



THE Branch

THE NEWSLETTER OF FIRST LUTHERAN CHURCH

DECEMBER 2023

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Happy Advent & Merry Christmas, Church!

I am taking a page from Church Council Secretary Ken Lamb's words for us, found on Page 2 of this month's edition of *The Branch*, and pondering anew that God meets us in human flesh and this little baby, born of a woman, in a stable in Bethlehem, is our God.

As Martin Luther asserts and as the Lutheran Confessions declare about Jesus: "Apart from this human being there is no God." At one and the same time, such a statement might stop us in our tracks—we who sometimes like to picture an immense, mighty God high up in a throne room—and also, such a statement comforts us as we remember the words of Revelation 21:3: "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them."

This is the promise of who God is for you. And here it begins, at Christmas, with the Word—that very promise of sin forgive and eternal life—made flesh. God has come to live with you! We celebrate this promise as God's elect, chosen people, for whom and in whom God has made the promise true. Jesus Christ is our God, the one dwelling with us and within us. Or, in the also radical words of a Third-century theologian, Athanasius: "Jesus, indeed, assumed humanity so we might become God."

In this Advent/Christmas/Epiphany season, I invite you to stop regularly and just think about this God, the only God you have: who becomes just like you. Who desires you so much, he takes on your flesh, along with that of all the world. This God shares in all your joys and wonders, pains and sufferings. This God—this little baby, our only God—becomes all sin in his flesh, dies and destroys it all, giving you newness of life.

Jesus's incarnation joins us with him, in the flesh, and with one another, so we are, indeed, the Body of Christ. In his birth, his humanity, we, too, are made truly human. In what Jesus experiences, we, too, learn how it is to be human. Or, in the words of the British poet W.H. Auden:

*He is the Way.
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.*

*He is the Truth.
Seek him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;
You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.*

*He is the Life.
Love him in the World of the Flesh;
And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.*

A Merry Christmas and a Great Shalom to you and all yours,



Christmas Event, Dec. 17
See more details about the event on page 4. We have added a living nativity this year!



Highlights / October 2023 Meeting Old Business

- o Vitality committee has been working on the North Branch history. Thrivent dollars to help pay for costs.

New Business

- o Offering loose cash will now be directed to the general fund instead of benevolence

Board Reports

Pastor's Report:

- o Preparing for confirmation on Oct. 29
- o Spending time with new members, study groups, and visits to members

Property

- o Tree limbs recently cleaned up
- o Discussed repairs for the parking lot and driveway

Deacons

- o Interviewing for Church Administrator

Youth & Family

- o Preparing for Trunk or Treat on Oct. 29

A complete set of the minutes is available at the kiosk in the Narthex.



Financial Updates

2nd Mile Giving

Project	Estimated Cost	To Date
Global Health Ministries	On Going	\$20,770
Peru Missionaries	On Going	\$17,786
2nd Mile / Shed	\$20,000	\$9,581

Treasurer's Report —

Current Fund (Pastor and Administration, Office, Building, Education, Worship)

Received through October 31: \$174,571.93
 Expenses through October 31: \$176,217.10
 Budgeted through October 31: \$193,368.43

October offering was enough to cover the month's expenses and to help decrease our shortfall. The shortfall as of October 31st is \$1,645.17.

Giving Online

If you would like the convenience of giving online you can do so by using the website:

<https://onrealm.org/firstlutheranavoca/Give>
 or Text NORTHBRANCH to 73256

or Scan the QR code.



Council Secretary

By: Ken Lamb



John 3:16-17

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

This is the true meaning of Christmas, to celebrate this incredible act of love.

Our busy lives sometime cloud the true celebration of Christmas. We are constantly reminded by TV and advertisements about the holiday season. That you need to buy these gifts, decorations, etc., to have a happy Christmas. We need to stop and think about what is really important. Remember your giving of your time is sometimes the best gift. A shut in or elderly relative would be very appreciative of a visit.

So in preparation of Christmas and all the related activities: shopping, decorating, sending Christmas cards—remember the reason we are celebrating. Celebrate the important things, family, friends, church and community and especially that Word made flesh sent from God, that little baby in the Bethlehem manger: Jesus. Let's keep the Christ in Christmas.



Update Contact Information

Do you need to update your contact information? If you've been missing the emails or calls from the church we probably don't have your correct information. Please update your contact information with the Church Office, office@firstlutheranavoca.org or 402-275-3300.





Church News and Events

A Note of Thanks

Thanks, Pastor Klinker, for the kind words you gave to us at First Lutheran in last month's letter. I, too, say thank you to anyone who makes it possible for us to create quilts to give to the needy. If you didn't collect used sheets and blankets or give us fabric and yarn, we couldn't do these kind acts. God is good and so are you! May a homemade quilt help people understand God's great love for us. We gave at least 200 quilts to the needy this year.

Thank you,
Margaret Stubbendick and all helpers!

We want to thank everyone who prepared food and helped serve at Verneel's funeral luncheon. We really appreciate your generosity, hard work, and support. Your kindness is an amazing example.

The Noerrlinger Family

The Stewardship board would like to send a big THANK YOU to Garry Hillman for his time and service by delivering all of our donations. For several years, Garry has volunteered to deliver the food pantry items to both Syracuse and Elmwood, plus he takes all the of coat drive donations to the city missions in Lincoln and Omaha. And I'm sure there's many more things he does behind the scenes that we aren't even aware of. Thank you, Garry!

Emily Iske, Stewardship Board Director

Thank you to everyone who donated supplies for the School Kits and Personal Care Kits to the Luther World Relief. Through the generosity and caring of our brothers and sisters in Christ, members of First Lutheran donated:

- 29 personal care kits
- 57 school kits

Save the Date: Congregational Annual Meeting on Sunday, Jan. 21

Our annual meeting will be held following the 10:30 a.m. worship service on Jan. 21. Please attend this important meeting of our congregation. All confirmed members of the church are eligible to vote. Items on the agenda are approval of the 2024 budget, election of council officers and other positions.

Upcoming Events

OSJ Members, Save the Dates!

We have some fun activities coming up for our OSJ (Order of Saint John) members (4-12 graders). Save these dates and watch for more details to be shared in the future.

- **Sunday, Nov. 26** at 9:30 a.m. (between services)
OSJ Officers Meeting
- **Wednesday, Nov. 29** at 7:00 p.m. in the Parish Hall
All OSJ Member Meeting (4-12 graders)
- **Wednesday, Dec. 6** at 7:00 p.m. in the Parish Hall
Nativity scene practice (4-12 graders)
- **Sunday, Dec. 10** after late service
Lunch and shopping for Tabitha's Threads and Gifts for Kids (4-12 graders) (drivers needed)
- **Sunday, Dec. 17** from 11:30 a.m. - 2:00 p.m. (in shifts)
Living Nativity Scene (4-12 graders)
- **Tuesday, Dec. 26** time and location TBD
OSJ Fun Activity – more details to come (7-12 graders)

*Order of
 Saint John*



Sharing the Holiday Spirit with Kids in Need OSJ Christmas Shopping, Dec. 10

Every year, as winter approaches, the excitement around Christmas grows, but for some children, that is not the case. We would like to make Christmas a little more special for area children in Otoe and Cass counties this year through the Gifts for Kids and Tabitha's Thread organizations.



Our the OSJ plans to go shopping for as many children as possible that are in need on **Sunday, Dec. 10**, and we would love your help in raising funds to support their efforts. You may designate your gift on your offering envelopes, send a separate donation to the Church Office with details, or make a donation in the box in the Narthex. Thank you for helping us with this meaningful opportunity to bring some Christmas to those in need.

OSJ members who are able to go shopping, please RSVP to Kelly Stephenson at kellyannlamb@yahoo.com or 402-639-1043.

Blue Christmas worship service, Dec. 21



Knowing that amid all the joy, anticipation, and hope of the Advent and Christmas seasons there can also be sadness and anxiety, First Lutheran will host a Blue Christmas worship service at 6 p.m., on Thursday, Dec. 21,

the longest night of the year in the Northern Hemisphere. The service is quiet, contemplative, and mostly self-directed, with candlelighting, remembrances, and a lament for loved ones who will be absent from celebrations this year. If you are interested in helping to plan or lead the worship service, contact Pastor Adam at pastor@firstlutheranavoca.org, or 402-660-2411.

Advent open house at the parsonage, Dec. 10

To help celebrate Advent and Christmas, join the Klinkers at their home on Sunday, Dec. 10, for a celebration of the season. The open house will start at the parsonage following the 8:15 a.m. worship service, and will continue until 12:30 p.m. Light refreshments will be served. All are welcome!



Christmas Offerings Designated

The local missions will be the designation of our Christmas service offerings this year. The People's City Mission in Lincoln and the Open Door Mission in Omaha provide food, shelter and life-changing programs for men, women, and children experiencing homelessness and poverty.



Coat & Mitten Drive

The Stewardship Board will be holding a coat and mitten drive throughout the winter months for the local missions. Gently used items for men, women, and youth are in great need this time of year. There is a container in the Narthex to place your donations. Items will be delivered to the mission on an ongoing basis as they are received. Items needed:

- Hats
- Coats
- Scarves
- Sweatshirts
- Mittens & Gloves
- Heavy Socks



Good Samaritan Center Donations

- Hand & Body Lotion
- Combs & Brushes
- Lap desks
- Easy board games
- Stationery
- Slipper socks with gripper feet
- Greeting cards, any occasion / Postage Stamps
- Walker pocket keepers/wheelchair pocket keeper
- CD's (polka, big band, Christmas)
- Books with different word games
- Shawl or cardigan (no pullover)
- Men's after shave or cologne / ladies perfume
- Sun catchers (that stick to window with suction cup)



Christmas Event, Dec. 17

Soon we will be celebrating the birth of our Savior. One of the names we know Jesus by is Immanuel, which means God with us. This year as we travel to Bethlehem we'll get to discover the ways Jesus, was and is Immanuel. Come join us Sunday, Dec. 17 from 11:45 a.m.-2:00 p.m. in and outside of the Parish Hall for this fun and meaningful Christmas experience.



New this year, we will have live animals, including a camel and other stable animals. All are welcome! Please invite friends and family to this special season of celebrating Christ's birth with our community.

Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve Worship

With Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve falling on a Sunday, please note our adjusted worship schedule for this year.

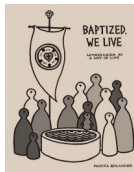
Sunday, Dec. 24, Christmas Eve - We will hold the morning worship at 9:00 a.m. and Christmas Eve candlelight services at 4:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m.



Sunday, Dec. 31, New Year's Eve - We will hold just one worship service at 9:00 a.m.

Congregational Catechism

The all-congregational catechism class led by Pastor Adam will continue to take place between services at 9:30 a.m. in the Church, pending any other church activities that day. We will continue using the booklet by Daniel Erlander, *Baptized, We Live*, and Ken Sundet Jones's book, *A Lutheran Toolkit*, as our text. We will examine how the theology of our Lutheran tradition still speaks uniquely to a world that is often overcome by pain, suffering, and doubt



GO AND...

At the Nebraska Synod Assembly, a year-long focus was launched to "Go And..." Be part of this call to GO. During the Synod Assembly, they taught how to lean

- PRAY
- LISTEN
- SHARE YOUR STORY
- SERVE WITH NEIGHBORS
- ASK
- BE HONEST
- BE PRESENT
- REST
- HAVE THE CONVERSATION
- BE INTENTIONAL
- TELL THE STORY
- BE CHURCH

in as God's people called, gathered, and sent to "Go And..." The Synod created a year of intentional themes around this focus.

December's is Go And...*Be Present*. Take time to be present in listening, in prayer, in silence, in the moments around you. In this busy holiday season, taking the time to be present and look around you will enrich your conversations and you can better appreciate the blessings that surround you.

GO AND...

As we await and celebrate Christ's birth, we remember that God is present and shows up. The babe in the manger, God Incarnate, is God's gift of deep love for us. We are invited to pause, be still, and be fully present in this holy season. Society calls us to a different place where busyness, spending, and rushing about are marks of success. God, in Christ, offers another way: Emmanuel – God with us.

Questions to Consider:

- What can I add to this season that would truly allow me to pause?
- What tradition do you have that nurtures being present at this time of year?
- As you are on the GO, how are you going to practice being present?

Prayer: Emmanuel, you are present with us. Help us be present with each other. Amen.

Suggested Song: O Come, O Come Emmanuel (ELW 257)

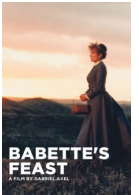
Learn More at www.nebraskasynod.org

Thursday Evening Bible Study

Faith & Film: Bible Study goes to the Movies!

Beginning Thursday, Jan. 11, at 5:30 p.m., join Pastor Adam for Faith & Film, a new study combining Scripture, theology, and the movies. We'll take a look at several films that have God's work in our lives at their very core and a few more that may seem to only tangentially deal with issues of faith but which nonetheless tell an important theological, even Scripturally-based story. We will watch the films together and discuss afterwards. Here's the marquee so far:

Jan. 11: *Babette's Feast* (1987) – A Danish film based on Isak Dinesen's 1958 short story about two sisters who grew up in a Pietist Lutheran community started by their pastor father, and a French refugee who suddenly appears at their house one day. The refugee, Babette, shocks the entire community with her gastronomic talents and her forthrightness, providing many lessons in humanity and divinity for the community. The story culminates in an extravagant dinner Babette prepares. (102 minutes)



Jan. 18: *Of Gods and Men* (2010) – The true story of the French Trappist monks of Tibhirine, Algeria, who, in 1996, were caught in the middle of a civil war between the Algerian government and Islamist insurrectionists. (122 minutes)



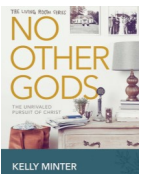
Jan. 25: *All Saints* (2017) – Another true story of a small-town church in Tennessee that is rejuvenated by the arrival of a refugee population of the Karen people of Myanmar. (108 minutes)



Thursday Zoom Bible Study

No Other Gods: The Unrivalled Pursuit of Christ

Join us via Zoom on Thursdays, starting on Jan. 4 at 8:00 p.m. for this 8-week session. We will learn to identify the functional gods you may be unknowingly serving and the lies they tell. As you dethrone your modern-day idols you'll be set free for the deeper, more abundant life Jesus came to give you—discovering that Jesus can do what no other god can.



BE PRESENT

Christmas Card List / Homebound and those 90+

Margaret Stubbendick
1185 Thorne
Syracuse, NE 68446

Carol Berner
Falls City Nursing & Rehab
1720 Burton Drive
Falls City, NE 68355

Alvina Blaikie
1720 Linden St Apt #308
Syracuse, NE 68446

Doris Wiebusch
1675 Thorne
Syracuse, NE 68446

Ruby Lutjemeyer
760 Midland
Syracuse, NE 68446

Helen Fae Haveman
10703 O St
Avoca, NE 68307

Bruce Stubbendick
8270 S 33rd Apt #302
Lincoln, NE 68516

Mona Nolte
913 Palora Circle
Nebraska City, NE 68410

JoAnn Brockhoff
PO Box 469
Syracuse, NE 68446

Eloise Stubbendeck
1720 Linden St
Syracuse, NE 68446



Gift for Pastor Adam

Dear Members of First Lutheran,

The time is near to celebrate the birth of Christ and rejoice in this season of giving. We will be collecting money to purchase a gift for Pastor Adam in appreciation for all he has done for us at First Lutheran. If you wish to participate in the North Branch tradition, please give your donation to a Council member by **Sunday, Dec. 17**. You may also mail your donation, please address the envelope to Renee Nolte at First Lutheran. The gift will be presented at the 4 p.m. service on Christmas Eve.

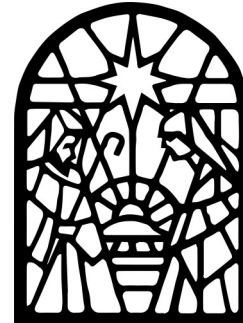
As we prepare for this holiday season, let us prepare our hearts to receive the greatest gift the Lord has given us, the gift of Love through his son Jesus Christ. May the love of Christ be present in your Christmas and remain in your heart always.

First Lutheran wishes you all a very Merry Christmas!!

Council President,
Josh Stubbendick

Church Council Members:

Jeff Panko	Sherri Wilson
Ken Lamb	Emily Iske
Renee Nolte	Jill Nosal
Gary Wockenfuss	Alison Hein
Cathy Callaway	Reese Stubbendick



Christmas will soon be upon us and that means it is time to order our poinsettias.

Poinsettias will be purchased from The Added Touch in Syracuse. If you prefer you may supply your own.

Poinsettias may be given in memory of a loved one, or in honor of any other occasion. The plants may be picked following worship on Sunday, Dec. 31. Poinsettias not picked

up by Tuesday, Jan. 2, will be given to the homebound or hospital patients.

Poinsettias can be ordered by returning the form along with your payment of \$17 for each poinsettia ordered.

Please make your check payable to First Lutheran Church and place the form in the offering plate or mail to the church office.

Poinsettias @ \$17 each _____

Name _____

In memory of _____

In honor of _____

Order deadline is—Sunday, Dec. 10