

*“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”*

[Matthew 1:23]

Dear siblings in Christ of the Northeastern Ohio Synod,

As I look ahead to the beginning of the church year in December, I am struck by the fact that each one of these newsletters that I write over the next eight months will be my final ones as your bishop. While I have made a concerted effort to focus on the present and not get too far ahead of myself, it's difficult not to reflect on what it will be like when I no longer have to come up with an Advent message that is different from the previous year's. What do I most want to say that I haven't said before or will not get to tell you again?

It calls to mind the line from the hymn, *How Firm a Foundation*, [ELW #796] “What more can he say than to you he has said?”

I have to admit, it is a challenge to come up with new thoughts, or to discover how to repeat an old message with a fresh approach. I cringe when my Administrative Assistant, Marilyn Matevia, gently reminds me that a Unified newsletter article is due. My brain scurries into hyperactivity, like the proverbial mouse on the treadmill, with little, if any, fruitful results.

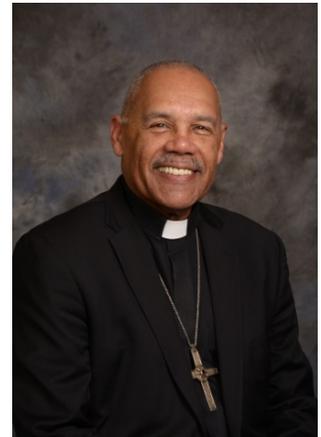
In many ways, the Gospel writers underwent the same struggles; how to tell the story of Jesus in ways that maintained the readers' attention. As you probably know, Matthew, though he appears first in the New Testament, was actually the second Gospel to be written, and he borrowed a lot of material from Mark, considered to be the original.

Mark began his Gospel with the baptism of Jesus. Therefore, Matthew added the birth of Jesus to his narrative. Each of the subsequent writers went further back in time. Luke began with the birth of John, who baptized Jesus; and John's Gospel takes the reader back to “the beginning,” evoking the opening words of Genesis. The objective of each, in the opinion of most historians, was to convince people that Jesus was the eternal son of God.

Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus, tracing his ancestry back to Abraham. Later in the first chapter, an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him that the child in Mary's womb is from the Holy Spirit, and that he should give him the name Jesus, “for he will save his people from their sins.” [Matt. 1:21]

Genealogies are boring to read unless they're your own. But note one outstanding feature of the genealogy of Jesus, according to Matthew.

In Matthew's patriarchal society, most genealogies were traced along male lines. Matthew, however, includes five women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, the wife of Uriah (Bathsheba), and Mary. Not only were they women, already marginalized because of their gender, but also foreigners (Mary being the exception), and women of somewhat questionable reputation.



The subtle point Matthew makes by including them in his genealogy is that God uses anyone in order to fulfill whatever divine action God has in mind. Our current society has developed a heightened sense of suspicion of anyone different, whether because of the color of their skin, the accent with which they speak, or the faith they practice. We turn away people at our borders who come seeking opportunity or protection. We incarcerate people in alarmingly high proportions. Yet in God's eyes, not one of these falls outside of God's mercy, grace, and purpose.

I frequently remind people that Jesus was born into a world that was much like ours and, perhaps, even worse than ours. As in our time, people endured conflict and oppression, poverty and despair. They lived in anticipation of a new day. They longed for freedom and justice.

We will soon be hanging decorations in our homes and celebrating Christmas pageants in our church sanctuaries that reenact the story of the birth of the Savior. As you go through your rehearsals and preparations, bear in mind that the Christmas stories, as told in the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke, are not just about a baby but about a person and his significance.

Celebrations are meaningless if they only recall a one-time event. Emmanuel – God with us – came to bring light into our darkness and invites us into the promise of salvation. The stories as told in the Gospels are a model of encouragement that Christ Jesus is the firm foundation of our great heritage and should be taken seriously. The historical Jesus, full of compassion was not only a historical figure, but one that remains central to our faith, in our

lives, and in our world today. As the hymn writer inspires us with these words:

*"Fear not, I am with you, oh, be not dismayed, for I am your God and will still give you aid; I'll strengthen you, help you, and cause you to stand, upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand."*

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As we begin this church year and the calendar year in January, we will be celebrating the 50th anniversary of the ordination of women in the Lutheran Church. In addition, we will also recognize the 40th anniversary of the first woman of color to be ordained, as well as the 10th anniversary of LGBTQIA+ individuals being able to serve freely.

Our Northeastern Ohio Synod, like others across the ELCA, will be holding recognition activities that call attention to these significant moments in the church's history. Congregations are encouraged to hold commemorative events throughout the year! There are several resources on the [ELCA website](#) that can help you plan your observation of these anniversaries.

May you be filled with God's richest blessings this Advent and Christmas season!

In Christ,



+Bishop Abraham D. Allende