33:16

As the sun rose over Juba, South Sudan, Charity Toksang took another slow step toward the doors of the health care clinic, her hand on her back to relieve her pain. She had traveled throughout the night to get here, traversing roads filled with mud and water from soaking rains. But she had little choice to do otherwise. Charity's baby was on its way, and she only prayed that she would reach the Reconciliation Lutheran Church Primary Health Care Clinic, on the outskirts of Juba, in time.

Access to prenatal care and specialized support during labor is an ongoing challenge in this part of South Sudan. There are few clinics or hospitals, and few women have access to transportation. Getting to a clinic can mean walking many miles, and visiting a private care facility costs more than most families can afford. The Juba clinic where Charity's son was born helps to address these challenges by providing needed care at no cost. The care center is a project of the Evangelical Lutheran Church Africa Mission in South Sudan (ELCAMSS), which is supported by ELCA World Hunger.

Charity was able to reach the clinic, and she gave birth to a healthy baby boy, much to the relief of Charity and her caregivers. Had there been complications – as Dr. John Sebit Madit Johnson, chief medical officer of the center, feared – moving Charity to a larger hospital in Juba would have been impossible.

To respond to the challenges of hunger, we must understand the real ways in which hunger impacts our lives. Images of empty plates or emaciated physical bodies were once commonly used to generate

concern about hunger. But hunger takes many other forms that need to be confronted. To end hunger we must recognize the ways hunger is reflected in multiple layers of vulnerability. We must focus on the “insecurity” part of “food insecurity” as much as, if not more than, the “food” part.

For Charity Toksang, ELCAMSS' Reconciliation Lutheran Church Primary Health Care Clinic provided a layer of assurance. Without transportation, getting to another facility would have been nearly impossible. With her husband out of work and few financial resources, the cost of care would have created a tremendous burden, one that Charity and her family would have borne for a long time. The care center helped her to address both challenges, yet there is more to be done. Even with the care center outside Juba, Charity still faced significant risks.

*If her labor had progressed too quickly ...*

*If her delivery had been complicated ...*

*If she had not known to seek care when she did ...*

Accompanying our neighbors in their struggles with hunger means entering into their stories of strength amid vulnerability and working together to end insecurity.

That's where our faith becomes vastly important. The promise of God to which we cling is the promise that we will not only live but live well, that “Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety” (Jeremiah 33:16). This promise for the people of Judah meant an end to the precarious social and political life of their nation. Internal and external threats were very real, and soon, Judah itself would fall to the Babylonians, who forced many Judahites into exile. Even without these political risks, the people still lived with environmental risks, such as droughts, which could cripple their farming economy and lead to widespread hunger. In fact, the entire Hebrew Bible could be summed up as God accompanying a vulnerable people through times of risk and uncertainty toward the coming of a new day.

That is part of our invitation as the church today, to accompany and be accompanied by our neighbors as we work to end the risks that come from too little food, too little money, too few clinics and too

many obstacles to meaningful change. This invitation draws the ELCA and the ELCAMSS together to walk with neighbors such as Charity toward a future when her community and all communities can access the care they need to thrive.

Charity's walk to the clinic, in some ways, mirrors our journey during Advent. In these weeks, we walk with another expectant couple, Mary and Joseph, as they travel toward Bethlehem, eagerly awaiting the birth of Jesus and praying to find shelter before he arrives. We walk, too, with the whole of God's people through history, in hopeful expectation of the salvation God has promised. For some, that means the brightness of a day that dawns in hope. For others, it means a welcome night of rest from their labors. For all, it means that God is with us, drawing us toward a future when we “will be saved and ... live in safety.”

As Charity cradled her healthy infant son, her smile and the ululations of her neighbors reflected their relief, hope and joy. Her efforts to reach the clinic had ensured that she and her baby would be safe. And, as Dr. Johnson notes, “Charity's story is just one among the many stories of women who got the chance to access health services for the first time due to the presence of the Reconciliation Lutheran Church primary health care unit.”

Fittingly, Charity named her newborn son Emmanuel.

### Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. As this year draws to a close, what are your hopes for the future?
2. In moments of uncertainty or fear, how have you been accompanied by God through other people?
3. What realities create vulnerability in our communities today? How can the church help journey with people toward safety and security?
4. What does it mean today to “be saved and ... live in safety”?

# PRAYER

Protector God, you journeyed with your people Israel in their flight from Egypt, providing food, water and shelter when they were needed. You guided Mary and Joseph to the stable and led the holy family to safety from Herod's violence. Be with us today as we face uncertainty, fear and risks both known and unknown. Comfort us, protect us and inspire us with hope for the future you have promised. Equip us to care for one another and all our neighbors, that all may know the joy of life abundant. In your holy name, we pray. Amen.

# Week 2

***By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn  
from on high will break upon us.***

—Luke 1:78

Zechariah's prophecy in the first chapter of Luke, our reading for this second Sunday in Advent, is sometimes overlooked in favor of the Magnificat of Mary in the same chapter. Mary's song, which we will read later in Advent, is a theological ode to God, who "lift[s] up the lowly" (Luke 1:52). Zechariah's prophecy, however, is a cry of joy for the God who fulfills God's promise. Both Mary and Zechariah have longed with their people for this moment, have yearned for the fulfillment of the promise that we heard on the first Sunday of Advent, when "Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety" (Jeremiah 33:16). Now, as Zechariah proclaims, "the dawn from on high [has broken] upon us" (Luke 1:78).

What does it mean for this new day to "dawn"? All too often, the church has tended to conflate metaphors of light and darkness with good and evil. The darkness of night is tied to fear, uncertainty and even despair, whereas the brightness of day symbolizes hope, joy and, in some cases, wisdom. But Zechariah's proclamation of the coming dawn reveals more than the difference between light and darkness. Indeed, in much of Scripture the dawning of the day of the Lord is far from a happy occasion. The prophets Micah and Joel both refer to it as "terrible," and Amos chastises the people who long for it to arrive.

In the Bible and in life, metaphors of light and darkness are more complex than we sometimes assume. In life, the darkness of night can bring risk and uncertainty, as we heard in Charity's story in the first session of this Advent study. Yet night can also be a time of rest, a symbol for the end of our labors. For the people of the Bible, living in hot, arid climes, the sun was necessary for growing food but its setting would bring a cool, restorative break.

For many of our neighbors who face housing insecurity, night and day each carry their own risks. As the sky dims, the need to find safe, suitable shelter intensifies. As the day dawns, the threat of eviction or displacement looms.

St. Andrew's Refugee Services (StARS) in Cairo, Egypt, a ministry supported by ELCA World Hunger, accompanies vulnerable neighbors through these risks. The community-based organizations supported by StARS are key partners in this work. When the COVID-19 pandemic forced many governmental agencies to close down or scale back their support of refugees in Cairo, these community-based organizations remained open, providing critical support.

Hala, a 37-year-old Sudanese mother, was one of these neighbors. Her husband passed away during the first wave of COVID-19 in Egypt, leaving Hala to care for their four children. Forced to support them on her own amid the widespread economic uncertainty of the pandemic, Hala soon fell behind in her rent payments.

Knowing she needed some support, Hala turned to Amal School, an organization supported by StARS. Amal School provided her and her family with an emergency grant so that they no longer had to fear eviction. The school also provided Hala with a caseworker who helped her find a job. Now, her family has stable housing, her job provides much-needed income and Hala has the resources she needs to care for her family. She no longer worries about what they will eat during the day or where they will lay their heads at night.

The season of Advent invites us to journey with our historical forebears, such as Mary and Zechariah, and with our neighbors today, such as Hala. This journey is no metaphorical shift between night and day, darkness and light, but a real, lived transformation from the vulnerability we know surrounds us to the promise we know includes us. For Mary, this meant seeing the proud brought low and "the lowly" exalted by God. For Zechariah, it meant seeing the dawn break from on high. For Charity Toksang, in our first session of this study, it meant seeing the sun rise over a health care clinic in Juba, South Sudan. And for Hala and her family, it means sleeping in a home they won't be forced to leave the next day.

God meets us where we are with a *promise* – that we will be reconciled, that the world is being transformed, that we

will live safely, securely and abundantly. God also meets us with an *invitation* – to participate in this reconciliation and transformation in the world.

Where is God meeting you this Advent? And where is God calling you to be in the new year?

### Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What does it mean to be vulnerable? What are some ways Hala and her family may have felt vulnerable? What are some ways you feel vulnerable in this Advent season?
2. What does God's promise of salvation mean for us today? What will "the dawn [breaking] from on high" look like in our lives?
3. The term "housing insecurity," used in the reflection above, includes not just homelessness but a variety of obstacles people face in finding a safe, stable and affordable place to live. Consider the terms "housing-insecure" and "homeless." What's the difference? What does it mean to have a "home"? What challenges does your community face in ensuring that everyone is "housing secure"?
4. Where is God calling the church to be this Advent? How does our faith call us to accompany neighbors such as Hala as they work toward a better future for their families?

## PRAYER

God of promise, we thank you for the darkness of night and the brightness of day, for the change of seasons, the passing of time and the promised future toward which you lead your world. Be present with us and with our neighbors around the world, especially those left vulnerable by rising costs and declining opportunities. Inspire your church to be part of your work in the world, ensuring that all can enjoy the blessings of safety, security, peace and hope that you provide. In your holy name, we pray. Amen.

# Week 3

**In reply [John the Baptist] said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."**

—Luke 3:11

In December 2019, then-Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue announced changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) that would have increased restrictions on eligibility and caused the loss of benefits for many Americans. In doing so, he told reporters that the changes would help move "more able-bodied recipients off of SNAP benefits toward self-sufficiency." His argument, like so many arguments against SNAP and other public assistance programs, was that these programs make people dependent rather than self-sufficient.

There's nothing new in this (though one might wonder how "sufficient" the average SNAP award of \$121 per month was at the time). For decades, self-sufficiency has been celebrated as the ideal marker of success. In 2019, Ken Cuccinelli, acting director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, famously altered the words of Emma Lazarus enshrined on the Statue of Liberty when he defended new restrictive immigration policies: "Give me your tired and your poor who can stand on their own two feet and who will not become a public charge," he opined. His message was clear: self-sufficiency is not just an ideal but a prerequisite for being part of American society.

By contrast, our faith is rooted in the idea that we are not self-sufficient but dependent and interdependent. Advent is the story of a dependent people being saved by God for the very reason that we could not save ourselves. We were and have always been dependent. From the first humans in Eden, relying on the gifts of the Creator, to our ancestors, wandering in the wilderness totally dependent on the protection and provision of God, Scripture is the story of God *with* us – because we can't do it alone.

In the Gospel reading for the third Sunday in Advent, John the Baptist chastises the crowd, calling them a "brood of vipers" and comparing them to chaff – the waste from processing wheat – that would be left on the threshing floor. When they ask what they ought to do, John's response is intriguing. He doesn't advise them to pray harder or attend synagogue more frequently. Rather, he urges them to restore their relationships with one another. In short: share and be fair. Share with one another (Luke 3:11) and be fair in your business dealings (Luke 3:13-14). John's response is to recognize and respect our dependence on one another. When we are in need, we depend on the generosity of others. And in daily life, our well-being depends on trusting others to act justly.

The early church took this to heart. In the book of Acts, we learn that the first Christian communities "had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:44-45). This kind of sharing distinguished Christian communities for centuries afterward.

For early Christians, dependence on one another went beyond just being nice. It was deeply rooted in the common understanding of property, human nature and God. Charles Avila, in his masterful book *Ownership: Early Christian Teaching*, describes how, for the early writer Clement of Alexandria, the purpose of property was twofold: *autarkeia*, or the ability to care for ourselves, and *koinonia*, the obligation to care for others in the community. Ultimately, Clement says, we are created for *koinonia*, for community.

*Autarkeia*, the "self-sufficiency" provided by property, finds its truest meaning in the freedom it provides us to care for each other. No one can live, let alone thrive, without help from others.

The COVID-19 pandemic reminded us of this interconnectedness. Even as we kept physical distance, the deep needs that stemmed from the pandemic couldn't be ignored. Hunger around the world increased dramatically. In the United States, food insecurity and economic insecurity led to massive spikes in the numbers of people using food pantries and other community assistance resources.

Ellie Puente saw this firsthand in her community in Fuquay-Varina, N.C. When the pandemic hit, she worried about her son's friend, Carlos, and his family. She knew Carlos' family had trouble

making ends meet, and the pandemic only made the situation more challenging. Ellie met with a friend and a few teachers from the school where she volunteers. Together, they identified 20 families, including Carlos', that were in need. They rounded up donations and started making daily deliveries of lunches and other food supplies to their neighbors. Every time they thought they would run out of money to pay for food, local supporters stepped in. Abiding Presence Lutheran Church became a partner in the school's program and provided food for the families with the help of a Daily Bread Matching Grant from ELCA World Hunger.

Their relationship with the families has been crucial during the pandemic. "Our food delivery program has been instrumental in meeting a physical need by providing food to our families," says Ellie. "More importantly, our food delivery program has helped us create a deeper connection with families. ... [The] families know we love them, and they know they belong."

The sharing that John the Baptist called his early followers to practice, and that Ellie, Abiding Presence and the school practiced, is about more than the things we distribute. It's about who we are created and called to be. As this Advent season reminds us, God promises not that we will be fine on our own but that we will be made whole in reconciled and transformed relationships with God and one another. From the joy of Zechariah in the second week of Advent to the proclamations of John the Baptist this week, the message of Christ's coming is that we can't do it on our own – nor do we have to.

The pandemic has shone a spotlight on the ways we depend on one another and showed us just how effective we can be when we recognize that interdependence and respond to it in love.

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How are the terms "self-sufficiency" and "interdependence" related? How are they different?
2. In your own life, how has the support, care or presence of others helped you? Thinking about it another way: in the story of your life, who else might play an important part?
3. How might the work of Ellie's school and Abiding Presence Lutheran Church have helped the families "know they belong"? How is your congregation helping your neighbors feel welcomed and supported in your community?
4. In what ways has the COVID-19 pandemic reminded you of our dependence on God and one another?

## PRAYER

Gracious God, you have brought your people together into one community, reconciling us in Christ one to the other. Forgive us for the times when we have isolated ourselves or others, and inspire us with the love that binds us together. When we feel alone, remind us that we are loved. When we are estranged, remind us of your love for others. Bless us with the memory of our dependence on you and each other this Advent, that we may be part of the community you have created in our midst. In your name, we pray. Amen.

# Week 4

**Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?"**

—Luke 1:41b-43

We are nearing the end of Advent and the start of that special holiday, Christmas. In the United States, stores have been filled with seasonal music for six months now (it feels that way, at least), garlands and lights are draped over homes and lampposts, and pine trees are adorned with baubles of all shapes and sizes. In many countries, Christmas markets have taken over city squares. As the old carol says, "It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas."

Doesn't the season, at times, feel almost too big, perhaps even overwhelming? Shopping for Christmas is such a big affair that, at least in the United States, it has come to dominate stores earlier and to fill social media feeds and websites with ads earlier and more visibly, refusing to be confined to the last weeks of the year or even to the month between late November and Dec. 25. In the life of the church, we often hear voices reclaiming Advent as a season distinct and separate from Christmas. Yet, the liturgical calendar aside, the bigness of Christmas often overshadows the important time of Advent.

Christmas is a big deal, and rightfully so. On Christmas Day, we celebrate the birth of the Christ, who will transform the world. Everything changes on that Christmas morning. The Gospel reading for this final Sunday of Advent tells us that even John the Baptist, though still in the womb, "leaped for joy" (Luke 1:44) when the pregnant Mary drew near.

Clearly, something huge is happening. But the story in Luke is a little curious, given what we know now about the importance

of that first Christmas. Sure, there are angels, but in the Gospel story, they appear in quiet moments of solitude – to Zechariah as he attends to the incense in the temple, to Mary at home and to a small group of shepherds. There are no magi in Luke's Gospel, either. Instead, there are Mary, Zechariah, Elizabeth and, later on, Simeon and Anna – by all accounts, relatively unremarkable people. Yet Luke's story begins here: with Zechariah at work, in a private conversation between cousins Mary and Elizabeth, and in a manger.

Amid the ordinariness of daily life, work and conversation, great miracles are afoot. And in a manger in a stable, the Savior of the world lies wrapped in bits of cloth. Later, there will be talk of kings and rulers, high priests and other important figures, but for now, in these opening chapters of Luke, the sacred breaks in among the ordinary and, as Mary sings, among "the lowly" (Luke 1:52). Even Elizabeth is surprised. "Why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" she asks.

Luke powerfully reminds us what it means to work for a just world where all are fed. This is hard work. It takes time, energy and prayerful patience. It can be frustrating work too. Watching the number of hungry people around the world climb again after decades of work to reduce it is discouraging. Hearing political leaders speak blithely about cutting funds for much-needed programs can be infuriating. Along the way, we hope and yearn for that promised day when "[we] will hunger no more" (Revelation 7:16), when our cupboards will be full, when we won't have to visit the food pantry every week or stretch insufficient public assistance to the end of the month.

We yearn, we long, we wait ...

Isn't that the meaning of Advent? Advent is a time of longing and anticipating the coming of Christ. Perhaps that is why Christmas can feel so huge next to Advent. We're tired of waiting, and the problems we face are so large – hunger, poverty, injustice, inequity – that we need the bigness of Christmas. Monumental problems require monumental solutions.

The Gospel story for this week, though, reminds us that Advent is about learning to look for signs of God at work even as we await the fulfillment of God's promise to us. In her pregnancy, Mary, with



the help of an angelic messenger, sees the “great things” God has done for her and for the people. Elizabeth, too, sees in her pregnant cousin “a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord” (Luke 1:45). Later, Simeon and Anna will recognize the seemingly ordinary couple entering the temple as an extraordinary sign of God’s presence.

The Advent story teaches us not just about learning to be patient but learning how to wait. It reminds us to look for the miraculous in the mundane, for the ever-present work of God in the everyday. That’s an important lesson as we and our neighbors face intractable, even overwhelming challenges. We may long for the “big things” that make a difference, but as we saw during the COVID-19 pandemic, God was at work in countless local ways – at food pantries that met increased needs, in schools that reached out to families needing support, at clinics and hospitals, and through rental assistance programs.

In Belgrade, Serbia, 15-year-old Leyla, whose family fled Iran as asylum-seekers, was one of millions of students around the world impacted by the pandemic. The transition to online learning meant she and her peers faced additional obstacles to taking the final exams that would allow them to continue their education. With support from ELCA World Hunger, the (APC) in Belgrade worked with the school to make sure Leyla and other students had the support they needed to take their exams and keep working toward their goals. Leyla did well on the exams, far better than she expected, given the language barrier and the significant gaps in her education as she and her family settled into a new land. With support from APC and the school, Leyla went from dreading the exams to celebrating her results and anticipating the next step in her education.

Through the ministry of ELCA World Hunger, we accompany neighbors such as Leyla in Serbia, Carlos in North Carolina, Hala in Egypt and Charity in South Sudan. A student in a new city, worried about her exams; a family in a small town, worried about paying their bills; a mother, working hard to pay rent; a woman in labor, walking into a clinic. In Advent, we are reminded that this accompaniment of our neighbors is, in the end, about the active anticipation that seeks and finds God at work, transforming ordinary situations into extraordinary signs of the coming fullness

of God’s reign, when all will be fed, when “justice [will] roll down like waters,” when “God will wipe away every tear from [our] eye” (Revelation 7:17), and when “Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety” (Jeremiah 33:16).

That is the promise of Advent and the joy of Christmas, that in ways both big and small, in the local and the global, amid huge crowds and with a single neighbor, God is at work, weaving “the promise [God] made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever” (Luke 1:55). Ending hunger doesn’t always mean seeking miracles of impressive scale. The gospel message invites us to see the miraculous ways God is already at work among our neighbors when we come together to work for a just world where all are fed.

### Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Where have you seen God at work through ordinary events or people?
2. In what ways might neighbors see God working through you and your congregation?
3. Why do you think the church is called to accompany neighbors such as Charity, Hala, Carlos and Leyla?
4. What does it mean to find God at work with and among our neighbors?

## PRAYER

Loving God, even when the challenges we face seem too great to handle, you remind us that we are never alone. Inspire us to seek your presence within each other and within the work of your church. Guide us, that we may be open to seeing the miraculous within the everyday, that we may recognize your image in our neighbors, your work through their hands and our own. In flame us with a holy yearning for a just world where all are fed, that we may participate in the promise you are fulfilling in our midst. In your holy name, we pray. Amen.

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