



Lower Susquehanna Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

The Rev. James S. Dunlop
Bishop

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January 6, 2021
Epiphany of Our Lord

Dear Siblings in Christ,

Grace and peace from God, our Father and our Lord Jesus, the Christ. On this day, celebrating the feast of Epiphany, we remember the visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus. In Matthew's Gospel, we hear how *"they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road."* (Matthew 2:9-12 NRSV)

During this time of year, we join in the Magi's joy at the incarnation of Jesus, the Messiah; the presence of God among us. Through this gift of Jesus, we receive the promise of new life, the light that no darkness can overcome. Yet, in this moment of joy, the Magi are warned about the continued danger. In response, they alter their originally planned path and travel a different road. Immediately following these verses in Matthew's Gospel, we read how an angel calls Joseph in a dream to flee with Mary and Jesus to Egypt. Not plans they wanted to hear; however, this critical new path would provide protection to Jesus.

We have experienced the joy of Christmas celebrations, although different from previous years. Light is breaking in as COVID-approved vaccines are now being administered to healthcare workers in our area. In addition, we have seen a decrease in the number of cases since the Thanksgiving spike. New cases in Pennsylvania were over 12,000 on December 9; January 4 saw just over 8,000 new cases. However, the critical measure of community spread, percent of positive tests, remains high. Pennsylvania's community transmission rate is 15%, with less than 5% being an acceptable rate. Even more concerning is that our counties' transmission rates are even higher, including Adams County at 26.4% and York County at 18.2%. We continue to be in danger.

As I shared last month, I cannot tell you what action to take; however, I continue to recommend that all in-person gatherings, including worship in our buildings, be suspended at least through January. Community spread continues at dangerous levels. Physical gatherings put our congregations at risk; they put our neighbors at risk and contribute to the strain on our overburdened health care system. Our whole understanding of God's law rests on loving our neighbor. We must, for the love of neighbor, not gather. Like the Magi and Joseph, even in their joy, they chose the abundance of caution, traveling a different way.

Our health care systems expect the post-holiday spike in cases to occur by the third week in January. At that time, we will re-evaluate the extent of new cases and infection rates. In addition, we will be able to better assess the level of vaccinations. Although difficult, it is important for us to remain patient, monitor the developments, while choosing the safer path.

I am incredibly grateful for your creative work in proclaiming the gospel in this difficult time and pray for you each day. Please care for yourselves in body, mind, and spirit. In this season of Epiphany, we turn once again to the light of Christ to guide us. Knowing that God's love for us, revealed in the gift of Jesus, must be reflected in our love for our neighbors. Let us choose the safest road to protect and love those around us.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "James S. Dunlop". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "J".

† James S. Dunlop, bishop
Lower Susquehanna Synod ELCA