

If your social media is anything like mine, over the last two weeks you have seen a lot of people posting their year in reviews or their wrap ups from the various apps and platforms that they use. The most popular being the annual release of your Spotify Wrapped, the story of your musical tastes from the past year. It shows you the amount of time listened, your most popular songs, your favorite artists; they've made a pretty cool production at this point. You might have seen people's GoodReads Year in Books posts, showing you the books they've read, the longest, the shortest, the best, the worst. Instagram likes to make a whole thing of your Top Nine, your nine most popular pictures of the year. All of it is a way to look back, to reflect on the way you have spent your year, the things that have been important to you, the highlights that have woven throughout the last 365 days.

I've heard a lot of people as we're going into 2026 make comments about how this year has to be better than last year, how everything about last year was awful. There seems to be a general pessimism that overshadows our hearts when the New Year gets rung in, and while I would love to think it was unique to this past year, I think it happens most years. For some reason, we want to hone in on the negative, the awful, the less than stellar moments; maybe it's a way to make the New Year seem brighter with potential, I don't know, but I have found, it can leave your heart feeling

heavy rather than hopeful around this time of year, and so as I was pondering my sermon, I realized, I wanted to do a bit of a Trinity Wrapped for 2025. I know, trust me I know, that our inclination might want to be to typical New Year vibe this, to think about, point out all the crummy things that happened this year, and there is no denying that they happened, but when I look back on the year that was for us as a congregation, I want to think about the good, the hopeful, the beautiful. So, here we are, a version of our year in review...

We helped eight families have full Thanksgiving meals and ten foster kids in Newport News have a remarkable Christmas. We wrapped presents for families and fed over a hundred people at PORT. I don't have the exact number yet, but I'm pretty sure, we have once again exceeded 1,000 pounds of fresh produce to Thrive Peninsula, on top of the other gads of pounds of canned food we donated, courtesy of our rainbow food drive and our participation in their Hispanic Heritage month drive, as well as our regular donations. Carol and Sharon fill the little red food box *every single week*, sometimes twice a week, feeding our neighbors with consistency and dedication. We collected Toys for Tots and made ornaments to be dropped off to local organizations. We have supplied who knows how many

bouquets of flowers to patients at Riverside through Simple Sunflower. And that's just our social ministry stuff that I can remember.

We welcomed new members and saw Abbi Wessler and Luke Harry get confirmed. Our youth have been locked in multiple times and caroled from Port Warwick to Williamsburg Landing. Some of our kiddos had their first communion this year. We once again took over Salsa's for Galentine's Day with four generations around the table. Kelly Rummel was one of only five people in the Virginia Synod to receive the Serving Boldly award this year. Tricia Wessler was honored with a Humanitarian of the Year award by the VIPP. We read banned books and finished adult confirmation. We studied Bonhoeffer and watched movies about Jesus. We once again worked to educate ourselves on the lives of our neighbor with Black History and Pride Month events. We have created a welcome statement and received our official RIC status, making us only one of three Lutheran congregations in Hampton Roads to have that designation. Bible study has continued to be the most random, raucous group of Lutherans I have ever experienced. We have loved each other through surgeries and losses. We have sung hymns and passed the peace and prayed and gathered around this table as a family, a family where all have a place and all are fed and welcomed. Y'all...it was a good year...it was a hard year, but it was a good

year. Ministry happened inside and outside of this building. We were the church for our neighbors and that is not something to take lightly as we look to the year that lies before us, because it is riddled with more opportunities for being God's hands in the world.

Ya know, with our gospel text this week, I am usually focused on all the in the beginning stuff, Jesus being the Word and the light and all the hopeful things that God promises us Jesus is, but this time around...I kept thinking about John the Baptist. I kept thinking about that line, "He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light." That would be John the Baptist's ministry wrapped summary: Testified to the light in 30 AD. And it's true, John wasn't Jesus, but let's be real that's a pretty high bar to compare to. If his wrapped was "Wasn't Jesus for another year," well then yeah that would be pretty depressing, but when looked at through the lens of, "illuminated Jesus in the world, showed people Jesus, pointed to the light," well that's a pretty hopeful thing. The world needed John in his own unique way to help them realize just who Jesus was and just what was coming into the world. He wasn't the light, no, but he certainly held a mirror up to the light to show the world what was coming.

And that's where I think about us as we enter into this New Year. If our goal is to be Jesus, well then, when 2027 rolls around, we're going to

shrug our shoulders and go, whelp, another year of not hitting the mark. *But* if our goal is to testify to the light that scatters all darkness, to *show* that light to the world, to refuse to let the darkness win and engulf our hearts, if we dare to be hopeful in a world that sometimes flat out refuses hope, well then we are going to ring in another new year with joy. There are so many opportunities to show our neighbors who Jesus is, to show them that in a world gone mad there are pockets of joy, to show them that there are places where the light breaks through and helps us see love and hope.

My beloved siblings in Christ, may we dare to testify to what we know in this year 2026. Because what we know is that there is hope—hope in a God who said I love you so much I am going to send you my Son to bear your burdens, forgive your sins, and show you a new way of life. What we know is that there is love—enough love for all, that love is not pie, that love for one does not diminish love for another, that God loves *all*, and all means all. What we know is that there is grace—we’re going to mess things up, we’re going to say the wrong thing, we will probably fail spectacularly at something, and the message will continue to be, grace upon grace. What we know is that there is joy—joy in our community, joy in serving, joy in knowing that we belong to God. That is the energy we are bringing into this new year, an energy that says, we know who we are, we are those called and

claimed to go out and testify to the light, to feed the hungry, unburden the oppressed, heal the sick, lift up the voiceless, and dare to love those the world says we should ignore or hate.

This year is going to begin and end the same way every year begins and ends, with Christ, the Word made flesh, the Savior born for us, heralded by angels, visited by shepherds, born of a teenager who dared to say yes. That is the light that scatters the darkness, the light that was born into a poor family, who lived as a refugee fleeing violence, who touched lepers, ate with sinners, and died with forgiveness on his lips. We are those called to testify to that light, the light we trust, the light we hope for, the light we love, the light we pray we can mirror in the world. We are not the light, but we are called to testify to that light, so may be our most ardent prayer for this year that lies before us, not that we get it perfect, not that nothing bad happens, but that we try, we try to love, we try to hope, we try to give grace, we try to bring joy, we try to testify to the light that we know has come. **AMEN!!!**