

December 17

Friends—

Happy Advent! Hopefully you are enjoying this time contemplating and enjoying the arrival of Christ's birth which we celebrate next week. It has been a busy time here in our family and on campus with classes just ending last Friday. Now finally I will have about six weeks off before the spring semester begins. It doesn't feel real yet but it is a good feeling that the hustle and bustle of classes and papers will take a pause for a good chunk of time in order to rest and enjoy time with family.

Angie's parents are still here with us and her father's health appears to be going well! It looks like he does not need surgery of any kind at this point and that he is clear to stop medical treatment with a follow up visit in 5-6 months. This means they are free to return home to Kenya and come back in the spring to see how his prognosis is. All of us are happy about this and they are now actively looking at getting a return ticket to use the first part of January. They will spend Christmas here with us but are otherwise anxious to return back to their own home and see their family and friends who have missed them.

Chelsea's vocabulary and play activities have really taken a step up since her birthday two months ago. She understands more abstract ideas and can follow commands that are slightly more complex. She goes absolutely ecstatic every time I come home from school at the end of the day, loving to hug my legs tightly and play with her dad! She definitely understands things like Christmas this year and what symbols signify the holiday. She loves kissing and holding the baby Jesus from one of my nativity sets as well as rearranging the (rather large) number of figures for this collection. Several days I have to go back and rearrange them to how they are supposed to be, haha!

I recently started building up a collection of commentary books known as the Concordia commentary series, put out by Concordia Publishing House, the publisher of our church body. They are large royal blue books which go through each book of the Bible analyzing the original Greek and Hebrew text as well as providing theological and exegetical insight from the author that most people would not notice. They are an invaluable resource for pastors and nearly every Lutheran pastor I know has them on his shelf. They only have volumes for about half of the Bible books so far. They release two volumes per year so it will take a long time for the whole canon to be completed! Even though each Bible book is only a handful of pages, each commentary is several hundred pages long, with some being spread over two volumes, or even three. The most recent one to be released at the end of November is the final third of the gospel of Matthew, written by one of our own exegetical teachers, Pastor Jeff Gibbs. Lots of pastors I know are very happy they now have his Matthew trilogy as a complete set on their shelves! I can tell these will provide valuable insight for preaching in the years to come. The next volume to be released this spring is the second half of 1 Kings. Not quite as exciting as Matthew but it is a good feeling having such in-depth study tools available at my fingertips!

The other exciting news coming up is that on Thursday December 20 Angie and I will have our vicarage interview with Pastor Glenn Nielsen. This will be our chance to talk with him and share what our biggest priorities are in a vicarage setting and congregation. Our hope is to be able to stay local and work with a congregation in the St. Louis area, but we also understand it may not happen and are prepared to experience vicarage wherever God chooses to place me. It seems unreal that the academic journey to vicarage is 3/4 over! May 1 is the date when we will learn where we will be sent and that will be here before we know it!

Isaiah & the Prophets spent the majority of the class going through the book of Isaiah and analyzing several of the oracles within the book. We also discussed how strong a contrast there is between the warnings and judgments of the Israelite people at the beginning of the book with the restoration and mercy

shown by God at the end of the book. Our final paper for that class focused on exactly that, noticing what types of differences occur between the beginning and ending chapters of Isaiah.

Pastoral Care ended with our class dividing into small groups for a live roleplay exercise. We each had to take turns being in the pastoral role as well as taking turns being in the parishioner role where we would come to the pastor with a problem (which was provided for us ahead of time.) The person in the pastoral role had to use the skills and techniques we learned to help uncover what was really troubling the 'parishioner.' It was a challenging but enjoyable exercise and we all understood how practice will make the skills easier to do. I can say this was my favorite class with certainty now, and I am very thankful to have been in Pastor Rockenbach's class.

Systematics ended with discussing eschatology (study of the end of time) in which we discussed our Lutheran view that Christ will one day return, give a final judgment, and usher in the new heavens and new earth where we will physically live in resurrected bodies forever. We compared this with other church bodies that believe there will be a literal 1000 year reign of Christ before a final ultimate tribulation, a secret rapture of Christians prior to the 1000 years (think of the Left Behind books), and a handful of other views that believe there will be a special period set apart prior to the last day. Our final week of class focused on dying and funeral services. We discussed what happens to the soul immediately after death, what a good funeral service is meant to capture, as well as the effectiveness of prayer. Again this class was also highly enjoyable and I am looking forward to seeing what topics we will cover in the spring semester systematics class.

History of the Reformation ended with writing three research papers on Luther and his influence on his immediate successors. We spent the final few class periods discussing other notable figures during this time period such as Henry VIII, John Calvin and the anabaptist movement. Pastor Dost thought our class did exceptionally well and was pleased with how our final papers turned out, saying we can feel free to take classes with him in the future.

At my field congregation I got to preach for a third time. This then would have been the first sermon I created that wasn't a class assignment from the preaching class last spring. The text was the whole first chapter of Mark, since Pastor Femmel wanted to spend the four Sundays of Advent going through the first chapter of each gospel, and Mark is the one I got. I spent a lot of time putting it together and am pleased with the final manuscript. The actual delivery didn't go as well as I had hoped for either service but thankfully for the service which got recorded, nobody else but me would have noticed what went wrong. You can listen to it by going to <http://www.zionmh.org/audio/2018-12-02.mp3>.

Thank you for your thoughts and prayers, as always. May the awe of God becoming flesh and being among us inspire and awe you throughout Advent and into Christmas.

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