

Advent Lutheran Church
Keep Living and Loving Like Jesus
August 31, 2025
Philippians 4:4-9 & John 21:15-17

As someone who was born in Arlington, grew up in Arlington, and now lives in Arlington I've traveled down South Cooper Street thousands of times. Despite passing by Advent on nearly all of those occasions, the first time I entered the doors was in May 2024. I came for an initial conversation with the Executive Team about serving as your interim pastor.

It turns out that Pastor Joel, your full-time settled minister for many years, had retired a few months earlier and you were actively seeking an interim pastor. So, of course, it made all the sense in the world that Advent's leaders would be talking to me – a guy who isn't Lutheran and who wasn't willing to leave his full-time job in a faraway land known as East Dallas.

Thankfully, through a process of mutual discernment, we determined that what on paper wasn't an obvious match was in fact the right fit at the right time.

In reality, I have quite a bit of training and experience in interim ministry. And I also knew quite a bit about being Lutheran thanks to serving at King of Glory in North Dallas a few decades ago.

You may have noticed that since this is my last Sunday I made sure we started in a way that flexed our Lutheran muscles. And nothing does that quite like singing A Mighty Fortress.

In all seriousness, there is no way to summarize the last fourteen months in the next ten minutes. I learned long ago that any attempt to name names is always incomplete. Instead, I will reflect on our shared journey with thanksgiving.

On my first Sunday I realized that I was entering a vibrant congregation with a shared mission of living and loving like Jesus.

Do you remember early on how many announcements I made inviting you to consider wearing a name tag? Yes, it was a way to help me begin to connect names and faces. And, yes, it will be a helpful practice in the coming weeks as you welcome Pastor Erik.

Learning one another's names was a small first step. One of our most impactful days was the Day of Discovery. After worship around 100 people gathered in Luther Hall to share your best experiences of Advent as well as your hopes and dreams for this congregation's future. Every person was interviewed and the information gathered that day shaped a shared future.

A small team of leaders organized the data. Then, from the forward-looking comments, they discerned our shared purpose, which was affirmed by Council. This purpose statement guided how we would live in to our mission during the interim period.

As soon as it was adopted, I shifted my welcome remarks each Sunday from a request to wear a name tag to an invitation to be part of who Advent is and seeks to become – a growing church where all are welcome and discover ways to serve.

Adopting this statement didn't part the heavens. Repeating it week in and week out didn't make it so. Inviting everyone to take part, however, has been transformative.

Our interim purpose shaped goal setting by staff, ministry teams, and Council. It informed the ways we engaged visitors to our campus on Sundays and for special events. It led us to invite everyone to deepen your involvement through comprehensive congregation wide drives that hadn't happened in many years – including a time and talent drive and a pledge drive.

In the life of this congregation and all congregations, interim time feels different and in some ways is different from the norm – from times when a settled pastor is shepherding the flock. There are specific tasks that interim pastors are trained to help congregations address, including some that require brutal honesty and a willingness to facilitate frank discussions about

things that are often off limits. Additionally, this in between time is also a time to try new things. Some of those worked well, some sounded great but didn't work at all, and many fell somewhere in between.

Today's Gospel is one many of us know well; it is often called the "Feed My Sheep" passage. It is the story of Peter's restoration. You'll recall that Peter had denied Jesus three times. Now, the Jesus gives Peter the chance to speak words of love three times, effectively countering each denial with an affirmation of faith.

The "Feed my Sheep" passage is used in many ways. It had never been among my favorites until I learned that the organization I serve in Dallas exists because of this passage.

Upon hearing this passage taught at a Lutheran church retreat, Donagene Christian was convicted to feed her community. In 1988 she responded to Jesus' invitation by bringing together 13 very different churches to form a new nonprofit called White Rock Center of Hope.

Because of her desire to feed all of the sheep in her neighborhood or in today's language we might say to feed anyone experiencing food insecurity in East Dallas, Hope is there when people need help. This year alone more than 12,000 unique people have benefitted, receiving hope in the form of groceries, clothing, and empowerment.

Feed my sheep is sometimes preached as a call to action, inviting all who follow the Way of Jesus to be involved in the work of caring for one another. And, we certainly should – often with simple acts and always with no expectation our efforts will go viral.

Feed my sheep can be stated as a charge to pastors at their ordination. It is a reminder that pastoring or shepherding is about servant leadership. In congregations, pastors are people who spiritually feed their flocks and who nurture and guide.

As your interim pastor I know that you know that I'm a little different. I'm different from your settled pastors because I'm here for a shorter season and with a different focus. And, yet, we share in common a desire to serve and to shepherd.

Over the last fourteen months that has meant being your pastor through the hard times and in the good times. I have sought to faithfully embody and proclaim Christ's love and to readily extend a ministry of presence to all. I have openly confessed my limitations and acknowledged my shortcomings.

And now as we come to the end, I find myself wondering about what comes next. I know it means we will say our goodbyes after worship today and I will continue serving White Rock Center of Hope. I know that Pastor Erik will serve soon begin as your next settled pastor. And, I trust that much fruitful ministry will occur as Advent enters its 50th year and for many years to come.

As I leave, I invite you to think about all of the people who will drive down South Cooper Street in the weeks, months and years ahead who have yet to discover Advent. I wonder what each of you will do and what all of you will do together to help many of them connect or reconnect to Jesus.

I close both this sermon and my time as your interim pastor with Paul's words from Philippians, which are today's Epistle lesson. This time, however, I'll read them from the NRSV until I get to the final verse where I'll make one small addition.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me – *especially any that were about loving and living like Jesus* – and the God of peace will be with you.¹

Amen.

¹ Philippians 4:4-9 NRSV with “especially any that were about living and loving like Jesus.”