



Northeastern Ohio Synod Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

For ten long months we have been hearing the same refrain, “Easter will be different this year.” “Graduation will be different this year.” “School will be different this year.” “Elections will be different this year.” “Sports will be different this year.” “Thanksgiving will be different this year.”

And here we are, at Christmas, when the refrain sounds out again, “Christmas will be different this year.”

I cannot help but think about Dr. Suess' classic *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. Only this year our Grinch isn't green and grumpy, our grinch is microscopic and viral. Here comes the viral grinch stealing our caroling and our candlelight services, packing away our family gatherings and visits to Grandma's house. It is saddening, and maddening, and yet another disappointment in long trail of disappointments.

I have heard that Dr. Seuss was an atheist, and yet he could write this:

“Every Who down in Who-ville, the tall and the small, Was singing! Without any presents at all! He hadn't stopped Christmas from coming! IT CAME! Somehow or other, it came just the same.”

“Somehow” – this is the word of hope. “Somehow” – this is where the Holy Spirit enters our story.

My dear siblings in Christ, Christmas does come because God declares it so. Long before the babe in the manger, God spoke light into the world. With that word, the chaos was calmed and God's Spirit was unleashed on the world. God's Spirit continues to blow about in our world calming the swirling eddies of chaos. God's Spirit continues to speak good news of great joy into our lives. God's Spirit continues to say, “Here is Emmanuel – God with us!” God's Spirit continues to send peace upon the earth like a blanket of snow.

“The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it.” Notice the present tense. This is not a candle from long ago. This is not a once and done thing. The Light *shines*. Now. Here. Today.

I invite you to be a witness to the Light that shines even today. Please join me in [creating luminaries](#) that we will light together Christmas Eve through Epiphany Eve (Dec 24-Jan 5). One is enough, more are welcome. Light these as a witness to our faith that Christmas comes – Christ comes to *us* – with a light that banishes darkness, a hope that dispels fear, a peace that passes all understanding. Please encourage your entire congregation to join us. And, when people ask about them, tell them this story: COVID cannot steal Christmas because the Light of Christ will come just the same.

Yes. That blasted refrain of “will be different” is still ringing in the air this Christmastide. But there is a louder, stronger, *brighter* refrain that has been ringing throughout all time: Emmanuel, God is with us!

A very merry Christmas to you,

+Laura Barbins, Bishop