



**Office of the Bishop
New Jersey Synod, ELCA**
God's work. Our hands.

Week of Advent 3, 2023

Want Ad

Help wanted
Hope needed.
Mixed signals, mixed messages –
Confusion all around.
The people plead for peace
and cry, "Shoot to kill!"
Where will it all end?

Throw away children,
abused women,
homeless men –
helpless all.

A lone voice is heard
from the depth of all ages:
like a whisper in the heart,
a song of love.

A lamp is lit from a distant star,
a spark in the eye of a child.
Night turns to dawn.

Jesus is coming again.
Help is on the way.
Hope is still alive!

Dear Friends,

The poem above was written by Father Kenneth E. Lasch, a priest for more than 60 years in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Paterson who advocated for victims of clergy abuse. It was published in his 2019 book, Winter Souls-tice: Reflections on Light and Darkness in a Season of Grace.¹ I've turned to this small book of prayerful poetry this Advent season to read again words of hope in a time of turmoil.

I don't need to recount for you the many ways hope may be eclipsed in our current time – you know too well the temptation to despair as you look around our neighborhoods, our country, and our world. We can feel like our prayers, our work, and our faith are in vain.

Yet, as people of persistent and defiant faith, we can also look around and hear that song of love whispering in our heart, we can see that lamp lit from a distant star, and the new dawn arising. In these glimpses of God's grace, we trust that help is on the way, Jesus is coming again!

On December 3, the first Sunday of Advent, I received the following photo.



It is a picture of Presiding Bishop Sani Ibrahim Azar of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, with Pastor Rodney Said, and eight confirmands at the Lutheran Church of Hope in Ramallah. Ramallah is a Palestinian town in the central West Bank.

This picture of a regular occurrence in our congregational lives is an illustration of hope this season. These eight young people stood in front of the congregation on the first Sunday of Advent, while war was being waged nearby, and publicly proclaimed their intentions to continue in the covenant God first made with them in their baptisms. Their witness to the love of Jesus Christ is a tangible sign of a living hope.

What tangible signs of hope do you see? Where is the love song of God being whispered to you? Perhaps in the congregation's preparations for Christmas worship or in the ordinariness of sharing coffee with a lonely neighbor or in a community vigil for peace. As people of faith, let us be awake to Christ's Spirit among us, even in the midst of forces that seek to draw us into despair. Jesus is coming again – hope is alive!

I pray you will know and experience this same hope in your lives this Advent and Christmas.

Your sister in Christ,

Bishop Tracie L. Bartholomew

¹Winter Souls-tice: Reflections on Light and Darkness in a Season of Grace, Catholic Book Publishing Corp., 2019.