

2020 Church Council Devotions



Southern Ohio Synod

Greetings, synod leaders:

Like most pastors, I have searched to find suitable material to share with church councils and other committees for opening devotional materials. Sometimes we have read books together, discussing a chapter and praying. Other times we have left it to council members to lead them from their own favorite Bible verses or materials. Recently I discovered that in 2017 the Virginia Synod of the ELCA developed a resource where pastors from ministries or congregations in the synod wrote a brief devotion for each month. Knowing how I feel when people come to me with an idea asking if we could do it, I undertook the process myself with the blessing of Bishop Dillahun. I began by contacting pastors in my own area, the Central Ohio Conference, thinking that I would get a half dozen or so volunteers. I was overwhelmed to hear from 15 folks willing to share their thoughts with lay leaders of our synod. I was truly thankful for the response. I had to tell three that they will be contacted for the 2021 resource first, then pastors from other areas around the synod.

On the pages following are 12 devotions, one for each month of the year, to use as you would like – provide for congregation members, church councils or committees. Although there may be some slight differences, most have a scripture reference, a couple of paragraphs of reflection, a few discussion questions and a short prayer. Use them as you wish with my blessing!!

The months were written by the following rostered leaders of our synod:

January – Pastor Liz Lowry, Messiah Lutheran in Reynoldsburg, Ohio; now serving in Anchorage, Alaska.

February – Deacon Nick Bates, director of the Hunger Network of Ohio and synod liaison for advocacy and public policy.

March – Pastor Glen Bengsen, retired and living in Powell, Ohio.

April – Pastor Beth Clothier, Trinity Lutheran Church in Marysville, Ohio.

May – Pastor Todd Mills, Director of Congregational Engagement and Advancement, Capital University.

June – Pastor Barry Scott, Trinity Lutheran Church in Marysville, Ohio.

July – Pastor Bonnie Gerber, All Saints Lutheran in Worthington, Ohio.

August – Pastor Tim Kuenzli, retired and living in Pickerington, Ohio.

September – Pastor Doug Warburton, Peace Lutheran, Gahanna, Ohio

October – Pastor Sally Padget, First English Lutheran Church, Columbus, Ohio.

November - Pastor Tim Isringhausen, Christ Lutheran Church, Bexley, Ohio.

December – Pastor Craig Richter, All Shepherd's Lutheran Church, Lewis Center, Ohio.

May the Holy Spirit enlighten us and lead us to faithful lives of leadership and service in Jesus' name.

Pastor Ralph Wolfe

Clinton Heights Lutheran Church, Columbus, Ohio

January

Isaiah 43:15-19

“Remember when....”

Celebrations, triumphs, failures that taught us, healing from past hurts - our memory of the past may lead us to be grateful for our present. But our memory may also get us stuck in the past when we become fixated on it. “Remember when...” may become a statement of “Why can’t we go back?” rather than one of gratitude for where we are today. Ever heard this in the church? (I have!) In churches, “Remember when...” may become an accusation of how things are falling apart, or changing too fast, or just not as good. Often as we become fixated, we look on the past with “rose-colored glasses,” unable to remember with honesty and clarity. On the other hand, sometimes the past has been so difficult that we become paralyzed by its memory, also unable to remember with clarity or look forward with hope.

Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord tells Israel to “not remember the former things.” Even though the former things are good and beautiful! In other words, stop fixating on all the ways I saved you in the past, because “I am doing a new thing.” The ways I’ve worked and moved in the past, the Lord says, are not the ways I’m working and moving today. Do you perceive the new thing? Do you see what I’m bringing forth today? When we’re able to look at the Lord’s work in our lives with gratitude, rather than hope that it will be exactly the same way, we receive a stronger hope. We become free to see how God is working *today*, not yesterday. We are grateful, but not stuck. We are excited for new possibilities and open to new gifts.

Questions for Discussion

- Describe how you saw God working in your congregation last year. What are you thankful for?
- Looking ahead to the new year, what “new thing” may God be doing in your congregation?
- In what ways are you open to God’s new work? What makes it difficult to be open?

Prayer

Lord, we thank you for what you have done for us in our life together. We thank you for the gifts of our past. Heal our past hurts. Help us to see what you are doing in our midst today. May we look ahead with hearts and lives open to your will. Amen.

February

Luke 1:46 - 56

Where do we sit?

Are we the hungry who will be fed or the rich who will be sent away empty? Are we the proud who will be scattered, or the humble who will be lifted up? Are we sitting on our own earthly thrones of privilege or are we humbled in front of God's throne to wash our neighbor's feet?

God is on the side of the oppressed and marginalized. Are we sitting with those who are to be vindicated in God's justice or are we sitting on thrones of power and privilege?

February is set aside as black history month in the United States. For more than 400 years, our country (and colonies) have sold Africans into slavery and discriminated against their children. Even today, African Americans are more likely to experience poverty, housing and employment discrimination, and shorter lives than Americans of European descent.

We are broken as a community because of our nation's sin of racism.

Mary's song and the prophets of the Hebrew scripture are not announcing God's desire for division between winners and losers. The division between black and white, male and female, rich and poor, native born and immigrant exist already in our community and lead to the oppression and marginalization of our neighbor. God's desire for humanity cannot be achieved until the oppression ends. Our communities are wounded.

Healing the wound and division of racism is hard because it requires us to acknowledge that privilege has been unjustly awarded (and that many of us have it). The waters of our baptism have thrown us from the thrones of power and privilege and into the streets – filled with the Holy Spirit – to stand, kneel, sit, pray, march, and speak with our neighbors to heal the deep wounds. To seek forgiveness. To seek reconciliation. To seek God's Kingdom where all will be fed and treated as a creature made in God's Divine Image.

Discussion Questions:

How will your congregation be honoring (or has honored) the struggle and contributions of African Americans in our nation?

How are we called as Synod to step down from our thrones of power and be in relationship with our neighbors who are oppressed?

March

MATTHEW 4:1-11

Lent always begins with the story of Jesus tempted by Satan, but all of Lent, indeed, of Christian life, is informed by this seminal encounter.

Jesus has just come from his baptism by John in the Jordan River. Jesus' identity and call have been affirmed by God, and Jesus is "led by the Spirit" into "the wilderness" (the world, and all its challenges to every person). The temptations that follow are not a one-time occurrence but are indicative of the challenges that Jesus faces throughout his ministry- to be true to his identity as the Son of God, and his call to proclaim God's reign (kingdom) of grace for all. Even at the end, on the cross, he is tempted ("if you are the Son of God, come down from the cross"). And even at the end Jesus stays faithful to God, to his call, to us, and gives of his life, as he had been doing all along, for the sake of our salvation.

The temptations themselves (also recounted by Luke) involve the same issue: if you are the Son of God ... "you can turn stones into bread (Jesus was famished after 40 days in the wilderness)"; "you cannot be hurt (so jump off the temple and tempt God's faithfulness to you)"; and "worship me (Satan)" and you will have all power over the nations." To each of these temptations Jesus responds by calling on God's Word in scripture - "It is written" - to rebuke the tempter's dares. We do well to recognize ourselves in the world as those challenged by all kinds of temptations to deny or affirm our identity and calling as God's child and God's people.

QUESTIONS for Reflection

1. How and where do you feel that God's Spirit is leading you? Your congregation?
2. What temptations, and challenges, do you and your congregation face in the days ahead?
3. Does your congregation regularly remember its baptismal identity, affirming how God's grace and promise in Christ supports you in your ministry together? How and when?

PRAYER

Gracious God, you have washed us in the baptismal waters of Christ's love, and called us to serve our Lord by loving you and one another. You promise to lead us in the power of your Spirit, to confront the temptations and challenges of life secure in your everlasting love. Hold us fast in your Word, and strengthen us in faith, hope and love, trusting you always to the end of our days, and beyond. In the name of Jesus, AMEN

April

“Again, you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers.”

Jeremiah 31:1-6

This time of year always brings songs of merriment to mind. In particular, “The Lord of the Dance.” As a singer I’ve sung many songs and some of them imprint in beautiful ways on my soul. One year I worked with a fellow musician, a wonderful pianist, on a version of “The Lord of the Dance.” We played with each of the verses allowing the text to color the emotion of the music played and sung for each verse. More than ever before, I heard Jesus singing the text. Embodying the humanity that each of us experiences over our lifetimes; anguish, pain, longing, rejection, death, rebirth, acceptance and the exhilaration that nothing on earth can stop Jesus’ love from living.

The words of the prophet Jeremiah are dark and speak to feelings of loneliness and exile, but they also provide assurance to Israel – to all of us who are Israel. They are words that remind us that God has us firmly in his grasp and the days and seasons of frustration will give way to the newness of life and love. Not unlike Jesus, Jeremiah’s message is one of truth, often uncomfortable truth, but still truth. There is little that brings out the stark joy of dancing, singing and merry making like the harsh realities of earthly life all of which seem very fresh at this time of the year.

With Holy Week and Easter upon us, we have entered a time to rejoice! A time to look at the world with new-born eyes. To follow the rebirth of all things with the wonderment and curiosity of children. We are called to rejoice, to take our tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers – there is no judgment in our dances of joy, just the pure love and enjoyment of life that is ours through the gift of Jesus’ resurrection!

Questions:

- What has made your spirit dance recently?
- Who do you think of when you envision joyful dancing in life?
- How can we help bring about a feeling of joy in the life of our congregation?

Prayer:

Blessed Lord of the Dance, bring joy to our lives and help us to dance wherever we may be. Bless us with the ability to dance dances to celebrate all of life, new beginnings, endings, and the joy of rebirth in all of its forms. Lead us in the dance that is life eternal. We pray this as our dance of thankfulness that Jesus is our Lord and Savior! Amen

May

Hebrews 11:1 (New Living Translation) Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us.

Sitting at my grandparents' kitchen table at about five years of age I watched my grandfather skillfully carve through the flesh of an apple carefully removing the seeds and hulls exposing all of the sweet goodness of the apple. Not quite a generation removed as a child on the family farm to now in the factory life to provide for his family the traditions, language and skills of a farming family were still very much alive. My grandparents' house sat on the corner of a row of houses that were built before the land was finally sold to another farming family. The backyard still held a small tract of land for farming. This was one of the first times I heard my Grandpa Harry utter a phrase that I'd not heard for a long while until recently: "we are all called to plant seeds to grow a tree to provide sustenance and shade for people we will never meet."

As we think back over our individual lives, the lives of our churches, the lives of our communities and beyond. Everything that we have and all that we are, while we might have had some work involved in these successes, the truth is that family, church family members, friends and people that we've never even known have provided for us. As we sit and look around at our church buildings, as we think of our homes, as we think of all that we've been entrusted with to even this day are we thankful? Each week as we make our way through the prayers of intercession we give thanks for the "huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith" are we following in their footsteps, the pathway of Jesus Christ? It is easy to find ourselves running in a direction just to feel like we're moving but we're called to travel the race that God has set before us. How are you doing...on your mark, get set, go for God!

Discussion: Feel free to share stories of the members of the cloud of witnesses that were important to your faith.

Prayer: Everlasting God, we give you thanks for so such a huge cloud of witnesses to the life of faith who poured out their lives for us and for your kingdom. Be with us and guide us that we might have the strength, compassion and energy to do the same and stay on your path. In the precious name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, we pray. Amen.

June

“I will call on the name of the Lord.”

Philippians 2: 5-11

Have you ever thought your name is powerful? Names can be powerful, especially when the character and the actions of the person bearing that name is inspiring and worthy of imitation. My middle name is Daniel, after my Uncle Dan, who was also my Godfather. It's a good biblical name. His actions and character were inspiring – Army Airborne, he parachuted behind enemy lines on D-Day in 1944, then returned from that war to serve as a police officer, and also retired a full colonel in the Air Force reserves. He also led the effort to build a children's hospital in Panama. Daniel is a strong, inspiring name for me.

Paul writes words of encouragement as he urges us to imitate another strong, inspiring leader. Except, the strength of Jesus is seen in his humility. Jesus, the only son of God, in whom the fullness of the Creator dwelled, chooses the path of service. Fully God, he “emptied himself”, becoming like us, fully human to show us the way to the Father. Jesus reveals God's determination to restore all of creation, every relationship, every brokenness, every person – all to experience the fullness of life God intends. God does the unexpected, turning expectations upside down, making the path of service the road to God's own glory. By following Jesus on this path, we join God's work in the world. Re-creation. Restoration. Reconciliation. Hope. Life.

Paul says that the name “Jesus” is above every name, every knee bends and every tongue confesses Jesus Christ is Lord. That's a strong name, and an inspiring character to follow. As we come together to be the church, and as those God has called to be leaders, we have one role model, Jesus of Nazareth, and one mission – to be his presence in the world.

Questions:

- How does this reading challenge the world's definition of strength and success?
- Whom do you admire because they put the interests of others ahead of their own?
- How can our congregation balance meeting the needs of others with our own needs?
What must change for that to happen?

Prayer:

Holy God, in your great love you sent your son to restore the lives of your people. You have called us to be the church, the body of Christ in the world. Jesus is life, and we call upon the name that is above every name to lead and renew us. We live, serve and pray in the name of Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

July

Scripture: Psalm 131

O LORD, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.
But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother;
my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.
O Israel, hope in the LORD, from this time on and for evermore.

It is a gift to be able to sit quietly in the presence of God to be reminded of all that God is. A weaned child wanders off on its own, not as fully dependent as the nursing child. In this newfound freedom, the child explores and becomes more independent. However, the child is not fully independent of its mother or father. They continue to be the source of nurture and growth. Daily, the child is reminded of the need to separate from the world of exploring to be renewed and refreshed to go out again and grow.

As Christians, we are like the weaned child, wandering away from God and seeking the world's favor. Yet, as a child needs rest, so do we. Our need to connect to God becomes increasingly important the more independent we believe ourselves to be. To sit quietly in the presence of God is a reminder of our utter dependence on God while having the freedom to make choices and decisions on our own. Our need to connect with God becomes greater the more we wander away. This is the only bond that keeps us right in the eyes of God.

Nonetheless, we wander, farther and farther away from God seeking a deeper independence on a daily basis. We sacrifice the one relationship that is critical for us to nurture and sustain. We willingly cling to others and to stuff, in the hope these will be faithful and true. They never are. Only God is.

Nothing can take the place of quiet time alone with God. It is essential to our very being. We need this faith lift on a daily basis. This daily lifeline saves us from ourselves.

Questions

What things make it most challenging for you to have a calm and quiet soul?
What practical tools could you use to help you cultivate a calm and quiet soul?
In what do you place your hope?

Prayer

Dear Lord, remind me through your Spirit to keep my ambitions and desires in check. Keep me humble in my endeavors as I seek to find quiet in you. May I grow and walk with you today. In Jesus' Name, Amen

August

The Container of your Call - Luke 9:12-13

You give them something to eat...

How often have you noticed this simple word of Jesus to his disciples? We correctly assume this little episode of Jesus' life and ministry is primarily a word about God's abundance and God's desire that all have enough, whether that's food, security, hope or whatever. God intends "enough." That's a word of goodness and grace.

But this word we often skip over is an important one for disciples, whenever and wherever they are. It is a word for you and me.

You give them something to eat...

One of the appropriate and regular questions people of faith ask, either aloud or in our souls, is "how do I best follow God?" We want to know how to be faithful, how to shape our lives so that they please God, how to fashion lives of meaning, substance and purpose. Often, we assume that the call to follow faithfully is a big deal: the "right" career, a noble gesture, a major sacrifice, a dramatic life change. Sometimes, I suppose it is. Most all of the time, however, it's a matter of following in much smaller ways right where we are.

"The container of your call" is a way of imagining faithfulness in mostly everyday routine, and small but very important ways. In what containers of life is your call to faithfulness held these days? Think about the days that are typical as they unfold before you:

- You're a family member – spouse, child, parent, sibling. Even in a family that's not perfect (and you can bet there aren't *any* perfect families, even those that you imagine are) what does faithfulness look like? What does your family most need from you that you are equipped to give?
- You're a part of a community where you and others labor. Who in your workplace needs attention, assistance, care, or anything that you might be able to offer? Even if your job isn't as self-sacrificing as Mother Theresa's was, are there ways to fill the call to love well where you are?
- You're part of a community of neighbors, town, school district, etc. How might you – even occasionally – attend to the needs of these communities? Maybe you're a leader in one of these areas, but more likely you'll only need to be a follower to make these communities stronger for the goodness of all.
- You're part of the leadership of this faith community. Does leadership here look like recognition or modesty? Like authority or service?

There are so many ways and places to exercise your call to follow the God who wants each and every one of us to be whole. And we aren't asked to do what is impossible, or beyond our capabilities. It's worthwhile noting that Jesus did the job of feeding the multitude. Perhaps Jesus was encouraging the disciples to share what they had, how they could, and then he'd manage what was beyond them. We follow a very gracious God, you know.

To begin this council meeting, sit quietly for several minutes and consider how you are being called to follow in your area of responsibility in this congregation. Perhaps you can share with the rest of the council one thing that seems clear to you – and it doesn't have to be an enormous, flashy sort of thing, remember. In this particular container of your call to faithfulness, what might God be asking of you?

September

Mustard Seeds and Weeds Luke 13:21-32

The parable of the mustard seed. Over the years I've mostly heard people reflect on this short parable by saying something like... "It's about how something so small as a mustard seed can grow into something so big." Of course, that bears some truth. But honestly, to me it always felt like a statement that can be placed on a Precious Moment figurine. A part of me always felt that Jesus was saying something more powerful about the Kingdom of God than little things can grow. Context helped me understand this parable in a significantly different way. All throughout the Old Testament, the way the Kingdom of God is described is as a noble, mighty cedar of Lebanon. A strong, powerful, tall tree providing shelter and shade. This is the metaphor people used to describe God's Kingdom at work. Jesus, standing in front of people who work the land, takes a 180-degree view and says something that might have sounded slightly irritating. "The Kingdom of God is like...mustard." What?!!! Mustard to this culture and context is a nuisance. It's something that they try to get rid of. It invades their fields, hides, and turns into an irritating shrub. Jesus has just compared the Kingdom of God to a weed that's hard to eliminate.

What might this say to us as we prepare to do the work of the church? I think it has much more to say to us than "small things can grow." The Kingdom of God, according to Jesus is hard to stop. It is potent. It is mixed in the soil. It's at work in ways we can't even see. Sometimes it's subversive. Let's be honest, all of us are feeling anxious about the state of the whole church. Declining numbers in worship. People with so many other options for how they spend their time. Where are the young people? What if Jesus is describing God's Kingdom as something that's always at work, even when it's hard to see? What if we shift our focus as leaders?

Instead of taking all the responsibility of the future of the church on our shoulders, we instead ask, "Where is this potent Kingdom of God at work today and how can we best join it?"

Questions

1. How does this understanding of the parable of the mustard seed change how you experience it?
2. Compare how you see God's Kingdom at work to a weed. (Crab grass!)
3. How does this understanding relate to the work we do as leaders in our places of worship?

October

Romans 12:2-8

²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. ³For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Randy had been a member of our congregation for two years. He came to church every Sunday, found his favorite spot near the back, sat through worship and when worship was over he would leave. No one in the congregation thought much of it, because we all knew Randy had some emotional and mental challenges. He would sometimes get angry over what we viewed as the smallest things. Then one Sunday morning I announced that one of our partner churches could use some help with their food pantry and to everyone's surprise Randy was the first one to volunteer. The next evening, Randy, me, and three other members from our church went to volunteer. Randy worked hard doing everything he was told to do. On the drive home he asked when we would be going back. Those six words were the most I had ever heard Randy say at one time and were the beginning of an amazing transformation. For three years Randy never missed the 3rd Monday of the month at our partner church, but his involvement at our church also grew. Now, he gets to church at 7:30am every Sunday morning. He puts out pastries for the homeless folks who come to our Sunday morning breakfast. After the pastries are ready, he goes upstairs and gets the communion ready for worship. When it is time, he lights the altar candles. Then finally, when service is over, he is back downstairs to help clean up after the breakfast. Randy also talks a great deal more now and has moved up to the pew in the second row. Being able to use the gifts God had given him, transformed Randy and in transforming Randy, transformed how our congregation views one another's gifts: everyone has been gifted by God. Everyone has gifts, and we look for ways to engage everyone. Young, old, rich or poor, even mentally or physically challenged. Everyone is encouraged to use their gifts for the good of the body of Christ.

Questions

God has gifted everyone – How is your congregation making room for all people to use their gifts?
Why is being able to use your gifts such an important part of faith development?
Whose gifts in your congregation are being overlooked?

Dear God, transform us by the renewing of our minds so we can see the gifts that have been overlooked within our congregations. Help us to use everyone's gifts to build up the body of Christ. AMEN

November

I can't recall the first time I heard the phrase, "an attitude of gratitude", but I like it!

What really brings power to that thought is the art of living that "attitude of gratitude" in every situation and circumstance. Of course, that is much easier said than done, but imagine the joy and stress-relief it would bring to our lives and the lives of those around us.

This "attitude of gratitude" is easy when things are going well. When everything we touch turns to gold, when our decisions are quick, good, and Christ-centered and the results bring peace and joy. In those moments we thank the Lord and even give thought to giving ourselves a pat on the back for the wisdom that we displayed. As the main character of the old show "The A Team" said at the end of every episode: "I love it when a plan comes together!"

Then there are the other days...those days when everything we touch backfires on us. We have good intentions, but those good intentions are overshadowed by our own sinfulness or the sinfulness of someone else, and the consequences range from inconvenient to troublesome to catastrophic.

What then?

That is when that "attitude of gratitude" is most important. In those moments of disappointment or trauma, we remember that the love of God in Christ Jesus overwhelms all of that mess, and we are forgiven, graced, and renewed for a hope-filled future.

In other words, our failures are not fatal in the grace of God. It is then that the "attitude of gratitude" moves from thanksgiving to thanksgiving.

The Apostle Paul says, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

I think I could use a bit of an attitude adjustment this Thanksgiving. Not for Thanksgiving mind you, but to live every day in "Thanks-living."

Will you join me?

A Happy and Blessed Thanksgiving and Thanksliving!

Questions to ponder:

- When in your life has it been difficult to have an "attitude of gratitude"? How did you deal with it?
- What are the similarities and differences between 'thanksgiving' and 'thanksgiving'?
- What changes in habits/priorities/perspectives might be helpful in the move to 'thanksgiving'?

Prayer:

Holy and Gracious God, we give you thanks for the many blessings you bestow upon us. Frankly, a good number of those blessings we take for granted. Forgive, us Lord, we pray, restore us to a greater awareness of your presence and love, and move us to lives of 'thanksgiving' that we continue to be your people who not only receive your blessings, but strive to be blessings to others as well.

This we pray in Jesus' Name....

Amen

December

“Hee-hee-hoo! Hee-hee-hoo! Hee-hee-hoo!” My wife of sixteen years shakes her head when I share this image. She raises her eyebrows, looks firmly at me and shakes her head. But despite her frustration with me, I still share it. I share it with the knowledge of her concern and an understanding of its power. Birthing is hard!

Birthing is hard! It is hard and takes serious preparation. Breathing exercises may be an integral part of birthing classes for a child because the exercises remind expectant parents to take shallow and deep breaths, slow down and work through the pain of the delivery together. For the expectant father, it is working through the anxiety of watching the expectant mother in pain. For the expectant mother, it is working through the pain of delivery and the pain of an expectant father who has no clue what the excruciating pain feels like. Yet, birthing classes are intended to teach so much more.

Birthing classes teach expectant parents how to develop a plan in preparation for childbirth. Thinking back to the birth of our first child, I thought after birthing classes that my wife and I had the perfect plan put together. The bag was packed and in the car a month prior to the child’s birth. The fire department in Harrisonburg, Virginia had installed and taught me how to install the car seat at least three weeks out. A list of whom we would notify was put together at least two weeks out. Possible names for the child were on a separate list in the overnight bags. Most importantly, I was asking my wife how she was constantly. Okay, I know that all of this was annoying my wife and making me the center of her laughter. I was, though, going to be a first-time dad. My motto from the birthing classes was *One Can Never Be Over-Prepared*.

One Can Never Be Over-Prepared! Problem was in my anxiety that I – yes, I - forgot to breathe. It slipped my mind especially when there was no way that I could prepare in totality for what was to come. A week out, my wife and I heard that our first child was presenting breach and would have to be delivered by C-section. In an instant, all our preparation changed. “Hee-hee-hoo! Hee-hee-hoo! Hee-hee-hoo!”

All of Joseph and Mary’s preparations for the birth our Christ Child change in short order. Word spreads that the first registration is about to take place. This registration that will take place is happening under Caesar Augustus while Quirinius is Governor of Syria. Instead of remaining put in the town of Nazareth in Galilee for birth of their child, Joseph and Mary, who was well into her pregnancy, head up to Bethlehem the town of David. Not what they expected at all.

In a packed Bethlehem, not only do they register together but also time comes for Mary to deliver their first child. Surprise! Surprise!

Prepared in a completely different way, Joseph and Mary do their best to make preparations and find a place to birth the child. After finding the best place that they could, she delivers her firstborn, wraps him in cloths and lays him in a manger. Probably not what they had planned, but what happened.

The birthing of Christ Child and the birthing of ministry is hard! It does not always goes as planned and according to the preparations. In the midst of it, God is with us. God is Immanuel.

Breathe. Take shallow and deep breaths. Slow down and work through difficulty of the birthing process of ministry together. God is coming, has come and will come again in the birth, life, death and resurrection of God’s only son, Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord.