



Dear Friends in Christ,

Advent is here. Advent begins a new year of worship in the life of the Church. Advent prepares us to relive the greatest story of history. It is the story of our rescue from sin and death by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Messiah. It is also the story of our recruitment as servants of the Kingdom of God.

We relive that story each year because it is the big story that makes sense of our own personal life stories. The world is constantly telling us different stories about survival of the fittest, about salvation by shopping, about serving self. But both you and I know that those worldly stories lead nowhere.

Worship in the Lutheran tradition is about Word and Sacrament. It is about hearing the Word of God in Scripture, sermon, and song. It is about receiving the promise of God in Holy Communion. We come to worship not because we are ready to put on a good show for God or for others. We come to worship because we are needy and hungry. And in our gathering together in the name of Jesus, God offers life-giving grace to us in Word and Sacrament.

But what if we are not hungry for God? Whether we realize it or not, we are spiritual beings who will perish without the grace of God. But maybe we have our hearts or minds full of other things. As we gather together in worship, life takes on perspective as we realize, "It's not about us." God is the source, the center, and the goal of life. Worship is a reality check that not only brings us God's grace but that also makes hungry for God's grace in the first place.

But what if we don't get anything out of worship when we come? Certainly God is present with us to give us God's grace. However, maybe we are looking for the wrong things. Maybe we are looking for certain kinds of feel-good emotions. Maybe we are looking for helpful hints for saving ourselves. What is it you are looking for in worship? How about a real living relationship with God?

The goal of our Sunday morning (or Saturday evening worship) is not to fulfill our worship duty for the week. The goal of our worship gatherings is to inspire us to worship God 24/7 in all that we say and do. We pray on Sunday to inspire our prayers the rest of the week. We sing on Sunday to give our hearts a song in our daily lives. We confess our sins to inspire us to repentance the rest of the week. We confess our faith in God to practice confessing our faith in God in our daily lives. The fact is that we need the discipline of our weekly worship gatherings to keep our own worship lives on track in our daily lives.

One of the greatest gifts that parents can give their children is the discipline of weekly and daily worship. One of the greatest gifts you can give to your neighbors is your personal example and encouragement to join in weekly worship.

I want to say a word of thanks to all those who help make our weekly worship gatherings work. Thank you, Marla and the bulletin folders, for preparing our worship folders each week. Thank you, Neva and the altar guild, Paula, florists, and bread bakers, for serving our needs and keeping the sanctuary beautiful. Thank you, greeters and ushers, for giving our visitors a good first impression and making everyone feel welcome. Thank you, Julia, Heidi, choirs, and praise teams, for leading us in song. Thank you, Scripture readers, for bringing God's Word to life in your varied voices. Thank you, George, Bill, and sound teams, for helping to get the Word out. Thank you, worshipers, for adding your voice and your visible witness to our worship gatherings. Often times your worship preaches a message to children and to others that is more powerful than you know.

Yours in Christ, Phil Nielsen