

1. Graduates of the class of December 2013; your family and friends—especially those who have traveled from afar to be with us on this most happy occasion; Faculty, Staff and Administrators; and Members of the Board of Regents of Wisconsin Lutheran College.
2. Winter, as you know, is a dark time. This morning in Milwaukee, the sun rose above Lake Michigan at quarter after seven. It traveled across the southern sky, reaching its culmination—its highest point—around noon. At this moment it was just twenty-four degrees above the southern horizon. Twenty four degrees is only about the width of two fists held at arms' length. The sun did not even come close to traveling directly overhead. It proceeded across the southern sky, hugging the horizon until it set in the west at quarter after four. You probably rose to darkness; ate your breakfast in darkness; and after finishing your work, returned home to darkness; and we are now here together in this room surrounded by the darkness of night.
3. But it is going to get darker. Technically speaking, it is not even winter yet. As many of you are probably aware, winter begins in just over a week, on December 21st. On this, the day of the winter solstice, the sun will shine for less than nine hours. The sun will be below the horizon for almost two-thirds of the day. And this is a best case scenario. It could be cloudy; there could be a blizzard, or worse yet, an ice storm. It will be the darkest day of the year.
4. What you may not know is that the ancient church fathers specifically chose the winter solstice as the date on which to celebrate the incarnation of our Savior. That is right: December 25th, you see, was the date on which the winter solstice *used to fall* according to the ancient Julian calendar.
5. The Julian calendar was adopted by the ancient Romans in 45 B.C. It was only in the sixteenth century, at the time of The Council of Trent and Pope Gregory XIII that the Gregorian calendar supplanted the Julian calendar. Today the Gregorian calendar is the most widely used civil calendar in the world. According to the Gregorian calendar, the winter solstice now falls on December 21st, *not* December 25th, as it did according to the Julian calendar—but the Western Church decided to just keep celebrating Christmas on the 25th of December.
6. Now, *why* would the ancient church fathers have chosen to celebrate Christmas on December 25th, the day of the winter solstice, the darkest day of they year? It was not by whim or by chance. Their reason was explained in the seventh century by a scholar and monk named the Bede. The Venerable Bede, as he is now called, lived and worked at a monastery on a tiny island off the west coast of Northumbria, in what is now Scotland.
7. Bede wrote a book on Ecclesiastical history, a number of liturgical works, poetry, books on grammar and rhetoric—the kinds of things that scholars do. Bede also wrote a book on the topic of astronomy and its use in constructing an accurate calendar. After all, it is bad enough when you show up late to class because your alarm clock is off by ten minutes. Imagine if you showed up late for Easter church service because your calendar was off by ten days.

8. Bede explained the choice of the date of Christmas in this way: He said: is it not true that in our darkest hour, we most eagerly yearn for the light? And is it not true that Christ brought light into this sin-darkened world? Would it not, then, be most fitting for the Church to celebrate Christmas on the winter solstice: the darkest day of the year?
9. For just as the winter solstice marks a turning point, after which the days grow brighter and brighter, so, too, the incarnation is the pivot, the fulcrum, the turning point of the history of the world. This is expressed in the beloved advent hymn:

Behold, a branch is growing  
Of loveliest form and grace,  
As prophets sung, foreknowing;  
It springs from Jesse's race  
And bears one little Flow'r  
In midst of coldest winter,  
At deepest midnight hour.

10. I remember when I graduated from College I was informed that I was now entering “the real world.” This admittedly surprised me a bit: after all, what other world is there? Now it is true that as one grows older he or she becomes more personally acquainted with grief, loss and decay. But we all are born, live and die in the same world. The laws of nature apply to us all. The sun rises and sets on the wicked and the just. We all share a common ancestor, Adam, who ate the forbidden fruit. And Christ died for all.
11. Graduates of the class of 2013, when you leave Wisconsin Lutheran College, you will be entering a sin-darkened world. You have spent the last several years living, working and studying at this College. You have learned to seek—and to find—echoes of the divine all around you: in the motion of the sun and moon, in the mind and habits of living creatures, in the eyes of the sick and lonely, in literature and language and education, in art and music, in history and philosophy.
12. Here at Wisconsin Lutheran College you have been trained to discern and to judge all things from the perspective of a Christian world-view. This Christian world-view is what guided and animated the ancient church fathers in constructing a calendar which proclaims the life, death and resurrection of Christ year in and year out.
13. Graduates, carry this light in your mind and in your heart, and proclaim it to others. Remember that everyone, whether Christian or not, is living in the year of our Lord.
14. Congratulations, Class of 2013. And may the Lord preserve you in the faith, and bless you in all that you do. Thank you.