

Beloved of God, grace and peace to you in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Advent is a season for truth telling. It's a season that asks How are you? and refuses to let you leave with a hurried fine. Advent looks you in the eye, reaches out to touch your shoulder, pulls you in for a strong hug when your eyes begin to brim over with tears. Advent sits with you in the silence as you struggle to express your deepest yearnings, your most peace-stealing fears.

And Advent joins with us in prayer as, together, we beg this world's Savior to come to us anew. Let's pray.

*Come now, O God, when our love is forsaken.*

*Come, when our bedrock of faith has been shaken.*

*Come, when our deepest of hopes are mistaken.*

*Come, Emmanuel. Come, Emmanuel.* (hymn in ACS by David Bjorlin)

"Be on guard," Jesus says, "so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life." Guard your hearts against worry. How are we doing with that?

I nearly made myself sick with worry in the days leading up to this new school year beginning. My youngest son was the only one in our family not yet vaccinated and my heart was overrun with worry. I don't know what this pandemic time has looked like for you, but I do know that our collective body—beloved of God—is feeling the weight of chronic anxiety, the weight of decision fatigue, the weight of change that we did not choose.

Change has happened here at Our Savior's—painful, unexpected change that you did not choose. You welcomed Kellie here with open arms and open hearts. You were willing to take on the weighty responsibility of being the first site to host a student in this new Accelerated Ministry Program, a collaboration between Wartburg College & Wartburg Seminary. All of us, I have to believe, entered into this partnership with high hopes, with a commitment to the wellbeing of one another, and with a deep desire for Kellie's time here to be a significant and beautiful piece of her formation as a called and ordained pastor.

I'm here today, as a representative of Wartburg seminary, to say thank you. Thank you for taking that leap of faith and welcoming Kellie so graciously into your midst. Thank you for accompanying her throughout these months, nurturing her in community. In truly significant and beautiful ways, you have helped to shape Kellie into the pastor God has called her to be. Thank you. I thank God for you.

I also confess to God and to you, that I failed in seeking your wisdom as I made the determination to end Kellie's placement here. I spoke with Kellie, with Pastor Jon, and with Kellie's advisory team at Wartburg Seminary, but I failed to reach out to you and for

that I am so sorry. I deeply regret the ways in which I have contributed to the pain of this loss for you.

We belong to a God who not only understands the heartache of dashed hopes but who also sympathizes with our weakness, who brings beauty out of brokenness, who offers abundant forgiveness so that we can love and serve our neighbors near and far without fear.

God hears us when we pray, with the psalmist, “remember, O Lord, your compassion and love, for they are from everlasting.”

We put our trust in God, who alone gives life. In the midst of my own failure and our collective grief, I can see God at work already in powerful ways. This experience is teaching us what is most important in the formation of our students, especially in this new program where there is still so much room to learn and grow, revise and dream anew. Kellie will continue in her academic program with no delay, but rather than being in a congregational site for the spring semester, she and Isabelle will be at home on the campus of Wartburg Seminary. This will offer her an opportunity that she would not have otherwise had as part of the Accelerated Ministry Program—time on our campus to be shaped there by the worshiping community of peers and professors, affording her time and space to grow into her pastoral identity before serving in a congregational context. Kellie’s presence on campus will be a gift not only to her, but also to the community at Wartburg as we will learn from and delight in Kellie as a beloved child of God, called to ministry and empowered with the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

I’m not sure we can actually guard our hearts against worry, but I do know that the word of Jesus creates what it declares. As he commands us to be on guard, he also enables and empowers us to do just that. The wholehearted, vulnerable, absolutely trusting spirit that lives in Jesus is ours as well. United with him, our hearts are not weighed down but are free to soar and to sing.

Advent sees your grief and your weariness, but it also sees your abiding trust in the God who shepherds us beside still waters and makes all things new.

On those days when the gentle glow of the Christmas tree lightens your heart, the laughter of the children is contagious, a word from a friend sparks the hope within you into a fire warm enough for the coldest days...Advent rejoices with you. Advent harmonizes beside you as you sing. Advent holds you close on brisk winter mornings, when the sky, just before the dawn, is that deep, rich, clarifying blue—and invites you to turn your gaze to the dawning light.

O Come, O come, Emmanuel. In strength and beauty come and stay. Amen.