

St. Pauli Lutheran Church
P.O. Box 944
Thief River Falls, MN 56701
historicstpauli.org

December 2025 Newsletter



Christmas Eve Services

Bell Ringing
4:30 pm

Services
5:00 pm

December 2025—Food Shelf Month

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
1	2	3 Confirmation Class 6:00 pm	4	5	6	
7 HOLY COMMUNION 9:15 Sunday School 10:30 Worship Services Pr. Darrel Cory	8	9	10 Confirmation Class 6:00 pm	11	12 WELCA Planning 3:30 pm	13
14 9:15 Sunday School 10:30 Worship Services Kevin Reich <i>CHRISTMAS TEA</i> 3:00 pm	15	16	17 Confirmation Class 6:00 pm	18 Church Council 7:00 pm SPCA Board 8:00 pm	19	20
21 Sunday School <i>Christmas Program</i> 9:15 am Practice 10:30 am Program Potluck: Lydia Circle	22	23	24	25	26	27
28 No Sunday School 10:30 Worship Services Kevin Reich	29	30	31	NEW YEAR'S EVE		

St. Pauli News in Detail



Christmas Eve

Bell Ringing
5:30 pm

Worship Services with Communion
5:00 pm

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Greeting and Ushering

Dec. 7 Gary Iverson
Dec. 14 Kari Iverson
Dec. 21 Faye Auchenpaugh (SS Program)
Dec. 24 Bruce and Shelley Mathson
Dec. 28 Staci Reay

Altar Preparation (Dec 7 and 24): Jan Strandlie

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Christmas Tea

December 14

3:00 pm at Country Schoolhouse

\$10 per person

You and your plus one are invited to our second Christmas Tea at the country schoolhouse.

Join us for sweet and savory dainties, hot coffee and tea. Door prizes for everyone, plus special prizes for:

- Most festive footwear
- Best Christmas hat
- Trivia Quiz winner

Men are welcome! Deadline to register with Cindy Cedergren is December 7th. Absolute limit: 24.

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Sunday School Christmas Program

December 21

10:30 am

Potluck follows with Lydia Circle serving

We always look forward to this annual event, which will be held this year on Sunday, December 21, during worship services.

December Milestones

Birthdays

Dec. 2	Katy Haugen
Dec. 5	Roxane Rondorf
Dec. 12	Heidi Haugen
Dec. 23	Jim Strandlie
Dec. 28	Ella Rondorf
Dec. 29	Neil Bugge
Dec. 30	Richard Geske

Anniversaries

Dec. 1	Jordan and Erin Rondorf
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Minutes of the St. Pauli Church Council

October 16, 2025

The St. Pauli Lutheran Church council held its monthly meeting on Thursday, October 16, 2025 at St. Pauli Church. Members present included Faye Auchenpaugh, Wade Benson, Sue Kotz, Jim Rondorf and Jana Prickett. Council President Faye Auchenpaugh called the meeting to order at 7:01 pm. Faye opened the meeting by reading a prayer prepared by Kevin Reich.

Approval of Agenda: Faye proposed additions to the agenda and the agenda was approved. M/S/C (Benson/Kotz)

Secretary's Report: M/S/C (Benson/Rondorf) to approve the Secretary's report for September 2025.

Treasurer's Report: M/S/C (Johnson/Rondorf) to approve the Treasurer's report for September 2025.

Checking Account Balance End of Aug 2025	\$24,878.82
Sep 2025 Revenue	3,395.00
Sep 2025 Expenses	(8,122.59)
Checking Account Balance End of Sep 2025	\$20,151.23
Other Account Balances End of Sep 2025	
Edward Jones	\$91,351.41
Memorial Fund	8,884.35
Savings	45,481.27
Total Acct Balances End of Sep 2025	\$165,868.26
Cemetery Association Funds End of Sep 2025	\$68,639.29

Pastor's Report: none

Other Reports:

WELCA – A successful fall event, the “7th Inning Stretch” by Steve Larson, was held on Sunday, October 5th. After the event, Steve made a \$100 donation in support of WELCA. Also, Sue Kotz noted that the cutting of diaper fabric will be rescheduled for a later date.

Old Business:

1. Cemetery Association
 - a. The new cross and plaque ordered by the cemetery association has arrived. Chad Tortsveit will work on securely attaching both items to the memorial pavilion.
 - b. Modifications will be made by Chad Tortsveit to retrofit the cemetery sign to be placed over the driveway once again.
2. Church exterior cleaning – it was determined that it wasn't necessary this fall.

New Business:

1. Gary Iverson suggested purchasing a new candle lighter. Council agreed to ask the Sunday School to purchase and present new candle lighter during service. Discussion was had about asking Gary Iverson to instruct the confirmation kids to light candles prior to every service.
2. WELCA has asked the council to consider spraying for flies and beetles in the spring and/or fall next year

3. WELCA to update handbook to include both husband and wife's names for the cleaning/ushering schedule. Updates will also be made to reminder letters.
4. Church council will need to discuss Nominating Committee at the November meeting
5. Pulpit supply - Pastor Darrel Cory will come back in November to handle communion if we are willing to be flexible on date. He agreed to take it month by month after November.

Next Meeting: Thursday, November 19th at 7:00 pm.

The meeting closed with the Lord's Prayer and adjourned at 7:37 pm.

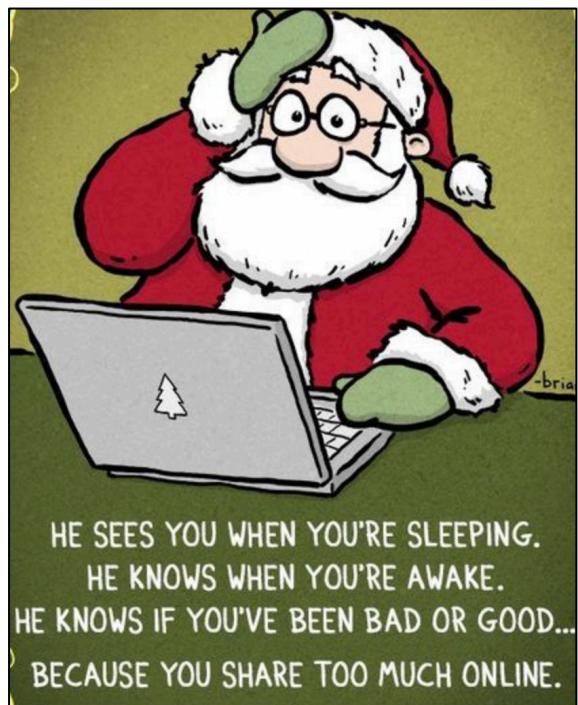
Jana Prickett, St. Pauli Church Council Secretary

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2025 “Fall Event” Donations

Net profits this year totaled \$1,853.16, but WELCA at their November 19th meeting decided to donate a total of \$2,200, as follows:

ELCA Good Gifts	\$ 500.00
ELCA Scholarship Fund	300.00
Heritage Center	200.00
BIO Girls	100.00
Pennington County Salvation Army	500.00
Northlands Rescue Mission	200.00
(plus misc. clothing donations)	
Little Brother/Little Sister Program	100.00
North Country Food Bank	100.00
Lincoln High School Prowler Pantry	200.00
	\$2,200.00



Kevin's Message on November 16, 2025

Luke 21:(1-4)5-19

1 He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; 2 he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. 3 He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; 4 for all of them have contributed out of their abundance. 5 When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, 6 "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down"; 7 They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?"; 8 And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!'; and, 'The time is near!'; Do not go after them. When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately. "; 10 Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; 11 there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. 12 But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. 13 This will give you an opportunity to testify. 14 So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; 15 for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. 16 You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. 17 You will be hated by all because of my name. 18 But not a hair of your head will perish. 19 By your endurance you will gain your souls."

The scripture readings we hear this time of year are not in sync with what is happening in our everyday lives; in the stores we visit, and in the ads, we see and hear. Things around us are gearing up for the shopping frenzy associated with the Christmas preseas. The lessons are gearing up for the battle between good and evil, God's kingdom and the forces of the Devil, even unto death.

Maybe you come to worship expecting to hear about pre-Christmas preparation, but what you hear is much different. You hear about global warfare, plagues, confrontation, betrayal, persecution, and endurance and salvation. In reality, the lessons may very well be in sync with our lives and what is happening in our world.

As we read through Luke, chapter 20 mentions many confrontations and conflicts Jesus has experienced with the authorities after entering Jerusalem. Including the first four verses of Luke 21 about the widow giving her last two coins to the Temple offering, provides an interesting transition to the "little apocalypse" we read further in Chapter 21. In Chapter 22 and following we hear about the arrest, trial, execution, and resurrection of Jesus.

The example of the widow's offering placed where it is by Luke, and the phrase, "but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on," sets the scene we will eventually hear about. It foreshadows what Jesus is about to do: giving of his all. Just like the widow, he holds nothing back for himself.

Most of us today do not know what it would be like to place our last two coins in an offering. Most of us have a few coins to spare, even if living on a fixed budget.

Years ago, I was visiting with Palmer and Irene Lovly of Goodridge about the tough times they experienced during their early married lives. Palmer shared a personal story. Irene knew Ladies Aid was to meet at Ekelund Lutheran. She wanted to go but she knew an offering would be taken and she had nothing to put in the offering. Therefore, she did not think she should go. Palmer told her, "You can go without having anything to put in the offering." But this was not acceptable to Irene. Because of her desire to go to the meeting, she scoured the house until eventually she found a dime. Irene went to Ladies Aid and put her one and only dime in the offering.

What an action of faith. Irene kept no money for her and Palmer. Just like the widow and just like Jesus; she gave her all. How many of us would come here today with our last dime in our pocket and put it in the offering plate when it is passed? Would we have the faith?

Even in her poverty the widow had an option having two coins. She could have given only one coin and kept the other for herself. But she, like Jesus, does not give in half measure. She, like Jesus, holds nothing back.

Jesus saw rich people at the temple putting their money into the treasury. One can assume they were making some kind of display as to call attention to their assumed generosity. But it was the poor widow who Jesus noticed. He not only noticed her but knew she put her last two coins into the offering. If she would have given one, it would have been half of her money, but she chose to give it all.

Jesus did not say the widow gave more than any one of the rich people. He said she gave more than all of them. They gave out of their abundance; she gave sacrificially, out of her poverty. Jesus is saying that, before God, the spirit of giving determines the value of the gift more than the amount of the gift. God appreciates and loves the cheerful giver.

God does not need our money. It is our privilege to give to him. In doing so it is good for us, not because it is good for God. The widow challenged the mindset that says, "I'll give when I have more." The widow had virtually nothing, yet was a giver. This means that we can all please God with our giving just as much if not more than the rich man can please God with his giving. Whatever we give sacrificially to God, he sees it and is pleased.

In reading verse 6, it is easy and probably correct, to view it as a forecast by Jesus of the dreadful things to come. "As for these things that you see (the Temple and its beautiful surroundings), the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another, all will be thrown down."

In Jesus' time on earth, it was customary for fathers who knew they were nearing the end of their earthly life to gather their sons, making their last will and testament. They would sum up their life, provide blessings, and often forecast future events. Those living in near death could often forecast future events because they were departing this life and entering the

life to come. They would experience glimpses into the life to come and report back to those who would be their survivors.

One can also read verse 6 and have a common-sense observation that all things material have a limited life.

Regardless of how grand something may be or how well it is adorned with beautiful finishings, it has a limited life.

Eventually it will deteriorate and crumble or be destroyed.

Jesus made an astounding prediction about the Temple. It was the center of Jewish life for almost 1,000 years. King Herod had doubled the temple mount area, increasing it to approximately 36 acres. His rebuilding took over 80 years with the construction being finished in A.D. 63. The temple was a very revered place.

The temple was not only big, it was beautiful. It was adorned with gold plates on the outside. Where there was not gold it was marble, so white, from a distance it would be mistaken for snow. The Temple had become an idol. It had more meaning to some of the people than God did.

But Jesus was not bashful to state that he was much greater than the Temple. Jesus says that not one stone will be left upon another. Even in its grandeur, the Temple will be dismantled one stone at a time.

About 40 years after Jesus' prediction, only seven years after its completion, the Temple was destroyed. It burned during the takeover by the Romans. Due to the heat of the fire, the gold melted and ran into the cracks of the walls. In order to retrieve the gold, the Roman commander ordered the Temple be dismantled one stone at a time; just as Jesus predicted.

Once again, we are made aware of how the disciples are not paying close attention to what Jesus is saying. He just gets done commenting on the relative insignificance of the offerings made by the rich, and the disciples are admiring the beauty and greatness of the temple. We are too easily distracted by what we see, forgetting material things are only temporary regardless of their magnificence.

Many scholars believe the details stated in verses 7 through 19 may or may not be the actual words of Jesus. But the words are certainly the later experiences of his followers as they recorded what happened. Jesus' words were remembered and recorded so that the people of the time, and us, might be wise in the days to come.

Whether or not Luke's words are really Jesus' words is not what is most important. What is important is what we are told in the details of the scripture.

- Everything in this world will pass. Verses 5-6
- There will be false teachers and do not be led astray by them. Verses 7-8
- There will be disasters and tragedies but do not be afraid. Verses 9-11
- Following me, Jesus, will put one at odds with the people who run this world and even one's own kinship. Do not be surprised by or avoid conflict. Verses 12, 16-17
- There will be a time when one will have to account for why one is my, Jesus', disciple. Do not worry about it ahead of time. I, Jesus, will be by your side providing you all the wisdom one will need at that time. Verses 13-15
- Believe me, Jesus, one will not perish. By having endurance, one will save your true self. Verses 18-19

Christians must expect to suffer; it is part of their allegiance to God. This suffering will not only come from outside the church but also from within, and within families. It can be difficult to understand that people will be hated for the sake of Jesus, the one who was and is love and goodness, offered to all.

Jesus assures us that patience possesses our souls. The Greek word for patience means a strong endurance, not a passive waiting. We will endure if we trust the promise of Jesus.

Gracious God, continue to provide us with the patience we need to endure. Provide us with a trusting heart and soul, trusting in your Son Jesus, each and every day. Amen!

THANKOFFERING

We always have such good programs for WELCA's Thankoffering every November, and this year was no exception. Below are just two of the readings we had, based on Psalm 100:1-5, Psalm 95:2-7, and Colossians 3:15-17.

- Funny how \$10 looks so big when you take it to church and so small when you take it to the store.*
- Funny how big an hour or so serving God and his church looks and how small 60 minutes are when even twice that time is spent playing golf, fishing, bridge, etc.*
- Funny how laborious it is to read a chapter in the Bible and how easy it is to read two or three hundred pages of a best-selling novel.*
- Funny how we look upon reading our church magazine as a real chore and yet pore eagerly through hundreds of pages of the newsstand magazines.*
- Funny how we can't think of anything to say when we pray and don't have any difficulty thinking of things to talk about on the phone to a friend or over a back fence to a neighbor.*
- Funny how we seem to have difficulty learning to worship God and find it easy to learn to do so many other things.*
- Funny how it seems we need two or more weeks to fit an event at the church into our schedule and are always able to adjust it for a social invitation at the last minute.*
- Funny, isn't it. Rather, it merely reflects the way we are living these days with our priorities mixed up and a "shoulder shrug" for God and his church.*

(* We responded with, "Open our hearts in service to you.")

COLLECTION OR OFFERING?

When your gifts are brought to God's altar, is it a collection or an offering? What's the difference? Is there one?

The name we give that part of our worship service means nothing unless we know the meaning of the words. The emphasis in the word *collection* is on the amount of money needed. It leads to the type of thinking expressed by "What is my *fair* share?"

The emphasis in the word *offering* is on God, the one to whom we are giving. It is based on our relationship to him, not on some human organization and its needs.

We *give* an offering; we *take up* a collection. We are personally involved in an offering, not so in a collection. We worship with our offering; we merely gather funds in a collection. Do you have a collection or an offering?

New Candle Lighter donated by the Sunday School

The Sunday School children have been very generous this year. Not only did they donate \$50 toward the Fall Event, but they also purchased a new candle lighter to replace the old one that had become a bit tatty.

This is in keeping with the tradition of our Sunday School students giving to the church. In 1911, they gave the baptismal at a cost of \$9.00. This is the equivalent of approximately \$306.92 in today's dollars based on the cululative price increase due to inflation.

Confirmation students Elsa Haugen and Ella Rondorf processed with the new lighter at the beginning of services on November 9th, followed by their teacher, Gary Iverson. They then each lit a candelabra under the watchful supervision of Gary.

Thank you, Sunday School!



Lincoln High School Christmas Concert – Monday, December 8th, 7:00 pm

Our very own Gabe Haugen is a member of the choir!



U.S. and German soldiers shared Christmas Eve dinner at height of WWII

By Dave Kindy (davekindy.com), December 24, 2022

German prisoners of war carry the body of an American soldier through deep snow during the Battle of the Bulge, in the Ardennes sector of Belgium in late 1944. Nearby, German and U.S. soldiers shared a Christmas Eve dinner.

On Christmas Eve 1944, heavy snow blanketed the Hürtgen Forest in Germany, near the Belgian border. Inside a tiny cabin deep in the woods, 12-year-old Fritz Vincken and his mother, Elisabeth, listened to warplanes and artillery shells as the Battle of the Bulge neared its climax.

As they tried to make the most of an inauspicious holiday, they couldn't anticipate that a true Christmas miracle would soon come to their modest home.

Months earlier, the mother and son had moved to the isolated cottage when their home in nearby Aachen had been destroyed by Allied bombing. For Fritz, who first recounted his story in a 1973 article for *Reader's Digest*, the remote cabin offered a reprieve from the death and destruction of the war.

They were alone because Fritz's father, Hubert, who baked bread for the German army, had recently been called into service as Allied armies pressed closer to Germany. Fritz and Elisabeth held little hope that Hubert would be able to join them for Christmas Eve dinner.

Less than two weeks earlier, the tranquility of the Hürtgen Forest had been shattered when Field Marshall Gerd von Rundstedt unleashed 30 divisions hidden in the nearby Ardennes Forest of Belgium for the last major German offensive of World War II. Vicious fighting erupted across the Western Front, including around the Vincken cabin, as Allied armies desperately tried to repel the surprise attack amid blizzard conditions.

Part of a U.S. Army convoy to the front line stopped for rest in a snow-covered valley in Belgium on Dec. 22, 1944, during the Battle of the Bulge. The men were reinforcements for front line units holding back the German counterthrust.

As mother and son prepared Christmas Eve dinner, they were startled by a knock on the door. The closest neighbors were miles away. With Fritz by her side, Elisabeth opened the door and saw three young soldiers, all armed. Two were standing; the third lay in the snow with grievous wounds. The men spoke a language unknown to the Vinckens. Fritz realized they were Americans.

"I was almost paralyzed with fear, for though I was a child, I knew that harsh law of war: Anyone giving aid and comfort to the enemy would be shot," Fritz later remembered.

Elisabeth also knew the penalty for harboring Americans. But the soldier bleeding in the snow was young enough to be her son. She motioned for all three to enter the tiny cabin. Fritz and his mother helped the severely injured man into a bed and tended to his wounds.

None of the Americans spoke German, but Elisabeth and one of the men communicated in French. Elisabeth, seeking to stretch their meager meal to accommodate the guests, told

Fritz, "Go get Hermann." Hermann was a rooster being fattened in case Hubert made it home for dinner. He was named for Hermann Göring, a Nazi leader for whom Elisabeth had little regard.

Suddenly, there was another knock on the door. Fritz opened it, expecting to see more Americans lost in the forest. Instead, he was alarmed to find four German soldiers. The young men had become separated from their unit and were looking for shelter from the cold.

Elisabeth went outside to speak with the new arrivals, telling them they were welcome to spend the night but had to leave their weapons outside. When the young Wehrmacht corporal started to object, Elisabeth looked at him sternly and said, "It is the Holy Night and there will be no shooting here."

While the Germans placed their weapons next to the woodpile, Elisabeth went back into the cabin and returned with the Americans' guns. When they were all gathered inside, the enemies stared at each other in stony silence, wondering how long this temporary truce would last.

Elisabeth took command of the scene, Fritz wrote in *Reader's Digest*, and had the combatants mingle close together. She realized that a meal of Hermann wasn't going to satisfy such a large group, so she told her son to get additional ingredients for the chicken soup she was preparing.

"Quick, get more potatoes and some oats," he remembered her saying. "These boys are hungry, and a starving man is an angry one."

When the wounded American started moaning, one of the Wehrmacht soldiers examined him. He had been a medical student before the war and realized the injured man had lost a lot of blood. "What he needs is rest and nourishment," the German said.

Eventually, everyone began to relax. Both groups of soldiers searched their backpacks for food to share. The Wehrmacht corporal contributed a bottle of red wine and loaf of rye bread.

Soon the soup was served. Elisabeth bowed her head and said grace. Fritz remembered seeing tears in his mother's eyes and noticed that some of the soldiers wept too, perhaps thinking of their families far away or feeling grateful that they wouldn't have to fight on Christmas Eve.

The next morning, the soldiers prepared to go back to war. A stretcher was crafted from a pair of poles and Elisabeth's tablecloth to transport the wounded American. As the U.S. soldiers checked a map, the German corporal showed them how to get back to their own lines. They then shook hands and headed off in opposite directions.

"Be careful, boys," Elisabeth called after them. "I want you to get home someday where you belong. God bless you all!"

Not long afterward, the war ended and the Vinckens were reunited. Fritz immigrated to the United States in 1959 and later opened a bakery in Honolulu. Hubert died in 1963, and Elisabeth followed in 1966.



Troops of the 82nd Airborne Division travel a snow-covered fire break in the woods as they move forward in the Ardennes region in Belgium on Jan. 28, 1945. (AP)

Fritz always hoped to meet the soldiers again, though he knew his chances of seeing the Germans were not good, given their staggering casualty rate at the end of the war. He thought publicity might help, starting with his 1973 *Reader's Digest* article, which President Ronald Reagan mentioned in a 1986 speech. In 1995, Fritz appeared on national television, telling his story on "Unsolved Mysteries" to host Robert Stack.

A nursing home chaplain in Frederick, Md., saw the episode and remembered a resident telling a similar story. He

contacted the TV producers about Ralph Blank, a World War II veteran who had been a sergeant with the 8th Infantry Division in 1944.

In 1996, Fritz flew to Maryland to meet with Blank, who was 76 and in poor health. They recognized each other immediately and reminisced about their shared evening of peace during a hellish war.

The reunion was filmed and shown on "Unsolved Mysteries" later that year. At one point during the episode, Ralph turned to Fritz and said, "Your mother saved my life." For the former German boy who was now an American citizen, that moment was the high point of his life.

"Now I can die in peace," he told the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*. "My mother's courage won't be forgotten, and it shows what goodwill will do."

Neither man lived to see the 2002 TV premiere of "Silent Night," a retelling of their 1944 encounter. Ralph died in 1999 at age 79, and Fritz died in 2001 at 69. (The families of both men could not be reached for comment.)

In a 1997 interview, Fritz spoke of the lessons he learned from the Christmas miracle.

"The inner strength of a single woman, who, by her wits and intuition, prevented potential bloodshed, taught me the practical meaning of the words 'good will toward mankind,'" he said, adding, "I remember mother and those seven young soldiers, who met as enemies and parted as friends, right in the middle of the Battle of the Bulge."

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Tuck's Winter Tour

by Dr. Ralph F. Wilson

"Winter, a lingering season, is a time to gather golden moments and embark upon a sentimental journey." John Boxwell, Yale professor

Just moving in? Well, welcome to the Northland. Call me Tuck. Everyone does. You're a long way from home, kid. Anyone give you the lowdown? Each person will lay it out a little differently. They say no two snowflakes are alike. Well, no two views of winter are quite the same either. But I have what I believe to be the simplest outline for the coming season if you're up for it; just a quick overview of what all you're in for. It's the brochure they should've given you at the border.

Looking at the calendar, winter is gearing up to introduce itself to you in less than a month, so it's good to get on top of it now. I'll try to make this as concise as possible.

I used to spend a fair amount of time wondering how Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's ended up bundled together in one short five-week stretch that happened to coincide with the first five weeks of winter. But, regardless, the result has been a brilliant diversion to keep people's attention off this long, cold, dark chapter we're entering.

If looming winter lets in a distant whisper just after Halloween, it delivers a welcome holiday respite right at the starting line. And not just any holiday, mind you, one that's synonymous with the warmth of family, filled with expressions of love and gratitude. All this coming right when it might be tempting for some to feel melancholy over the loss of the sun and the long, cold march ahead.

Thanksgiving says, "Hey, don't be getting all gloomy on me now. We've set up a little time off work for you, as well as an opportunity to relax with relatives around a banquet table, so you can recall all the fine things that have come your way this past year. Pay no attention to the rallying cold and dimming light. Focus on the turkey, and Aunt Kay's parlor games.

The thing is, it works. It's too difficult to see winter's impending gloom when Thanksgiving presents the most popular secular holiday of the year. And the diversions don't let up there. When Thanksgiving's long weekend is over and it's back to work, it's suddenly "The Holiday Season."

"Don't focus on that 4:30 p.m. sunset," the chorus shouts. "Focus on the twinkling-colored lights going up on the houses and businesses. Revel in the spirit of giving, that's growing in intensity right alongside that growing darkness. And repeat these lyrics" "City sidewalks, busy sidewalks, dressed in holiday style." Or my favorite line, "Children laughing, people passing, meeting smile after smile..." you know the song.

What's that? You're not a Christian? If not, a slew of different cultures around the world have a sacred and festive take on this time of year. You can substitute anything you like, but the lights and the joy and the music work a kind of magic for most everyone, artificially manufactured or genuine. The spirit of the holiday season does infect a fair percentage of folks,

religious or not. It's contagious, and it creates a palpable energy that gives a boost to the mood.

Anyway, at this point, winter is still brand new. There hasn't been time for it to wear on anyone yet, and the holidays have most everyone focusing attention on house gatherings, toasts, and end-of-the-year office parties. The giddiness can get one thinking back to childhood, and many of those early memories will warm your heart. TV specials will fill the masses with holiday cheer, and the snow outside will tastefully enhance the tableau. The thing is, snow is supposed to be here. An L.A. panorama would be a rank absurdity right now, a harsh affront to the senses. Snow isn't a hardship at this point. It's what we demand for the holidays. It's a Hollywood setting straight out of *It's a Wonderful Life*.

And just about the time Christmas passes, out attention moves on to yet a third bacchanalia. New Year's Eve offers the promise of a fresh start and the completion of something quite monumental, the year in a human life. Suddenly, a new set of thoughts occupies the mind, once again keeping at bay all thoughts of the sinking temperatures and blanketing darkness. Reflections on the year that has passed, and hope for the year to come, pepper conversations. Drinks flow and songs are sung, and the party that started with Thanksgiving Day wraps up with shouts, hugs, kisses, and merry midnight revelry.

For many, that run from Thanksgiving through New Year's Day is a vertiginous, almost dream-like entry into the winter season. But it comes with a bracing bend in the road that leaves one in a wholly different state of mind, come the morning of January 2. A glaring reality drops down with a dull and ominous thud.

I've always described this next stretch of winter as "The Long 90." This is the number of days, give or take, that Northerners will have to trudge through to arrive at that first welcoming spring breeze. And they will be days without significant holiday diversions, and days where winter will not seem so fresh, and they'll include the coldest days of the year. It's a startling come-down from the holiday razzle-dazzle, and it seems to be a major flaw in the grand design. As brilliant as the clustering of Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's was, The Long 90 represents a debacle. There's no kind way to put it: The party is over.

There are three ways people tend to look at the vista staring at them come January 2. Some feel relief. The holidays were just too demanding. Spending time, energy and money, maintaining the rituals, and keeping up with the festive toasts and glad-handing was just plain exhausting. January presents an opportunity for welcome rest. Like a bear entering a winter den, these people treat the month like a cave to relish, hunkering down and doing very little. In fact, many of us feel we are being given cosmic permission to do very little. We did plenty in December. Too much, some would argue. And it's now the coldest month of the year. It offers the perfect excuse to let the gears grind to a halt and to deliver a giant exhale. The month is tailor-made for inertia, and it's a gift from the gods for any and all introverts.

But there's a second group that views the world from this perch as a wonder to behold, a wild gift to the senses, a playground to enjoy, an inviting contrast to the other seasons. These are people who take full advantage of those winter offerings available no other time of year. They feel lucky to

live where such treasure is laid out before them. They're not a crowd your average Hawaiian will understand, but you'll do well to learn from them. They'll overhaul your outlook and readjust your attitude.

Of course, there are plenty who find themselves someplace darker. On January 2 this third group takes on the full weight of winter for the very first time. If they didn't prepare for it, if winter is a season they just try to "get through," on their way to enjoying life on the other side, this moment is the sobering and somber wakeup call. What lies ahead are 90 days of stark white landscape, bare trees, and arctic air. Ninety days to get to those first mild, sunny April afternoons. Life may be short, and each day may be precious, but to these people the next three months could be skipped entirely if someone had the power to make their life a bit shorter.

I feel for these people. They are not where they belong. The fates have made a blunder placing them here. Phoenix is waiting, and Boca Raton. Corpus Christi is calling, and its sales pitch is echoed by Santa Barbara and Santa Fe. When an entire season in the Northland is viewed as a growling predator outside your window, or a gray-walled prison, it's time to pack up the kids and blow town, like the dustbowl refugees fleeing Oklahoma for California's promised land. The rest of us understand. You have a mindset we've encountered often. We've stopped trying to talk you into a new perspective. We realize there are different types of people on this earth, and some were never meant to be Northlanders. You deserve joy. You deserve to find the climate soulmate you meant to partner with on this planet.

But if you do stick around, and if you do make it through January, the good news is that the worst is over, my friend.

February is best known for what it's not: January and March. It's not the coldest, harshest month that kicks off every new year, and it's not the last tired strides at the end of a long road. It's the month that firmly separates those who enjoy winter from those who tolerate it.

If you enjoy the outdoors in winter, February will give you plenty of snow and plenty of reasonably mild days—even a lot of sunshine. But if you've been waiting out the winter, it's getting old by now, and your failure to not have done more with the season than watch it through a window is starting to take its toll. You thought winter would move faster. But nothing moves fast when you're staring at it. This is when the grudging toleration crowd can tolerate, grudgingly, no more. If they have the cash and the time, they seek a few sunny days in Miami or San Diego, to give their spirit some defibrillation. And all of these escape artists ask themselves, on that trip, why they don't just live where they're only visiting. Each one will contemplate a move. If not soon, certainly before they die. These are not fun people to hang around on a cold snowy day. They're developing an irritable edge and seem mildly depressed. I've often thought we should have a separate neighborhood just for such residents, a commiseration community with a well-stocked bar.

Now, if you're not part of the grudging-toleration crowd, but find yourself a hearty winter enthusiast, February can be a blissful playground. The days are getting longer, and that growing daylight feels good bouncing off the white. You'll get days below zero at some point in this month, but you'll also see temps above freezing. You'll get little hints that spring is just weeks away and it will fuel you to enjoy the remaining

days of winter while you can. You'll make sure you start doing the things you told yourself you'd do more often, way back in November, when giving yourself that winter pep talk. The ice skates will come out, the cross-country skis will slip on, the fishing poles will make it onto the ice, the snowmobile will fire up, or the snowshoes will get a workout. Winter is fleeting, damn it, get out there, there are activities you could be enjoying that you'll never be able to come spring.

The entire season will wrap up with one final sigh come March. You'll damn near smell the looming thaw. So close, yet so far. April is sitting on the flip side of that calendar page, but you're now in the snowiest month of the year, so prepare for spring to seem further away than ever. You've got one thing going for you, however, if you're someone who struggles with the length of the season. You have the start of daylight-saving time. This is the extraordinary gift of March. March will bring longer days anyway, just by its placement nine weeks past the winter solstice, but daylight-saving time will kick that sun into the sky well after sunset, and that's the first thrill of March. Sun in the sky after supper brings an infusion of energy. It is the light shining at the end of a tunnel. Some will ride it blithely, like a Tunnel of Love at an amusement park. Others will ride it like claustrophobics in a mineshaft, but both are feeling the same energetic shift. Spring is arriving soon, a time when the angels will come out to dance like 17-year-olds at the prom, and all of nature will join in choreographed splendor.

There you go, my friend. There's your preview of what's ahead. Get ready. Come at winter with a strategy. Greet it with your arms wide open. Or, if this wakeup call just woke you too harshly, get a condo in Tampa.

When you just can't be bothered to put in the effort



JÓLABÓKAFLÓÐIÐ: “CHRISTMAS BOOK FLOOD”

Cozy evenings, the joy of gifting, and the love of reading is the essence of Jólabókaflóðið, Iceland's cherished Christmas Eve tradition. This unique cultural practice, deeply rooted in the nation's love for literature and storytelling, is celebrated on Christmas Eve and revolves around giving and receiving new books, often accompanied by delicious treats like hot cocoa, Icelandic chocolates, or even a special beer. The night is

spent in the company of loved ones, reading and sharing stories, creating memories that last a lifetime.

Icelanders exchange books as gifts on Christmas Eve and spend the evening reading. This beloved tradition emerged during World War II, an era marked by economic constraints and strict currency restrictions across Europe. In Iceland, these conditions and the relative leniency on paper imports made books an accessible and highly valued gift choice. Unlike other commodities, paper was not rationed in Iceland during the war, paving the way for books to become the preferred Christmas gift.

The tradition's official start was in 1944, aligning with Iceland's break from Denmark. This year saw the debut of 'Bókatíðindi' (the Book Bulletin), a catalog listing new books for the Christmas season and sent free to Icelandic homes, igniting the festive book-giving spirit.

But Iceland's story-loving roots reach further back, to the 9th century. The celebrated Icelandic Sagas, epic narratives from the 12th to 15th centuries, were first passed down orally before being written, embodying the essence of Icelandic culture and the longstanding storytelling tradition.

Why do Icelanders love books?

Iceland's love affair with books is deeply rooted in its culture and history. With a near 100% literacy rate, Icelanders don't just read – they immerse themselves in literature. This nation leads the world in terms of writers, books published, and books read per person. Imagine this: about **1 in 10 Icelanders will publish a book in their lifetime**, and a third of the population reads books daily! That's impressive and reflects their deep-seated passion for writing and storytelling.

This rich literary culture has historic beginnings. Back in 1786, when the first Icelandic library was established, schools were scarce. Icelanders turned to books for self-education, nurturing a love of learning that has thrived.

Fast forward to the present, and you'll find that reading remains a cornerstone of Icelandic life. Nearly every home in Iceland – 97% of them, to be exact – houses at least one book. In 2021 alone, Iceland published an astounding **834 fiction titles**. For a country with a population of just over 360,000, these numbers are remarkable, underscoring the significance of literature and storytelling in Icelandic society.

Recent trends in reading habits provide further insights. A survey by the Icelandic Literature Center revealed an increase in average reading – **2.3 books per person per month**, up from 2. Young Icelanders are increasingly exploring literature in languages other than Icelandic, and audiobooks have become popular.

Facts about Icelanders and books

- Iceland publishes more books per capita than any other country, with around 80% of its annual book sales happening during the Jólabókaflóð period.
- The tradition of evening storytelling and reading has been vital for education and literacy since their early days.
- Icelanders read an average of 2.3 books per month.
- Icelandic youth frequently read in languages other than Icelandic.
- A vast majority (76%) believe it is essential for Icelandic literature to have access to public support and funding.

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