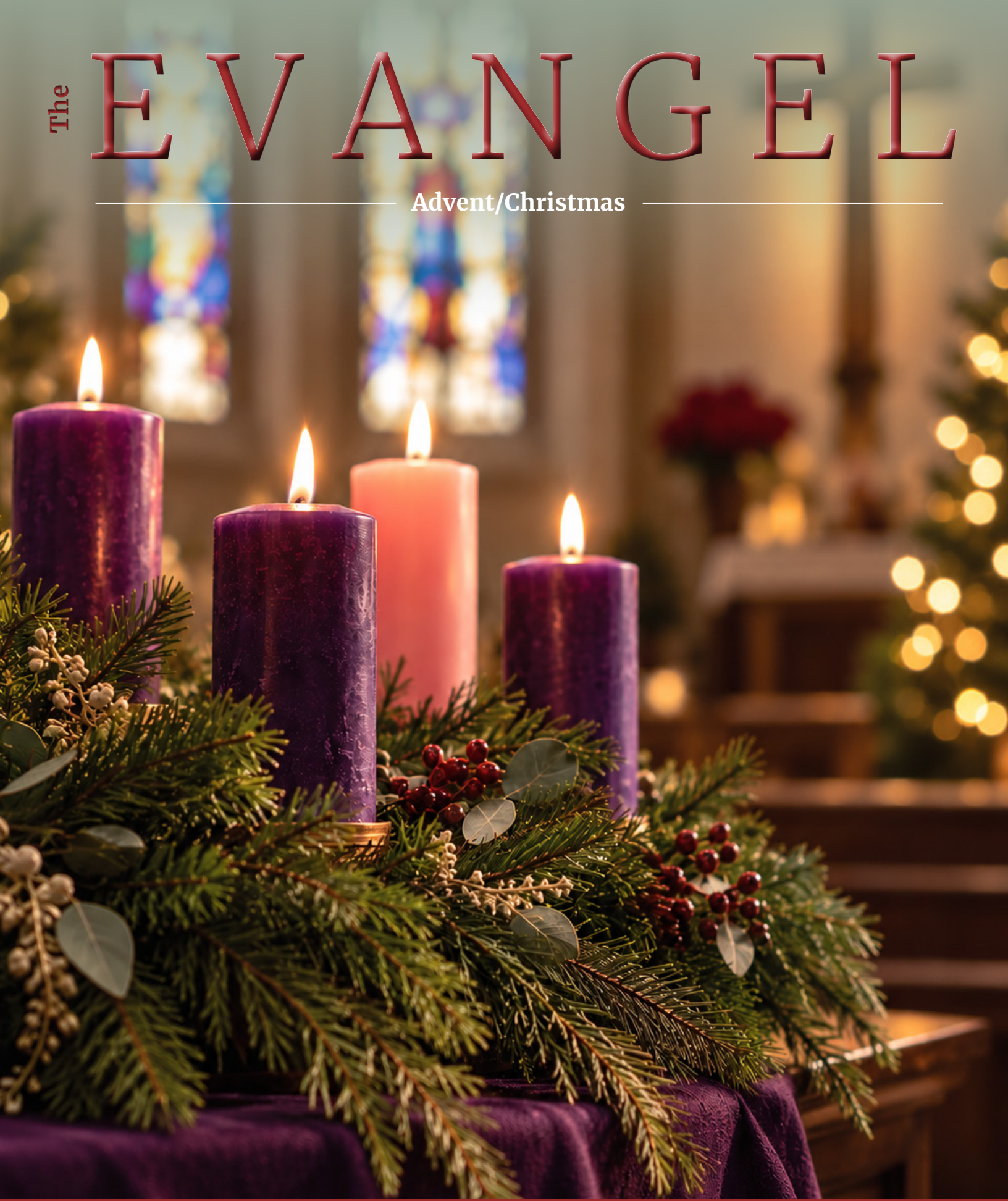
The EVANGEL

Advent/Christmas



A Publication of The American Association of Lutheran Churches

Issue No. 232 - November/December 2026

From the Editor

As the decorations are dragged out and dusted off for the upcoming holiday festivities, how many of you will display ornaments with the words "waiting," "suffering," "sin," or "judgment?"

These are not the typical words highlighted during Christmas. Yet, somehow these words have shown up on the pages of this edition, and even more so, in our lives or those around us. Isn't this supposed to be the "most wonderful time of year?"

In yet another reminder that God's ways are not like ours (Isa 55:8-9), the Scripture readings during Advent seem opposite from what we see or expect to see during this season:

- Our Presiding Pastor Dr. Cary Larson shows us the parallels between Advent and Lent, both seasons of waiting.
- Rev. Jacob Schaeffer looks at the triumphal entry; what does Jesus being humble and lowly tell us about suffering?
- Rev. Norman Hoffeld invites us to do some self-evaluation and be honest about our sin.
- Rev. Rich Eddy examines John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus, which brings up the need for evangelism in the face of coming judgment.

Is this really the Christmas edition? Yes, indeed, it is.

It's kind of a relief, though, isn't it? Instead of some book where everything is perfect, God's Word is real about this life. There's a lot of trouble and hurt. But INTO this setting, God enters in human form, in the middle of the dark, the waiting, the wondering.

Jesus came into our broken world to forgive, save, help, comfort, and so much more.

So, when the calendar is busy, the family gatherings get tense, and the money is tight, take the time. Read and remember what God has done and is doing for you.

He is our peace,

Gretchen Baker

Gretchen Baker
The Editor

2	From the Editor
3	Presiding Pastor
5	Advent: The Humility of Christ
7	Advent: Sin & The Gospel
8	Advent: Prepare the Way
10	ALTS Revives Journal
11	Women of L.I.F.E.
12	St Matthew's Joins The AALC
13	Trinity Joins The AALC
13-14	Prayer Bookmark
14	In Memoriam
15	Vitality in Rural Colorado
16	New 2027 Themes

Note: The themes for the 2027 editions have been set and are listed on the back page. Would you prayerfully consider writing an article on one of the themes? If you are interested, let me know and I can share a specific topic with you.

In addition, the 2027 issues will be sharing updates from each region, so start thinking about what you can share with your fellow churches of The AALC.

Email me at: theevangel@taalc.org.

Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version®, copyright ©2007 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Editor: Gretchen Baker
Layout & Design: Karen Young



Why the Church Refuses to Skip Waiting

By Rev. Dr. Cary Larson

The world treats Christmas as an exciting shopping season from the Friday after Thanksgiving to December 26th. However, the Church keeps another calendar. She waits four weeks, then kneels at the manger and celebrates this lowly birth for 11 more days. That is not old, irrelevant custom. It is Christian doctrine for every generation.

Advent comes from the Latin word *adventus*, meaning "coming" or "arrival." It opens the Church Year on the fourth Sunday before the Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord, otherwise known as Christmas. Vestments are violet, or in many churches, blue. The "Gloria in Excelsis" is silent until Christmas Eve. One candle is added to the Advent wreath each week. The hymns plead, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," or "Savior of the Nations, Come," and advises to "Light One Candle to Watch for Messiah."

This is not childish make-believe, as if Bethlehem's nativity had not yet happened. Advent remembers a people who anxiously waited, names our own waiting, and treats that waiting as faith, not as an unscheduled delay.

Christ Jesus came in the flesh (John 1:14). The people of God lived under the promise to Abraham and David (Gal 3:16). The prophets spoke of Jesse's shoot (Isa 11:1), a virgin who would conceive (Isa 7:14), and a ruler from the little town of Bethlehem (Mic 5:2). Advent sets us beside those ancient believers, so Christmas is fulfillment, not a sweet story.

He comes now. Between Christ Jesus' ascension and the Last and Great Day, He is not absent. He comes where He has bound Himself, in the preached Gospel, and in the Sacraments: Holy Baptism, and the Sacrament of the Altar. Advent trains us to look for Him there, where He has promised and not through novel human ideas.

He will come in glory to judge the living and the dead (2 Tim 4:1). Note that early Advent readings are not nativity scenes. They are the Son of Man on the clouds (Rev 1:7), lamps trimmed (Matt 25:1–13), watchmen at their posts (Mark 13:33). The year begins with the end in mind.

Advent and Lent are liturgical sisters. Both wear colors of penitence, both temporarily set aside the "Gloria," and both refuse to hurry the feast. The shared focus is repentance.

John the Baptist stands at the center: "Make straight the way of the Lord" (John 1:23). A house is not made ready by leaving the rooms as they are (Luke 3:8). The Church prepares by confessing

continued on page 4

Why the Church Refuses to Skip Waiting … *continued*

sin and receiving absolution. That keeps Christmas joy from becoming cheap and commercial but as holy.

Lent looks to the cross and contemplates what redemption cost. Advent looks to the manger and contemplates why that price was paid with God taking on human flesh. Repentance here is discernment: why God would not save us from a distance but became one of us out of divine love (John 3:16-17).

Our ruin began in the flesh, so rescue had to be worked in the same flesh. "When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law" (Gal 4:4-5). The Law we would not keep had to be kept. The death we earned could not be passed over. He became what we are without ceasing to be who He is.

From His borning cry He is under the Law for us. He honors father and mother. He is baptized though He has no sin. He loves God and neighbor beyond reproach. That perfect life is not first an example. It is a gift given in our place, so His obedience is counted as ours when we are baptized into Him (Rom 6:4).

The Child is born to die. The manger already leans toward the cross. He takes our nature to bear our sin. He comes as an infant so that He may go as the Lamb of God. We wait not merely for a birth but for a perfect Substitute. We repent not to earn His coming, but because His coming shows how badly we needed Him. He is placed in our hands as the One who has already done what we could not do (1 Cor 11:23-27).

The guidance of our Christian heritage is simple. Sing Advent hymns in Advent. Light the wreath and read the appointed texts at home. Come to midweek services if they are offered. Leave the "Song of Praise" silent until it can be sung with a full voice. Use the weeks as Lent is used: confession, self-examination, asking why this Child had to come.

Then Christmas will not be something we staged. It will be the arrival of the One long expected whom we did not create but whom we can only receive.

God and sinner are indeed reconciled through Christ Jesus!

A blessed Advent and a joyous Christmas to all the saints of The AALC, from my family and myself.✝

The Rev. Dr. Cary Larson serves The AALC as the Presiding Pastor.



We repent not to earn His coming, but because His coming shows how badly we needed Him.



Advent: The Humility of Christ

Mark 11:1-10

By Rev. Jacob Schaeffer

The triumphal entry might seem like a strange place to start a season which anticipates the birth of the Savior, but it makes sense when we consider the mission of our Lord's earthly life. Jesus does not first come in power, honor, splendor, or glory. Rather, He comes in weakness, lowliness, and meekness of heart: laying aside the eternal glories of heavenly bliss for the sake of mankind's redemption.

The triumphal entry perfectly exemplifies the nature of Jesus' first advent. Where worldly expectations of a conquering king would demand honors, fanfare, and demonstrations of judicial power, Christ comes to save His people through His lowly submission unto death. The first advent of Christ is characterized by a single word: humility.

The Apostles, while still in a state of spiritual weakness, reviled and despised the cross of Christ. St. Peter, wanting nothing to do with the shame of the cross, would even dare to rebuke the Lord. Jesus' response teaches us what the orientation of our hearts must be, for "He turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men'" (Matt 16:23).

To despise the suffering of the Christian life is an offense to Christ. It is to be mindful of the things of men, not the things of God. The Savior, in no uncertain terms, teaches us, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me" (Matt 16:24).

continued on page 6

Let it be remembered that Jesus was a man who fully embraced the lamentations of this life. He exemplified a sorrowful grief, born out of His unfathomable compassion for sinful man. In the days of His flesh, He never ceased to offer up "prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears" (Heb 5:7). This was so characteristic of His person that the prophet Isaiah describes Him as "a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isa 53:3).

Beloved, to reject a share in the grief that our Lord bore over sin is to reject a share in the subsequent joy that He earned for us through His work of redemption. We must take seriously the admonitions of the Holy Spirit when St. James writes, "Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up" (James 4:9).

Although the sinful flesh recoils to hear it, sorrows and suffering are a necessary part of the Christian life. Let it be recalled that Jesus, the very Son of God, "learned obedience by the things which He suffered." (Heb 5:8). Jesus embraced affliction and humility as the necessary steps along the pathway of mankind's salvation. Our Lord, so exceedingly gentle and compassionate toward His Church, forewarned us of our own sufferings saying, "A servant is not greater than his master" (John 13:16).

The evil world, our sinful flesh, and our wicked foe, Satan, plan schemes and destruction against us at every hour. But God is not ignorant. Our Guardian does not sleep nor slumber while we suffer. To the contrary, the Lord is busy at work, thwarting all the wicked schemes of our enemies! How abundantly wise was the Patriarch Joseph when he declared to his brothers who had sold him into Egyptian slavery, "But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good" (Gen 50:20).

O, that we would believe heartily with St. Paul that "all things work together for good to those who love God" (Rom 8:28), then we would find the sweet waters of God's consolation bubbling up all around the spiritual deserts we traverse. But our wretched hearts are so ill-disposed to God's goodness that we often expect evil intentions from our Heavenly Father. We rejoice in all the temporary benefits He bestows us in body and soul and yet despise the formation He wills to work in us through our adversities. Much to our shame, we often assume that earthly afflictions are a sign of God's anger toward us. God help us to see His hand of loving kindness in the midst of His chastisements!

Our Lord comes to us lowly and humble, and yet so often we want no part in His humility. We are eager to enjoy the sweetness of His gifts and yet we complain at carrying the smallest of His burdens. If we could, for a moment, lay aside our earthly comforts, we would see that there is nothing sweeter than the Fatherly hand of discipline. This very chastening the Lord uses to produce the peaceable fruit of righteousness in His saints, and yet so often we refuse to yield to His stripes.

Lord, have mercy upon us. We long for the joy of Christ to overflow abundantly before we have ever known the least of our Lord's sorrows. We yearn to be filled and satisfied before we have ever truly hungered or thirsted for righteousness. We cry out for spiritual consolations before we have ever known spiritual humility. We demand to be told of God's forgiveness before we ever allow ourselves to be smitten by a revolting disgust of our own sinfulness.

Beloved, know this as a truth, to despise the chastenings and disciplines of the Lord, which He intends for the cultivation of Godly character and true humility, is nothing more than to despise being His child.

Lord, help us in our weakness to fix the gaze of our hearts upon Jesus. Although deserving of the highest honors and glories, our Lord did not taste the sweetness of His heavenly ascension until He first guzzled the bitter cup of His hellish crucifixion. Our Lord would not enter into the rest of eternal delights, until He first bore the back-breaking labors of redemption. Our Lord would not allow Himself to be crowned with the supernal might of His kingdom, until He was first crowned with curses and thorns. Our Lord refused to ride the white horse of His power and victory, without first subjecting himself to the lowly colt of His weakness and death.

"Most assuredly, I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; and you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy" (John 16:20). The joy of Christ is such a sweet, indescribable flavor that nothing of the world can possibly satisfy the one who has tasted it. So immeasurable is this joy that the saint who partakes in it will find unending contentment and peace even in the midst of loss, tumults, wars, or any number of evils our wicked foe could devise against them. And yet, this joy, the very joy of Christ and His triumph over the powers of darkness, can only come to refresh the saint who has **first** shared in the sorrow and humility of the cross.

To the one who embraces the bitter sorrows of this temporal life as the kindest chastisements of the Heavenly Father. To the one who confesses themself to be a poor, miserable sinner. To the one who mourns this wretched condition to be their own fault, indeed, their own most grievous fault. To this one, and to this one **alone**, does God shed the sweetness of the hidden mysteries of Christ. To this one alone does the joy of the Lord abound and overflow even in the midst of their afflictions. It is this one alone who finds that their King has come to them. "He is just and having salvation, lowly and riding on a donkey, a colt..." (Zech 9:9).✝

The Rev. Jacob Schaeffer serves Faith Lutheran Church, Watseka, IL.



Advent: Sin & Gospel

Rev. Norman Hoffeld

In this Advent season, we take a look at a lesson from the Gospel of Mark. Mark is the shortest of the four gospels—only 16 chapters (Matthew has 28 chapters, Luke has 24, and John has 20). Mark was an associate of the apostle Peter. It is apparent through history that his major source was the preaching and instruction of the apostle Peter. Many believe that Mark was the first gospel written and that Matthew and Luke used the material from Mark to write their own gospels.

Mark does not contain a genealogy as does Matthew and Luke. He begins with the public ministry of the Savior. He gets immediately to the point. He says, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1). He immediately emphasizes Jesus' divine authority. His words make a statement—this is not just religious news—this is world changing news.

The title "Son of God" sets Jesus apart. Jesus' authority goes beyond earthly powers. That message offers hope to the world. God has come into this troubled world! Mark points to scriptures from Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3: "Behold, I send My messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight."

The message of John the Baptist was a call for people to realize their sins and repent (to turn away) and receive the forgiveness of their sins. That is still the call for all of us today. That is the reason we Lutherans begin every worship service with the confession of our sin, the call to repentance, and the announcement of forgiveness. It is then that our worship service goes into praise. **That is the Gostpel (good news) message!** It is an important and necessary part of worship. It is what makes worship possible because when I recognize my nature and how much I need the Lord's forgiveness, it opens me up to receive the new life that comes through Him.

John the Baptist makes clear to the crowd that if you seek God, you must first recognize who and what you are. We all stand together as forgiven sinners. We come as forgiven sinners to receive the life-giving message. The ministry of John the Baptist was the beginning of the good news. John brought a message of comfort and hope in the admission of sin, in their repentance and the all-important promise of forgiveness.

But John does not call attention to himself; in fact, he must have been a sight to behold: "clothed in camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts [yuck] and wild honey" (Mark 1:6). In our modern day, we would have called him weird. Today he would be called a fanatic and ascetic. His home was the desert. His clothing, like Elijah's was the coarsest and the simplest. His food was sufficient to maintain life and strength, but was not luxurious.

John did not consider himself worthy to loose the Savior's sandal strap which, in that day was a menial duty of a slave. His preaching always exalted the Lord Jesus through his own humility. He was a man who subordinated all things to the task of making Christ known. God chose him to prepare the way for our Lord and Savior. He apparently drew a crowd, and he prepared the way for the Savior. He was not tactful in his approach. Matthew records John's words: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham" (Matt 3:7). The words were blunt and to the point. He would not have been popular in the pulpits of the church of today. His appearance and his words must have made quite a scene. He had an obvious impact on his listeners.

Mark goes on to tell us John's words: "I have baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (Mark 1:8). It is in the admission of sin and the confession of sin that God moves in the hearts of His people and brings about renewal.

When we talk about the gospel message, we understand that the message of the Lord's forgiveness means nothing unless we realize our sin and our need for God's mercy and forgiveness. That is the reason we always come to our Lord in humility and thankfulness. It is the Holy Spirit that convicts us of sin and also empowers us to lead a life of service to Him. Through the Spirit, I understand my sin and my need for forgiveness, as our Lord makes possible the renewed life.

The Advent season is a time of preparation for the wonderful news on Christmas day. In this Advent season, we need to pray that the Lord will continue to remind us of our need for the savior as we celebrate His birth on Christmas day.✝

The Rev. Norman Hoffeld is a Pastor Emeritus with The AALC.



Advent: Prepare the Way

John 1:6-8, 19-28

By Rev. Rich Eddy

I have to be honest with you. When I was asked to write an article about this passage, my first thought was, "Oh, no! Not the John the Baptist passage!" Not that I had anything against John; I actually like the guy. But every year when I encountered him in Advent, I always thought John was misplaced in the lectionary.

Consider: here we are, preparing for Christmas and Jesus' birth. But all of a sudden, we jump thirty years into the future to when Jesus is about to be baptized and begin His ministry. What happened to all the intervening events like the arrival in Bethlehem, the Angels, the star, the Holy Night, the Wise Men, the reindeer, Anna and Simeon, and the boy Jesus in the Temple? How does John's ministry serve as part of Advent? I thought, "There have to be good reasons this passage is part of Advent. I wonder what they are?" And as I pondered that question, I soon realized the reasons are, indeed, very good.

What are those reasons? Why has the Church long (since the mid-Third Century) considered John's ministry to be part of the Advent season? I think there are at least six good reasons. To cover them all, we can draw clues from all four Gospels, because all four Evangelists considered John and his ministry important to the story of Christ. From here on out, unless I refer to John's Gospel, whenever I say John, I mean John the Baptist.

First, in Luke's Gospel, we learn that there was a spiritual encounter between John and Jesus while both were still in the womb. We read, "And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy'" (Luke 1:41-44). So, even before they were born, John testified to Jesus' special nature!

Second, though Jesus was about 30 years old by the time John began his ministry, few people knew that the Messiah had been born. It wasn't in the papers, or on the evening news, or in social media. To them, they were still awaiting the "Advent of our God." The fact that they asked John, "Who are you?" and he answered that he was not the Christ, showed that the people did not know Christ had arrived in the world and was about to begin His earthly ministry.

Third, the very fact of John's ministry was the final stage of the prophetic period about the advent of the Messiah, tying both Testaments together. Old Testament prophets foretold many things about the coming of the Savior; John brought them into focus. When the religious leaders asked him who he was, he answered, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." The prophecies of Isaiah were given some 700 years earlier; now John the Baptist was updating and fulfilling Isaiah.

Later, Jesus himself will connect John with the prophets of old when he says about John, "A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet . . . For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come" (Matt 1:9, 13-14). Jesus also quoted the prophet Malachi, saying John was the one Malachi referred to when he said: "Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before me" (Mal 3:1).

Fourth, verse 7 of our passage says, "He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through Him." John the Baptist defined who the Light was. He prepared the people for the arrival (advent) of the Messiah, not just as an event to watch for, but also to prepare to receive Him by faith. This also pertains to our time; the work of the Church today is to announce to the world that the time to prepare to receive Jesus is now, for either Jesus will return soon as promised, or we will go to be with Him.

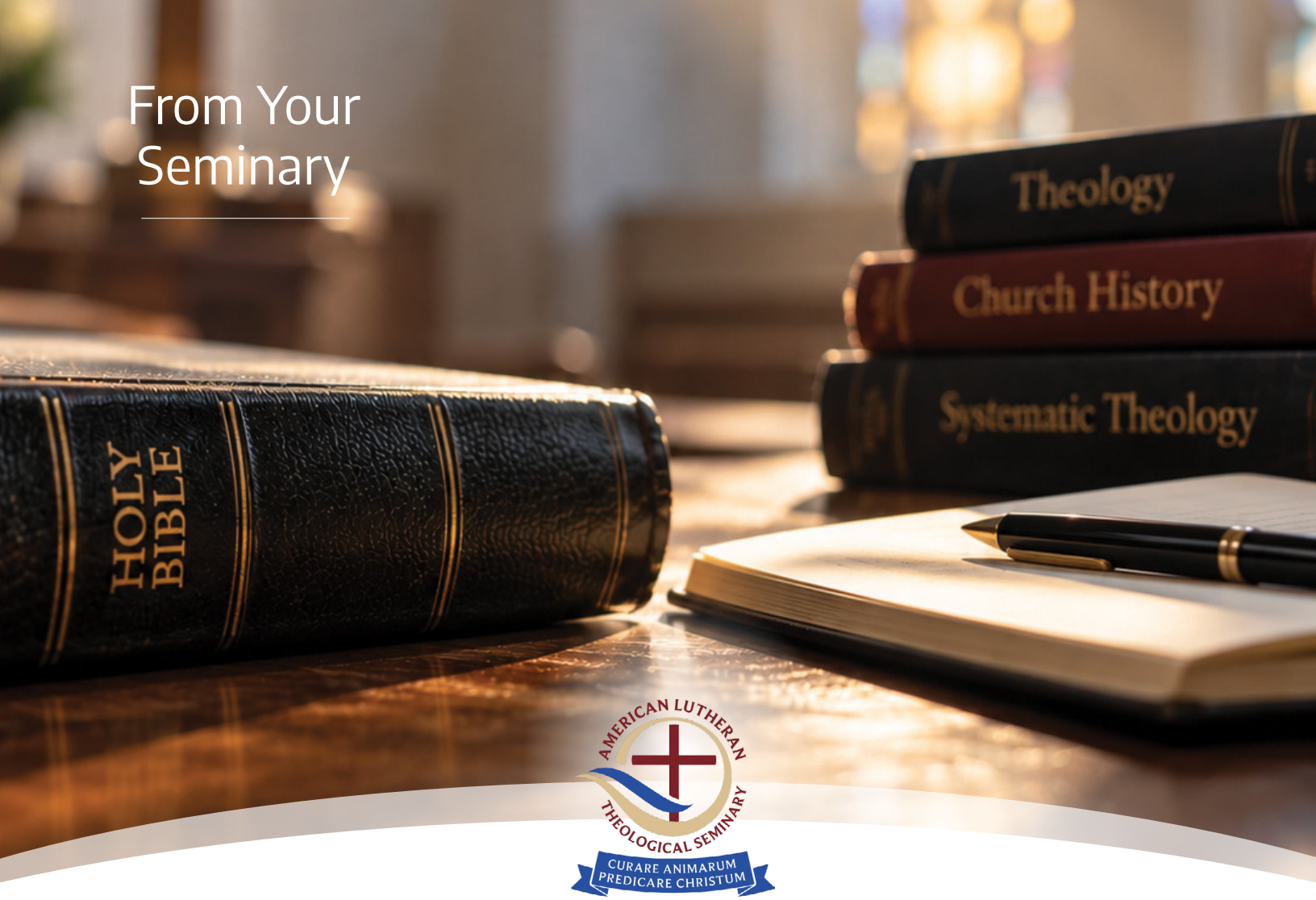
Fifth, John prepared the people by telling why Jesus had come and what He was going to do. He called Jesus "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). Which is exactly why Jesus was born: to take away people's sins. When John was questioned about why he was baptizing, he said, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even He who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie" (John 1:26-27).

Matthew recorded more of what John said: "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will clear His threshing floor and gather His wheat into the barn, but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire" (Matt 3:11-12 and partly in Luke 3:16). By John's prophetic words, Jesus would bring both salvation and the fire of judgment, or as we affirm in the Apostles' Creed, "From there he will come again to judge the living and the dead."

Finally, John played a crucial role in preparing Jesus for His ministry, which had not yet begun. What did John do? He baptized Jesus, to "fulfill all righteousness" (Matt 3:15). This pivotal event is recorded in all four Gospels, given here for our purposes from Luke 3:21-22, "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on Him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, 'You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.'" Thus, we see the approval and empowering from the other persons of the Trinity – as the Messiah began the work for which He was born. The period of Advent was finally complete. Now the work which John foretold was ready to begin!

As I came to appreciate when reading all that the Gospels said about John the Baptist, his work and the role he played in prophesying about Jesus and announcing His arrival, I realized that the passages about him do deserve a place among the recognized Gospel texts for Advent! ✝

The Rev. Rich Eddy, Pastor Emeritus, regularly writes on his blog: https://pastor-richeddy.com



ALTS Revives Theological Journal

By Rev. Dr. Mark Mattes

The American Lutheran Theological Seminary faculty plans to revive *American Lutheran Theological Journal* as an annual and invites you to submit scholarly articles, reviews, editorials, and sermons for consideration for publication.

The purpose of American Lutheran Theological Journal (ALTJ) is to provide a forum for the renewal of confessional Lutheran identity throughout the world. As a voice of the ministerium of The American Association of Lutheran Churches (AALC), ALTJ witnesses to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord on the basis of God's inspired and inerrant Word and is designed to strengthen pastors to care for souls. All submissions must conform to the doctrinal standards of The AALC.

Your support of ALTJ will help promote doctrinal fidelity and unity within The AALC, equip pastors and other church workers to engage more deeply with Scripture, the *Book of Concord*, life-giving pastoral practices, and encourage theological literacy across The AALC and its partners throughout the world. ALTJ especially seeks to support the pastor's role as a Seelsorger, providing care to souls, and strengthen The AALC's voice within the wider confessional Lutheran community and secular society. Our goal is not merely an academic enterprise but instead to engage the life of the mind for Christ and His Kingdom.

In addition to submissions from ALTS seminary professors, pastors, and friends of The AALC, contributions from seminary students at all levels are welcome. The seminary faculty will carefully evaluate manuscripts for publication. Please send your contribution or recommendation by January 1, 2027 to Dr. Mark Mattes at mmattes54@gmail.com. We anticipate that the journal will be available by late Spring 2027, online and in hard copy by request.✝

The Rev. Dr. Mark Mattes serves as Chair of Doctoral Studies for American Lutheran Theological Seminary.

Art and History on Display at New Hope



Joan Sethre, member of New Hope Lutheran Church, Newfolden, MN, had an thought: how to decorate the fellowship area of their church, plus preserve historical and meaningful artwork?

At 95 years old, Joan enjoys history, plus has won many prizes for paintings and photography. She was inspired to combine these two interests in creating various themed displays in her church's fellowship hall. Out of a desire to save a collection of old-fashioned artwork, she started the "classic wall," which includes old-fashioned pictures and a sewing machine of a member who has passed on to glory. The project then grew to collections on other walls, including the "prayer wall," the "John 3:16 wall," and the "Haiti wall," which showcases items from her pastor's regular mission trips.

Joan's home church of New Hope was one of the first churches to form The AALC, the first in Minnesota. The congregation was made up of a group that left another local church over doctrinal issues.

She remembers the congregational vote was very strong to leave the church body, but not the 66% majority needed. So the remaining members left with their pastor, Rev. Steve Estrem, to form New Hope in the fall of 1987 and join the new group that was to become The AALC.

The congregation met at another location before the new building was finished two years later. The church was paid for before it was built; Joan said, "There was so much enthusiasm."

This time was not without its trials. During construction, a windstorm leveled the building. A construction worker went down with the building, but thankfully, was not hurt badly, Joan added.

When asked what it was like to part ways with a local church, Joan replied that in a small town, "everyone knows." She recalls there was tension in town; she worried over the impact on the family business at the time. But Joan summed it up with: "Somehow or another, it worked out. We've been blessed all the way." The church is currently served by Pastor Ollie Urdahl.✝

A collection of faith, history, and love.

Top: *The Classic Wall, which includes old fashioned pictures and a sewing machine of a member who has passed on to glory.*

Middle: *The Prayer Wall, which includes a velvet copy of the Norwegian Table Prayer, "In Jesus' Name," and "Give Thanks," crocheted by a current member.*

Bottom: *Joan Sethre stands by the "John 3:16 Wall" which Joan arranged to demonstrate the various phrases: "God so loved the world" (heart wreath and round wreath), "He gave His only begotten Son" (nativity), etc. Joan created the leaf mural using grape and dogwood leaves. Submitted photos.*



Submitted Photo

St. Matthew's Joins The AALC

St. Matthew's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Wilmington, NC, was formed out of St. Paul's German Lutheran congregation in 1892, as the first English-speaking Lutheran congregation in Wilmington, NC. Our parish's charter families were mostly German speaking farmers, but, as their children were assimilating into the local culture, they needed an English Sunday School.

As a congregation founded by the United Synod of the South, St. Matthew's was in the Mühlenberg tradition and subsequently became affiliated with the United Lutheran Church in 1918, the Lutheran Church in America in 1962, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1988. The congregation remained mostly a local family church until 1941, when the war effort brought the building of two hundred Liberty ships in Wilmington, the second largest port in the South after Charleston, SC.

From the 18th century, North Carolina Lutherans had mostly been located in the Piedmont region; they had founded the North Carolina Synod in 1803, making it the third oldest Lutheran synod after the Ministeriums of Pennsylvania and New York.

When Piedmont Lutherans began to move to Wilmington in search of work after the hard years of the Great Depression, St. Matthew's grew beyond its initial identity. By 1963, the congregation had outgrown its second building and relocated across the street from what would become the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. Since then, four building additions expanded the parish church to include new facilities for worship, education, music, fellowship, and gym activities.

St. Matthew's is known for excellent music with wonderful acoustics, a 47-rank Austin pipe organ with trompette-en-chamade, and a concert grand piano. Musical gifts are shared through an adult choir, a bell choir, children's choir, an acoustical worship group, and individual vocal and instrumental soloists. Organ and choral events bring traveling artists to the church and for the wider community twice each year. Fall and spring prayer retreats bring well-known theologians to be our guest teacher and preacher for each weekend.

A group of female quilters produces 200 quilts annually for Lutheran World Relief, a local domestic violence shelter, new housing for the homeless, and a ministry producing beds for poor children. A full-time Director of Youth and Family Ministries oversees activities for everyone from cradle to the elderly. Out of love for neighbor, the congregation has had an active Stephen Ministry program since 1994.

Men, women, and youth participate in individual and group service projects both at and beyond the congregation. While not a ministry of the church, St. Matthew's has hosted a Christian Montessori school for forty years. It is run by a church member with another church member on staff.

The congregation is becoming known for its annual Christkindlmarkt, a German Christmas market, held the Saturday before Thanksgiving. Last year, more than 3,000 enjoyed a German band, dancing, German food, and the booths of 73 vendors.

Serious Bible study through a variety of classes is led by both pastors and lay persons and is available on Sundays and throughout the week during the program year. The Holy Eucharist is celebrated three times every weekend (each a traditional liturgy celebrated in a different style) and a spoken Eucharist on Wednesdays at noon with Healing Prayer available. Evening Prayer (Vespers) is sung or said on Mondays at 6 p.m.

Having fought an arduous battle (that lasted five years) to disaffiliate from its predecessor church body, St. Matthew's rejoices to be a member of The AALC. The Rev. Dr. Samuel David Zumwalt was ordained in 1981 and is in his 23rd year as St. Matthew's Senior Pastor; he has not found the title "retired pastor" anywhere in Scripture. He also serves as an adjunct preaching instructor for our American Lutheran Theological Seminary and has scheduled English language sermons since 2010 for the German preaching website Goettinger Predigten. Rev. Robert Alan Shivers, ordained in July 2026, is our new called and installed Associate Pastor. St. Matthew's is blessed with a seasoned staff that includes a half-time Director of Music in his 23rd year, a fulltime Administrative Assistant in her 19th year, and several other part-time staff who have served more than five years.

St. Matthew's website is https://stmatthewsch.org/. Our worship services may be accessed online at https://www.youtube.com/@st.matthewslutheranILM. ✝



Trinity Lutheran Church Joins The AALC

In 1907, shortly after North Dakota was recognized as the 39th state, a pioneer lawyer began plans to establish a church in Alexander, ND. Fifty people met at the "Nameless School House" and voted to form a congregation affiliated with the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Reverend Johanson was called as their first pastor with an annual salary of $100.

Initially, these pioneers gathered in local homes until a church could be constructed. The basement was completed in 1915, followed by the church proper the next year. Over time, St. Olaf, Rosseland, Rawson, and Trinity in Alexander merged to form a single congregation in Alexander.

The congregation became part of the American Lutheran Church upon its formation in 1960, then integrated into the ELCA in 1988. In 2014, they severed ties with the ELCA and joined the Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ.

On February 2, 2025, the congregation voted to join The AALC. Trinity Lutheran Church, Alexander, ND, was officially welcomed to the roster at the Biennial Convention in June 2026; Rev. Kevin Beard serves as pastor.✝



"For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

MATTHEW 18:20

November 2026

PRAYER BOOKMARK

1. Prayer of Thanksgiving for all the Saints who have gone before
2. Churches thinking of joining The AALC
3. Rev. Robert A. Shivers
4. Eastern Region TAALC
5. Trinity Lutheran Church, Alexander, ND
6. For peace and comfort that only God can give
7. For your Pastor and Lay Leadership
8. Women of L.I.F.E. Executive Committee
9. Pastors: pray for your congregations
10. For your local government
11. That God would raise up Church Workers
12. For the families of Christian martyrs
13. Husbands: pray for your wives
14. World Missions Commission
15. That the Word of God is shared around the world
16. Rev. Dr. Cary Larson, Presiding Pastor
17. Wives: pray for your husbands
18. Rev. Jon Holst, ALTS Administrator
19. Parents: pray for your kids
20. For those who volunteer in soup kitchens
21. Unity in the Church
22. Holiday travels
23. The unchurched
24. Rev. Carl Groh
25. Tartu Academy of Theology
26. Prayer of Thanksgiving for God's blessings during the past year
27. Greater Heartland Region TAALC
28. Pastors thinking of joining The AALC
29. To remember what Advent is all about
30. Elders of our churches

December 2026

PRAYER BOOKMARK

1. Children to respect their parents
2. Women of L.I.F.E. Groups
3. Rev. Jacob Schaeffer
4. West Great Lakes Region TAALC
5. College & University Campus Chaplains
6. Holiday season ministries
7. St. Matthew's Ev. Lutheran Church, Wilmington, NC
8. For our veterans
9. Rev. Dr. Chris Caughey, ALTS Accreditation Coordinator
10. North Plains Region TAALC
11. The homeless/ low income
12. Rev. Scott Strohkirch
13. Those struggling with disease
14. Doctors and nurses
15. Kristy Jensen, Bookkeeper
16. Holiday stresses
17. Police and other Law Enforcement
18. The unemployed or underemployed
19. For those unable to be with family
20. For those without family
21. For those who are homebound or in nursing facilities
22. For those grieving during the holidays
23. AALC Leadership
24. Rev. Clyde Awtrey
25. To remember what Christmas is all about
26. Rev. Don Ginkel
27. Western Region TAALC
28. Regional Chairmen
29. Women of L.I.F.E. Committees
30. Rev. Daniel Cloeter
31. For all to repent of sins



"Well done, good and faithful servant."

MATTHEW 25:23

In Memoriam: Marguerite R. Thorson

Marguerite Ruth Lemoing Thorson, 94, of Chippewa Falls, WI, died peacefully on June 23, 2026, surrounded by family while under the care of St. Croix Hospice.

Marge is preceded in death by her parents, John and Ruth Lemoing; a sister, Carole Zinter; and her most loving husband, Rev. Donald Thorson.

Those surviving her are her children, Kathryn, Steven, Jeanette, Gregory, and their spouses. Plus, her many grandchildren and great-grandchildren; her sister, Marilyn Brace; and nephews and nieces.

Her greatest joy was serving her Lord Jesus alongside Don. Soon after their marriage, she obtained her R.N. and Don was ordained into the ministry. Together they served two country churches in North Dakota, a large inner-city church in Milwaukee, Central Lutheran Church in Chippewa Falls, and were charter members and then called to serve Christ Lutheran Church (AALC) in Chippewa Falls.

Marge and Rev. Thorson were part of the founding of The AALC with Marge active in the formation of The AALC's Women of L.I.F.E.

The majority of her career years as a nurse were at St. Joseph's Hospital in Chippewa Falls, where she worked first in pediatrics then transitioned to being the recovery room nurse. Her care and love of people was shown to her patients, her friends, and her family.

Through her deep commitment to Christ, and unfaltering love for her dear husband, she lived the beautiful legacy she left to her family. A life well lived and greatly blessed.

A memorial service was held August 8, 2026, at Pederson-Volker Funeral Chapel, Chippewa Falls with Rev. John Erickson of Immanuel Lutheran Church of Cedar Lake, rural Rice Lake, officiating.✝

Vitality in Rural Colorado: St. Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church

On December 1, 2024, St. Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church (SPELC) welcomed Rev. Jamie Strickler to its pulpit following a three-year vacancy. During the interim period, the congregation sustained its vital ministries through regular lay-led services and consistent Sunday school programming.

"I walked into a 'ready-to-grow' situation," Pastor Strickler reflected. "The people had all of the internal ministries active and full of life."

Situated in a remote, rural community of just 500 residents, the congregation maintains an impressive weekly attendance averaging between 67 and 70 worshippers. This represents an inspiring 50–60% membership-to-attendance engagement rate.

Through the Lord's work, the church has experienced a significant revitalization across all age groups:

- Sacramental Growth: The parish celebrated four recent baptisms and confirmed five new candidates.
- Youth Engagement: The summer Vacation Bible School program averaged 47 children daily.
- Adult Education: The adult Sunday school program has expanded both in attendance and academic rigor, elevating its curriculum to a bachelor's degree level of theological study.
- Community Fellowship: SPELC launched two Memento Men's Fraternities, a monthly community-wide Men's Breakfast, and expanded its women's Bible Study.

Looking forward, the parish is developing new members' classes, historical liturgy courses, preparing a young man for enrollment at the American Lutheran Theological Seminary, and preparing for an upcoming wedding.

Notably, SPELC retains its rich liturgical roots, utilizing the classic 1941 *Service Book and Hymnal*. Because the architectural aesthetics of the historic sanctuary preclude the installation of digital screens, traditional hymnals remain central to the worship experience. Ultimately, SPELC stands as a vibrant testament to the reality that robust, liturgical ministry can thrive and multiply within a rural context.✝







Glimpses of activities happening at St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Otis, CO: Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, Rev. Jamie and Bree Strickler visiting with youth. Submitted Photos.

The American Association of Lutheran Churches
921 East Dupont Road, #920
Fort Wayne, IN 46825-1551

Address Service Requested

The American Association of Lutheran Churches

The Evangel – Issue 232
November/December 2026

The American Association of Lutheran Churches

(260) 755-9401
theaalc@taalc.org

Visit us on the web:
www.taalc.org

UPCOMING EDITIONS...

Themes for 2027: Lutheran: "A Gracious Confession"
Please be in prayer for these upcoming editions:

Jan/Feb: Firm Foundations, Open Hands (Deadline: Nov. 1)

Mar/Apr: To Tell The Truth...in Love (Deadline: Jan. 1)

May/June: Confession as Gift (Deadline: Mar. 1)

July/Aug: Rooted, Not Rigid (Deadline: May 1)

Sept/Oct: The 40th Anniversary of The AALC (Deadline: July 1)

Nov/Dec: The Grace within The Confessions (Deadline: Sept. 1)

Church News:
The Evangel welcomes submissions of what's happening in your congregation. To submit content, **email the editor** Gretchen Baker: theevangel@taalc.org

Or mail: Gretchen Baker, PO Box 84, Parshall, ND 58770