



NEW JERSEY SYNOD  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
*God's work. Our hands.*

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Week of Advent 3, 2013

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I am beginning this letter on December 18 as I watch the snow slowly melt under the bright sunshine (though the temperature is not yet above freezing!). I spent this morning praying through our roster and giving thanks to God for each of you. Yesterday I was privileged to spend the day in Hoboken and Weehawken learning about and meeting the people at St. Matthew-Trinity lunchtime ministry, the PERC Shelter and the Hoboken Shelter – each a ministry with which we partner in some way. I know that these ministries of hope are repeated in congregations, towns, and cities across our synod and I am grateful that we continue to live out our lives of faith in these ways.

As I prepare to hear again the Christmas story of God's becoming flesh and dwelling among us, I give thanks for this most amazing gift. It is the gospel message that we receive and share. We hear it spoken to Mary, to Joseph, to shepherds, and to us. And in each case, this message is preceded by the words: don't be afraid. *Don't be afraid* says the angel to Mary when her life is about to be upended. *Don't be afraid* says the angel to Joseph as he contemplates divorce. *Don't be afraid* the shepherds are told as they cower in the dark. *Don't be afraid* we hear through the witness of our faith ancestors.

Do you notice that whenever these words are spoken it means that the people to whom they are said are about to have a life-changing encounter with the living God? In other words, they have every reason to be afraid! God is about to do a new thing for them, through them, or with them. In the Biblical narrative, this prelude to change seems a gentle way to get people's attention so they will be able to hear what comes next.

It's the same for us. God comes to us in Jesus Christ and our lives are forever changed. It could cause us to be afraid. Instead, this transformative gift comes to us in ordinary, everyday ways – as a baby in Bethlehem, in the waters of baptism, through bread and wine at a communal meal.

Because of Jesus' life, our lives are made holy. Because of Jesus' death, our deaths are not the end. Because of Jesus' resurrection, we live with hope for the future, knowing that it is in God's own hands. And so we have nothing to fear!

I hear these angels' words as words of promise, affirmation, and invitation. I hear in *don't be afraid* a promise that God is present in our world and in our lives, even when there isn't much evidence to the untrained eye. I hear in *don't be afraid* an affirmation that God continues to

delight in us and all creation, even when we aren't very lovable. I hear in *don't be afraid* an invitation to take risks to love the people Jesus loves, even when doing so seems nearly impossible.

I met many people in my tour through our shelters and feeding programs yesterday. One of the men I met is currently serving as a cook at the Hoboken Shelter Monday through Thursday and as a chef on the weekends at one of the upscale restaurants in the neighborhood. He wasn't always the cook. He actually started out as a homeless guest at the shelter. When the director of the program got to know him, she learned that he had a propensity for cooking and helped him enroll in a culinary arts program. He excelled in the program as many of his classmates dropped out. He was able to get a job and a place to live with the help of those who dared to be the presence of Christ for him. Now, he says, he prepares hot meals "with love" because he knows what it's like to be homeless, afraid, and hungry and he wants those he feeds to know someone cares. *Don't be afraid* for Emmanuel, God with us, has come!

As you prepare to hear again the story of Christmas, I pray that you will celebrate with joy the gift that is yours through Jesus Christ.

"Down in a lowly manger  
the humble Christ was born  
and God sent us salvation  
that blessed Christmas morn."  
*African American Spiritual*

May you have a blessed Christmas!



The Rev. Tracie L. Bartholomew  
Bishop