



# First Things – February, 2023

## To Africa, With Love

With the permission of the Board for Lay Ministry, I've been serving as the chairman of the Administrative Committee for Africa (ACA) for the WELS Board for World Missions.

When I graduated from the seminary, serving in world missions was the furthest thing from my mind. I was shocked when we got the call to serve in Zambia. But Sue and I soon learned that we loved both living and working for the Lord in Africa. When we finally came back to the USA after 21 years, it was for two reasons: 1. for our children's education and 2. because I wanted to serve as a pastor.

But after 5 years at Immanuel Lutheran on the north side of La Crosse, I was asked to serve on the Administrative Committee for the first time, as the "liaison" for Cameroon. I was happy to volunteer my time. And during the next four years I made two trips to Cameroon, getting to know this west African country that was so different from Zambia and Malawi where we had served in Central Africa.

In 2012, the Lord surprised us again, this time with a call to live and work in India. And we pretty much figured that we'd be there until retirement. But unexpectedly the Lord saw fit to remove me from India and to bring me here to La Crescent.

I had pretty much kissed world missions goodbye when Pastor Larry Schlomer, the Administrator of the Board for World Missions called in early January and asked me to take on the chairmanship of the "AC" again.

In the last year, I've realized that a lot has changed. During my time in Central Africa, missionaries served local congregations in Zambia and Malawi. Now, that work is done by national (African) pastors. And the missionaries now work with new and old partners throughout the continent of Africa.

The annual meeting for the One Africa Team (OAT) is coming up February 13-15. And since I was going to that meeting, we decided to have Sue come along and that we would spend a little extra time in Africa. Again, there are two reasons for it: 1. We want to experience Africa once again and 2. I want to get the opportunity to sit down with the mission families in their own homes, and to experience a little bit of what day-to-day life is for them in Zambia and Malawi today.

Here's our itinerary:

- January 30 – we travel down to Chicago by Amtrak and stay overnight
- January 31 – we leave in the morning on Ethiopian Airlines for a 14-hour (!) non-stop flight to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
- February 1 – after a brief layover in Addis Ababa, we'll take another four-hour flight to Lilongwe, the capital of Malawi.

We have three missionaries in Lilongwe: John Roebke and his wife Nancy, Dan Kroll and his wife Karen, and Mark Panning. We lived in Lilongwe for 13 years and are eager to see some old friends and to see how things have changed in 20 years.

February 6 – we fly from Lilongwe to Lusaka, the capital of Zambia

There are six missionaries in Lusaka: OAT team leader Howard Mohlke and his wife Leslie, John Hartmann and his wife Sharon (he's just accepted a call to serve in Tucson, AZ), Phil Birner (who will retire next year), Dan Witte and Deborah, Ben & Becky Foxen, and Keegan & Kate Dowling.

February 7-9 – we're flying down to Livingstone, Zambia by Victoria Falls – this is the "vacation" part of our trip to Africa.

February 16 – we fly back to Addis Ababa, and then back to Chicago, arriving on Friday morning

February 17 – we'll board Amtrak once again and return to La Crescent.

Please keep Sue and me in your prayers.

I was downright afraid when I received the call to Africa when I graduated. When I heard the news, it was the first time in my life that I felt my jaw drop to the ground. Eight years later, my jaw dropped to the ground once more. It was in a radiologist's office when Sue was pregnant and having an ultrasound scan. That's when I heard the words, "Look, two heads, twins!" There's one thing I've learned from these jaw-dropping experiences – the Lord turns our greatest fears into his greatest blessings.

## Looking Ahead to Worship

In the January newsletter I announced the themes of the Sundays through February 19. That's going to be changing a bit.

February 5 & 6 – [Matthew 5:13-20](#) – Pastor Bader's theme is *High Expectations*



February 12 & 13 - [Matthew 5:38-48](#) – Pastor Bader’s theme is *The Lord Teaches Us A Lesson About True Love*

February 19 – [Matthew 17:1-9](#) – **Transfiguration Sunday** – *Go Up And Listen To The Lord*

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, February 22. We will have midweek services on that day and during the Wednesdays in March at **6:30 PM**. Watch for details about possible Lenten services. The message theme for our Lenten services is *His Final Steps*:

*His final steps led to a tomb  
His final steps led to a dinner celebration  
His final steps led to his Father’s house  
His final steps led to a fig tree  
His final steps led to some Greeks  
His final steps led to his enemies*

## Mark Your Calendars

**April 22, 2023 – WELS Coulee Women’s Retreat** will take place at Luther High School – check out more information [HERE](#)

**May 22-25, 2023 – Bus Trip to Ark Encounter and Creation Museum** – bus is full, but you can be put on the waiting list.

On the **Sundays in Lent**, as well as on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, our messages will look at the Beatitudes which our Lord Jesus spoke on his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:1-13:

February 24 – ***Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***

March 5 – ***Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.***

March 12 – ***Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.***

March 19 – ***Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.***

March 26 – ***Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.***

Palm Sunday, April 2 – ***Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.***

Maundy Thursday, April 6 – ***Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.***

Good Friday, April 7 – ***Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.***

## Area WELS Update

Rock of Ages Lutheran Church in Rochester and Our Savior’s in Kasson continue to call pastors. St. John’s in Lewiston is calling a second pastor and the Rochester multi-site congregation – called Resurrection and Life – is calling a third pastor.

## February at First Lutheran

1. **Sunday Worship** – Pastor Bill Bader will be pinch-hitting for me while I’m in Africa, February 5 & 6 and 12 & 13.

2. **Sunday Bible Study** will NOT meet on February 5 and 12, but will resume on February 19. We'll be starting a series of studies on **10 Lies About God**. During the month of January, we'll be looking at the **teachings of other Christian church bodies here in America**
3. **CrossTalk**, our children's ministry, meets on Sundays after worship.
4. **Monday Bible Study** will not meet on February 6 and 13, but will resume on Monday, February 20 at 9:00 AM
5. **Confirmation Class** for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders will NOT meet on February 1, 8, and 15. During Lent, we will begin at **4:30 PM** on Wednesday evenings.
6. **Choir** rehearses on Wednesdays at 7:00 PM and after worship during Lent.
7. **Women Of the Word (WOW)** – plans are uncertain right now, watch for announcements
8. **First Women** will be meeting again on Saturday, February 11 at 10:00 AM.

**Reports from the January 29 Annual Meeting  
will be available in the entryway.**

## **Become A First Lutheran Facebook Follower**

We'll be supplementing what is on our church website ([KeepChristFirst.com](http://KeepChristFirst.com)) and what we send out in emails with more announcements and pictures on **our First Lutheran Facebook page**.

Check out the First Lutheran La Crescent Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/KeepChristFirst/>) and become a follower so you will keep up with what's happening.

God Bless,

*Pastor Mark*

*See you soon!*

