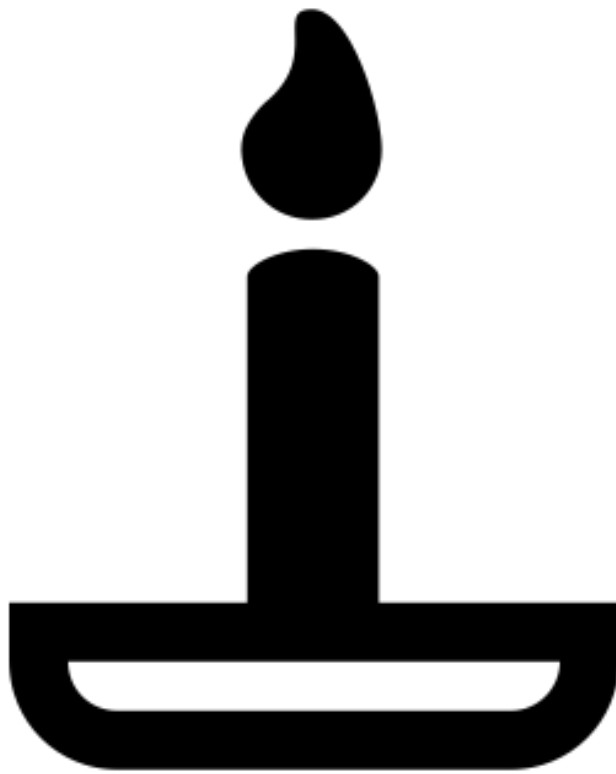


Advent Devotions

2023



Written by the Pastors of the St. Cloud Circuit (LCMS)

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, the one who arrived, still arrives, and will arrive again (the Latin word *Adventus* means arriving)! We, the pastors of the St. Cloud Circuit, hope and pray these devotions are beneficial to you during this season of Advent.

Here are a few tips for reading these devotions – read the verses of Scripture *before* you read the devotion, and read those verses *out loud*. The verses assigned for each devotion are intentionally short, and that allows for deep reflection on short passages of Scripture. There’s also a hymn from *Lutheran Service Book* that you can sing or speak out loud.

These devotions aren’t intended to replace your daily devotional routine; they are intended to supplement it. Looking for a daily devotional routine? Ask your pastor for advice! He knows your spiritual situation. But if you’re looking for something immediate, here’s a Psalm plan for the season of Advent –

Advent	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Morning	24	122	33	50	18:1-20	102	90
Noon	129; 131	135	137; 140	144; 145	146; 147	148	149; 150
Evening	25; 110	40; 67	85; 91	14; 16	126; 62	130; 16	80; 72

God’s blessings to you this Advent. Please check out our other resources at lcmscloud.org.

In Christ,

Rev Joshua Reber (Editor; Faith, St. Cloud; Trinity, Clear Lake; SCSU Campus)

Rev David Steege (Immanuel, Albany)

Rev Jeff Manthe (SonRise, Avon)

Rev Ben Hollingsead (St. Paul’s, Eden Valley)

Rev David Buchs (Concordia, Fairhaven)

Rev Zach Hoffman (Holy Cross, St. Cloud)

Rev Bruce Timm (Redeemer, St. Cloud)

December 3 by Rev Joshua Reber

Text: Mk 11:1-11; Hymn: 343 (Prepare the Royal Highway)

Happy New Year! Today is the first day of the church year, so it is fitting that we would have a parade. The location? Jerusalem. The occasion? The Advent (arrival) of our King.

Starting at the end of a story helps give us perspective. Many books and movies start with the end, and then flashback to the beginning. You already know how the story is going to end, but that doesn't make it boring. The question becomes: how did we get here? We started with a good creation; how did we end up with a perfect man marching towards His death? We started with a manger; how did the wood turn into a cross?

The Church Year begins with Palm Sunday. To understand Bethlehem, we must go to Jerusalem first. Jerusalem is the end, but it's also a new beginning.

Speaking of beginnings, one question every pastor relishes is, "What was God doing before the world began?" St. Augustine famously quipped that He was creating hell for people who ask questions like that. I enjoy Augustine's edge, but the Bible gives an answer. Look at Eph 1:4, 1 Pt 1:20, Titus 1:2, and 2 Tim 1:9.

Before the world began, God planned on sending His Son to die for you. God knows everything. He knew we would sin. The Father knows by creating the world, He would also have to redeem it. The Son knows that creation would lead to His eventual sacrifice.

It all starts with Palm Sunday. It's the week God planned before the original week of creation. It's the week creation had been groaning for since Genesis 3. It's the week God planned before the foundation of the world.

So prepare the royal highway! Prepare your hearts this Advent season. He came once to die on a cross. He still comes to us in His Word and body and blood. He will come again to take us from this valley of sorrow to Himself in heaven.

Prayer: Jesus, prepare my heart this Advent Season to receive you. Always keep me awake and ready for Your return. Amen.

December 4 by Rev David Steege

Text: Isa 64:1-9; Hymn: 355 (O Savior, Rend the Heavens Wide)

Advent is about waiting. In Isaiah 64, the day of reckoning has arrived! That's good news – salvation and reckoning go hand in hand. Isaiah's audience found themselves uneasy with their journey. Isaiah prophecies to a godless society just like ours.

They had not been chaste in their relationships. A chaste relationship seeks purity rather than its own satisfaction. Chaste relationships begin and end with God. With this they find themselves faint in heart lost without the Lord's strength. Unfortunately, they had not called on the name of the Lord.

Isaiah asks God an honest question on behalf of the repentant: **“Behold, you were angry, and we sinned; in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?”** Their repentance is shown by the honest confession of their sins and their faithful appeal to God. They pray for God to reshape them. He is the potter, and we are the clay. Let God reshape you in with and under His Word.

With all of man's sin with the fall you also say: **“Be not angry, O Lord. Remember not our iniquity. Look upon your people Lord in mercy.”** Let God rend your heart! Let your relationships dwell in the purity of His promises. Oh that God would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at His presence! Pray that the Lord would kindle the fire that makes your name known to your adversaries, that the nations might tremble at your presence! From of old no one hears or perceives. Their ears are closed, but we listen to the Lord our God. Meet Him who joyfully works righteousness, who remembers you in your ways yet desires to be merciful. Behold this Messiah quells the Father's anger. He covers sin and He delivers your salvation. You have all become like one who is unclean, and all your righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. Call upon His name, that His mercy is revealed to you. Let Him melt away your iniquities. Let the Lord shape you as the potter. Be the work of His hand.

Prayer: Be not angry, O Lord. Remember not our iniquity. Bring us to be once again your chosen people. Let our relationships return to the purity of your relationship with your eternal community.

December 5 by Rev Bruce Timm

Text: Ps 80:1-7; Hymn: 395 (O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright)

Psalm 80 begins with two sons of Israel, Joseph and Benjamin, and two sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh. Joseph was a savior of his family after his brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt. Ephraim and Manasseh formed a significant portion of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Benjamin's land was on the border between Israel and the Southern Kingdom, Judah.

Psalm 80 is anticipating and realizing the Northern Kingdom's demise. Life in Israel was going very well. Sadly, the people had forgotten the Lord. Destruction was coming from Assyria. The Psalmist cries out for help – to the Shepherd of Israel (v 1), to the God who sat above the cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant to deal personally and mercifully with His people.

Note that sometimes the Psalmist prays *with* the people (v 3, 7) and at other times he prays *for* the people. (v 4-6). That reminds us of Christ! As true man He prays *with* us, but as true God, knowing in His Divine Nature what we need, He prays *for* us.

Christ prays for us. He prays that God gives ear to our prayers. He prays that He shines forth from His throne. He prays that His face shines upon us to restore us and save us. In the Psalms, Christ is praying for the Father to send the Son. When Jesus is born, God's presence shines forth among us. Jesus is the face of God. If you want to know what your Father looks like, look at Jesus. See the Son of God becoming man and see that man dying on the cross. Jesus becomes man to restore you to Him and your humanity to you – to forgive you so you can forgive, to love you so you can love, to clothe you in His righteousness so you can look at God your Father with fear, love, and trust again.

Prayer: O God the Father, continually shine for face on us in your Son Jesus Christ, that we may not forget you in days of prosperity nor despair of you when we are suffering. Amen.

December 6 by Rev Ben Hollingsead

Text: 1 Cor 1:3-9; Hymn: 696 (O God, My Faithful God)

How many times have you stood in the middle of a big box store wracking your brain for a gift idea for someone you only see once a year? Or how many times have you hastily thrown gifts into your cart out of obligation and not out of joy? Have you ever stared in disbelief as your children quickly destroyed or tossed aside the item you saved to buy? How often is our Christmas season marked by experiences of frustration, stress, and consumerism without an ounce of thought regarding the real reason for the season?

This isn't a just a modern-day problem. The Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth to address their love and focus on earthly possessions and pleasures. There was inward fighting within the church because of the many and varied opinions on what it meant to live a Christian life. Just as the Church in Corinth faced sadness and division, we too find ourselves in similar positions, often much more so during the holiday season as we remove the gifts of peace and joy through Christ only to replace them with shiny, gift-wrapped boxes.

Instead, our focus should be on Christ, who came down from his throne to bear our burdens of sin and death. He defeated the devil providing us the greatest gift, salvation, so that by faith alone we may stand guiltless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ's second coming. Can you imagine a greater gift? It's a gift that will last much longer than one Christmas season!

As we move along in the season of Advent, remember that this season is one of repentance. Repent when we remove Christ from our daily life just as the church in Corinth did. Remember that the greatest gift has already been given: life and salvation through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Prayer: O God, my faithful God, all good gifts come from You alone. Bestow on us grateful hearts so we may abide in peace through all seasons of life. Lord, protect us from the devil's attacks that would cause us to doubt. By grace, through your Son we have all we need for this life and the life to come, through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord. Amen.

December 7 by Rev David Buchs

Text: Isa 7:1-14; Hymn: 357 (O Come, O Come, Emmanuel)

Isaiah brings words of comfort to King Ahaz in the face of danger and treachery. Syria allied with the Northern Kingdom of Israel, represented by the tribe of Ephraim, and they planned to attack Jerusalem. Such an attack from all sides, fighting without and fear within, was plenty of reason for Ahaz to tremble.

Isaiah comes with comfort by means of an admonition: **“Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint.”** Don’t shake like a tree; instead, believe the Word of the LORD.

And what is that Word of the LORD? In a little while, your enemies will be brought to nothing. In a little while, and the faithful remnant will be delivered. Sixty-five years are but as the blink of an eye in the sight of God. Either believe, or you will perish in your unbelief.

If this sounds harsh, consider God’s invitation to Ahaz: “Ask for a sign.” “Let me prove it,” God says. King Ahaz wants no proof, and even if someone were to rise from the dead, he would not believe. Nevertheless, his faithlessness does not nullify the faithfulness of God, and a sign is given: **“The virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”**

What a sign indeed! It’s a sign for Ahaz, whether he would have it or not, but it’s also a sign for us. What makes you tremble? What makes you shake like a tree? Do you see the enemy prowling like a roaring lion? **“Do not let your heart be faint.”**

But a little while and you will be saved. But a little while and you will have no cause for fear. How can you be firm in faith? Look to the virgin’s Son, Immanuel, God with us, our valiant One, who has conquered by the cross all our foes.

Prayer: Lord God, never let us doubt your promises. Free us from fear and let us laugh at bad news. You are our God. Keep us as the people of your pasture and the sheep of your hand. Amen.

December 8 by Rev Zach Hoffman

Text: Jer 33:14-18; Hymn: 338 (Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus)

Behold! The days are coming!

When we look forward to the big days of the year, they always seem to get here faster than we can prepare ourselves for them. Then they are gone, and we find that we have missed out on the chance to savor them.

Time can be so cruel! We can never get everything done in time; Christmas arrives whether we're settled or not. It all comes too fast, and it goes too quickly.

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: The Lord is our righteousness” (Jer 33:14-16).

Suddenly, but not too quickly, at just the right time, the days that the prophet Jeremiah foretold have come. Christ our righteousness! Christ our King! Christ our Great High Priest!

We rejoice not because we have finally stemmed the rushing tide of time, and have the days under our control. No, we rejoice because the long-expected day of Jesus has come!

“Come thou long expected Jesus born to set thy people free...Israel's hope and consolation, Hope of all the earth thou art, Dear Desire of every nation, Joy of every longing heart.”

Now, in faith, we wait for his return, but no need to rush around. Look to him **“and he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion on the Day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:6).**

Prayer: Almighty Father, give us rest in our rush, as we look forward to the day of your Son, our Lord's return. Amen.

December 9 by Rev Bruce Timm

Text: Gal 4:1-7; Hymn: 332 (Savior, of the Nations Come)

The opposite of slave is not free, but son. That may sound strange, but Paul is contrasting the Old Testament to the New Testament. The Old Testament people were still subject to all the laws and regulations of Sinai (circumcision, Sabbath Day observance, dietary restrictions). They were children of God waiting for their promised Savior, but while they waited, they were subject to all the rules and regulations of God's covenant.

But then came the day when the promised Christ was born. Jesus was born of a woman and born under the law. He was circumcised on the 8th day. He kept the Sabbath. He obeyed the Law, not just the ceremonial laws of Israel, but also the moral law. He perfectly kept God's commandments for His entire life. You wouldn't have wanted Him as your older brother.

Yet He is your brother, and He became your brother to redeem you. Redeem is another slavery word. To redeem is to pay the price for someone's freedom. Jesus offered His perfect life, His own flesh and blood, as the sacrifice for your sins. Since your brother Jesus is also true God, His offering was sufficient to ransom you from your sin, your death, and your tyrannical master the Devil.

You're free from the ceremonial laws. You can eat shellfish and attend Divine Service on Sunday instead on Saturday (which was the Sabbath day). You're also free from your sins! That means you're free from death and from the Devil's accusations. However, you're not free to do whatever you want. Christ redeemed you to be a son of His Father. The Spirit dwells in your heart by faith and faith causes you to love God. He's redeemed you so that you can live with Him. He adopted you back into the family and has written you into the will. That's why you call Him Abba, Father.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, You have redeemed us by Your Son and made us your sons. Grant us faith to believe in our adoption and to love You as You have loved us. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

December 10 by Rev Joshua Reber

Text: Mk 1:1-8; Hymn: 346 (When All the World Was Cursed)

For Lutherans, nothing is more important than baptism. Can you blame us? That's where we were born again and became children of God. That's where our sins were washed away. That's where we were given our beautiful and pure white baptism garment that we wear to the wedding feast of the Lamb which has no end. Baptism is our beginning, our middle, and our end.

The Gospel of Mark begins with baptism. There's no Christmas story. You'll find the most elegant Christmas story ever told in Luke 2, the darkest Christmas story ever told in Matthew 1-2, and the heavenly perspective of Christmas in John 1. But Mark, like the Bible, begins with water. Before God even speaks in Genesis 1, the Spirit is hovering over the face of the waters.

Mark's middle is also all about baptism. Look at Mark 10:35-45, with a particular focus on verses 38-39. Jesus says the word "baptism" three times twice! Mark ends with baptism. In Mark 14:51-52, a naked young man flees from Jesus during His passion. In Mark 16:5, that young man reappears, but this time He's not naked anymore – after the resurrection, He receives His white baptism robe.

Now back to Mark 1. In verse 4, John the Baptist is preaching. What's he preaching? The Greek indicates that was preaching (rendered in the ESV as proclaiming) baptism! And that's the sermon the world needed and needs to hear. Baptism kills our sinful nature and makes us alive in Christ. We pastors can do a whole lot worse than preaching baptism.

"When all the world was cursed, by Moses' condemnation, Saint John the Baptist came, with words of consolation. With true forerunner's zeal, the greater One he named, and Him, as yet unknown, as Savior he proclaimed" (LSB 346, st 1).

Prayer: Father, thank you for making me Your child in baptism. Continue to teach me through Your Word every day what it means to be a baptized Christian. In Jesus' name, Amen.

December 11 by Rev David Steege

Text: Isa 40:1-11; Hymn: 347 (Comfort, Comfort Ye My People)

In Isaiah 40, they're looking for comfort. Comfort and control go hand in hand. They had lost control when they were taken to Babylon seventy years earlier. Now they return to Jerusalem, but they must still let God have control. Isaiah speaks tenderly to the church. He speaks that the war between God and man is over and that her iniquity is pardoned.

Their problem and our problem begin and end with listening. The Lord is preparing them and you today to hear the voice of the one crying in the wilderness. The voice will be that of John the Baptist. He prepares the way for Jesus who prepares the way for you. Let the Spirit proceed from this Savior to help you walk the straight and narrow and find the highway of salvation. Let Him comfort you. The Lord alone delivers you through His glory. The glory that He is pointing to will be fulfilled when Jesus goes to the cross for you that you now partake in the sacrifice of Thanksgiving. This all leads you to the altar to hear His Word.

LSB 347 speaks to a God that pardons your sin and blots out all your iniquities. This God of light will consume the darkness and in doing so He will give you comfort in the fallen world. The Lord's comfort consumes the anger of the sin of the fallen world to bring back His creation. In Advent, there is an anticipation that the Lord will send His comfort to take away all suffering and griefs that all sadness will be turned into gladness. As the hymn calls all sinners to repentance, it brings you to live in the Kingdom of salvation. Now with Him in control, faith seeks to be obedient. He makes the crooked straight that the valleys might be leveled. In this season, find your comfort in the glory of the Lord who is willing to live a perfect life for you and die for your sins that you might live in the hope of his resurrection. Let Him be the one to give comfort. Let Him be in control in this hectic season.

Prayer: Dear Father, send Your Spirit to comfort me by giving my faith in Your Son. Remind me that you are in control of the universe, the earth, and my heart.

December 12 by Rev Ben Hollingsead

Text: Ps 85; Hymn: 964 (Lift Every Voice and Sing)

A mulligan is often used in golf when someone would like to redo a poor shot. In my limited experience playing golf, I have realized, even in the mid-swing of my club, that the ball was going in the wrong direction, so I shouted “Mulligan!” wishing before I even swung that I could have a redo.

How nice it would be to have a mulligan in life situations! But we can’t go back, and the damage is already done. We can’t rewrite the past.

Can you recall a conversation that went wrong because it was approached with anger or hurtful comments towards family, friends, or coworkers? Career, financial, and health decisions can be places of regret. These are areas of life that lack righteousness and peace.

Advent is one of my favorite seasons in the Church year. Advent prepares us to celebrate our Lord’s coming at Christmas and the end of time. It is also a season that signals a new beginning and hope for us. Ps 85:10-11 says, **“Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed. Truth shall spring out of the earth, and righteousness shall look down from heaven.”**

In His return, Christ will remedy our greatest mistakes beyond all human repair. The incarnation of Christ is good news for us, for in the body of Christ, He has paid our sins on the cross and, in His resurrection, has made a way for us. It’s like a mulligan, but even better. God’s new creation will never fall. We can’t rewrite the past, but God has written our names in the Lamb’s Book of Life.

Prayer: God, of our weary years and our silent tears, we thank you that your Son Jesus Christ has, by grace, rescued us from the grief and death we have created for ourselves by sinning against you and our neighbors. Help us Lord to not take your mercy for granted, for true righteousness and peace comes from You alone; in the name of Jesus, Your Son, our Lord, Amen.

December 13 by Rev Ben Hollingsead

Text: 2 Pt 3:8-14; Hymn: 331 (The Advent of our King)

Looking to our favorite political news outlet to help us determine whether the events of today are predictive of our Lord's return is a common error that happens too often. While it is good and faithful for a Christian to be excited for our Lord, it is erroneous to use current events as our guide to determine Christ's return because it negates the clear words Jesus gives us in Holy Scripture.

2 Pt 3:10 reiterates the Words of our Lord Jesus in Lk 12:39 that our Lord Jesus will come as a thief in the night, and only our Heavenly Father knows the hour of His return. The only prophecy left for Christ to fulfill is what we confess in the second petition of the Apostles' Creed that Christ Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead. Our hope as Christians is not to look for outbreaks of war, famine, or changing weather patterns as many false teachers say to bring about anticipation of the Lord's return.

The Scriptures give us three great things we can do to prepare for Christ's return. First, attend weekly Divine Services so that we may receive the gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation through God's Word and Sacraments.

Second, meet with your Pastor regularly for private confession and absolution. Private confession has gone by the wayside in the Lutheran Church, but there is no greater way to unburden your conscience than by confessing your sins and hear the Absolution directly from your Savior!

Finally, find time daily to be in the Bible. Attend Bible studies provided by your Pastor, hold daily devotions, and catechize your family. How wonderful is it to know that we can look with eager anticipation for the day when we shall see our Savior face to face.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, the events of tragedy and death in our world are more than we can handle. Remind us that there are no human crafted solutions to bring them permanently to an end. Hear our prayer O Lord, to come quickly if it be Your will. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

December 14 by Rev David Buchs

Text: Heb 1:1-4; Hymn: 384 (Of the Father's Love Begotten)

That God would speak to His people through prophets is both strange and hopeful. It is strange as it reflects the broken relationship between Creator and creature, no longer walking in communion in the cool evening of the garden. Now He must send messengers because His children cannot endure the sound of His footsteps, much less the sound of His voice.

That God speaks through prophets is also hopeful, as a promise of life, for silence is what kills. The prophets are the mouthpieces of God, and their words are His Word, and even when His people would hold Him at arms-length, He speaks to them lest silence reign, and with it, death.

But all of that was for a time. The prophets longed to see the day of Christ: God nearer than He was in the voice of the prophets, near enough to share flesh and blood with fallen, sinful humanity. In the person of Jesus Christ, all the Deity of the Godhead was pleased to dwell, so that He could make purification for sins; that is, so that he could restore what had been broken and resurrect what had died.

God speaks to us by His Son. He speaks to us in the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. He speaks peace for all eternity. No longer is it something strange or something hopeful, but a restoration of paradise and promises fulfilled.

Sitting down at the right hand of the Father, Christ reigns for all eternity as our King, our brother, our Savior, and Redeemer. As the writer to the Hebrews warns: **“How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?”** (Heb. 2:3). You cannot attend too closely, too earnestly, or too faithfully to this salvation!

Fill your ears and your hearts with the Word of Jesus. The Lord God speaks to you in His Son. Listen to him!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, send us your Spirit so that we would have listening hearts, glad to receive the promises of your Son and to live obedient to his Word. Amen.

December 15 by Rev Zach Hoffman

Text: Dt 18:15-19; Hymn: 583 (God Has Spoken by His Prophets)

There is not much that grows like we think it should. As we come to the end of the year did you expect your finances to grow? Did you expect to find a greater level of happiness? Did you hope your family would be growing together? Did you expect your energy and muscles to grow while the waste line grows smaller? (It's ok. The first three letters in December stand for "Do Eat Cookies")

Maybe you have set your hopes on higher things. You have looked to the Lord to do something big. Perhaps, you hoped he would bring your family members who have strayed back to church or moved our culture into a more positive direction. It seems like every hope that we dare to raise up gets smothered by darkness. Well... almost every hope.

There is One Who was promised and Who was raised up in spite of it all. He was foretold in Dt 18:18 **"I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him."**

This Great Prophet is Christ, and we dare not hope in anything else; we boldly place all our hope in Him. He will do all that He said He will do. He will bring peace and justice. He will bring comfort to our longing hearts.

Christ **"grew and became strong, and filled with wisdom and the favor of God was upon him"** (Lk 2:40). He did not stray in His youth from the Word, and God put his Spirit upon Him at His baptism- **"the Spirit of wisdom and understanding"** (Isa 11:2). While so many do nothing but lie, He is the truth, and His Words are Spirit and life (Jn 6:63).

"God has spoken by Christ Jesus, Christ the everlasting Son, brightness of the Father's glory, with the Father, ever one: spoken by the Word incarnate, God, before all time began, light of light, to Earth descending, Man, revealing God to man" (LSB 563, st 2).

Prayer: Almighty Father, when there is not much that we can trust in or build our hopes upon in this world we give you thanks that your Son is faithful and all that he has spoken is true. Amen.

December 16 by Rev Bruce Timm

Text: 1 Pt 1:13-20; Hymn: 743 (Jesus, Priceless Treasure)

Perhaps we should say “Holy Christmas” instead of “Merry Christmas.” “Happy Holidays” isn’t so bad; after all, it means “Happy Holy Days.” Peter tells us, quoting the Lord in Lev 19:2 **“You shall be holy, for I am holy.”** Peter’s letter is a rich letter of encouragement to the baptized. Through Holy Baptism you have been made holy children by the Holy God through His Holy Son.

You could think about 1 Pt 1 using the old cliché, “Like father, like son.” Through the Son of God we learn about our Father in heaven. He is Holy which means He cannot tolerate sin or evil or rebellion. He is just which means the punishment must fit the crime – you sin, you die. Thankfully He is also merciful, which means He satisfies His justice through His Son.

The Son of God was born of Mary to reveal His Father to us. Jesus reveals the holiness, justice, and mercy of His Father, with His life, His preaching, and His death. By baptism into the Son, we are declared holy, righteous, and forgiven. Therefore, God’s Word urges us to be like our Father. That means we hate sin, we don’t pursue the futile way of unbelief, we are sober, and we conduct ourselves with fear of the Lord. He who has called you is holy; you are also to be holy in all your conduct. In other words – like Father, like Son, like you.

Like everything else this Advent, there is a single reason given for this exhortation – Jesus. In His mercy, your Father in heaven paid a high price for your adoption. He did not ransom you with temporal treasure such as gold or silver, but with the precious blood of Christ, the Lamb of God without blemish or spot. In your baptism God has given you His Name, His Son, His forgiveness, His death and resurrection. These are holy gifts from Your Father so that you can be holy.

Prayer: Holy and heavenly Father, you have made us Holy through the saving work of your Son. Strengthen us to live holy lives in His name. Amen.

December 17 by Rev Joshua Reber

Text: Jn 1:6-8, 19-28; Hymn: 344 (On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry)

Who is John the Baptist? We have more negative answers than positive answers in Jn 1. He's not the light (v 7). He's not the Christ (v 20). He's not Elijah (v 21). He's not the Prophet (v 21 – for the record, *the* Prophet is a reference to Dt 18:15; Moses told the Israelites that God would send a prophet like him).

We do have some positive answers. He is a witness to the light (v 7) and a voice crying in the wilderness to make straight the way of the Lord (v 23). He's also defined by what he does – he baptizes, hence the name, John the Baptist (the Baptist was not his last name nor his denominational affiliation).

Notice that all of these identity questions concerning John revolve around Jesus Christ. It's extremely telling that the first thing John says here, "I am not the Christ."

Everything we are and everything we do is done in reference to Christ. After all, we were made by Him, through Him, and for Him (see Jn 1:3 and Col 1:16). This is the case for every single human being. Even non-Christians were made by and for Jesus. The difference is Christians have been made a new creation in baptism and are walking in that light (1 Jn 1:7).

John is asked, "How dare you baptize?" The church today is asked, "How dare you make absolute statements?" Our authority is not found in ourselves, just like John's authority wasn't found in himself. Our authority is found in Jesus Christ.

If we actually believe what John and Jesus says, we'll make bolder and bolder statements all the time. Here's one, "Salvation is found in no one except Jesus Christ. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved."

Define yourself as John defined himself – in relation to Jesus. "On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry, Announces that the Lord is nigh."

Prayer: Father, thank you for faithful preachers like John. Teach me to find my identity in Your Son, whom you sent to die for my salvation. Amen.

December 18 by Rev David Steege

Text: Isa 61:1-11; Hymn: 349 (Hark the Glad Sound)

You wait for Lord, the anointed one, the Messiah, the Christ. He is set apart to preach the good news of the gospel to the poor in Spirit. He is set apart to bind up everyone concerning their sin seeking to mend their broken hearts. His liberty is the only liberty that can set the people free. Because of His promises you are no longer captive. You are free. The Jubilee is now not just every fifty years but yours every day!

The Lord speaks His blessing today for you in the church just as Isaiah speaks it here. Your garment is an eternal covering. Your crown is an eternal crown. Crowned for eternity, you find yourself letting Him take away your vanity and your faintness of spirit. He lifts you up from the ruins of the fall such that you can now march into Jerusalem with Him celebrating His death and resurrection in with and under His Word and Sacrament. So today, instead of sitting in sackcloth and ashes, you sit at the feet of your Savior. You receive His comfort. The world chases satisfaction while you bask in His satisfaction already.

The hymn confirms this message. Hark the glad song for the promised Savior! This Savior has burst the bonds of Satan. This Savior bursts the world's bubble. Let him draw you to flee to the Spirit that will break down the gates of hell. So as you go toward Christmas Day look at His journey for you. Don't forget that He has come to recreate what man has destroyed. Sing Hosanna He came into Jerusalem for you. Your anticipation is complete. He comes to reclaim His kingdom for you. You anticipate in this birth that He will raise His hand for you. Bow down and worship Him. Stand in the arch of His promise with the treasures of His grace in Word and Sacrament. Let Him set you free to dwell in the safety of His care.

Prayer: O Lord, direct my eyes to your Suffering Servant, Jesus Christ, who came to take away my sins. Send me your Spirit so that I may rejoice in my Savior. Amen.

December 19 by Rev David Buchs

Text: Ps 126; Hymn: 402 (The Only Son from Heaven)

What do the nations say, those peoples who plot in vain against the Lord and his anointed – what do they say of us? Do they say, "**The Lord has done great things for them**"? (v 2). Far from it, it seems. They despise and shame. They laugh us to scorn. "They trust in the Lord! Let him deliver them! Isn't it quaint, that they celebrate the birth of a child from so long ago?"

If you measure God by the standards of the nations, you will despair. He should act. He should rout the wicked and preserve the righteous. "Why would a good God allow evil to persist...?" and so on and so forth.

But hear the promise of Psalm 126: there will come a day when every knee will bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth. Every tongue will confess the mighty name of that babe born in Bethlehem. What's more, all the nations will praise Him as your God.

What people is there that has a God such as yours? Though you tarry, it is but for a moment. Though you bear your cross, crosses give way to glory. Though your captors rejoice for a time, you will look in triumph on your adversaries. Though He lay in the grave, He rose with a shout of acclamation, and you will never be put to shame.

You will rejoice and be glad. You will sing songs of deliverance. You will be filled with laughter. You might even think it's just a dream, but never will there have been anything more real, more solid, more certain than the life that God is giving to you through His Son.

Prayer: Lord God, free us from the snares of the devil and keep us from heeding the taunts of the world. Let us hear your voice and live. Let us say evermore, our God is great, who has done such wonders for us. Amen.

December 20 by Rev Ben Hollingsead

Text: 1 Thess 5:16-24; Hymn: 663 (Rise, My Soul, to Watch and Pray)

Hold up a hand. How quickly can you rattle off five problems in your personal life, in your community, and in the world that cause you hopelessness? Hold up your other hand. How quickly can you rattle off the solutions to these problems? Whew... One seems a lot easier to do than the other.

So often we feel as if all we can do is throw up our hands in defeat, because we are ill equipped to do anything helpful. However, as Christians we always have the upper hand in any circumstance that comes our way because we have the Almighty and merciful God on our side. God has given us the privilege to pray without ceasing in 1 Thess 5:17 – **“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”**

Prayer is a faithful, good work for the benefit of you and those for whom you pray. Martin Luther writes concerning the 1st Commandment in the Small Catechism that we are to, “Fear, love, and trust in God above all things.”

As Christians, we must be cautious not to fall into an attitude that quenches the Spirit and leads to despising God’s faithful teaching and preaching from His Prophets and Apostles. Doubting if prayers are proper or even helpful breaks the 1st Commandment because it is not trusting God above all things.

In Advent, as we prepare for our Lord’s second coming, let us take every circumstance, be it good, bad, or complicated, to our God in prayer. Prayer really works! God really listens to His children! We trust that when His will is done, it is for our good.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, the burdens of daily life can be overwhelming for us to handle on our own. Thank you for sending Your Son Jesus Christ, our Lord, who in His death and resurrection, destroyed the power of sin and death so we may live our life confidently, trusting all trials of life to your care through constant prayer. Through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, Amen.

December 21 by Rev David Buchs

Text: Isa 11:1-10; Hymn: 342 (What Hope! An Eden Prophesied)

Too often, the Lord Jesus is regarded as nothing more than a country club manager. Or maybe a fishing guide, or a therapist. That regard comes from imagining that the kingdom of heaven is shaped after our desires: I would like to golf all day, every day in heaven; I would like to fish and always catch the big one; I would like to talk to a really good listener who never judges me.

None of those images, however, does justice to our Lord, and neither can such pictures of the kingdom of heaven hold a candle to the description given by Isaiah today. **“The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat.”**

It’s a restoration of the peace pervading creation in the Garden of Eden. In the place of violence and destruction and the eager groaning of creation for redemption. It’s a picture of promises fulfilled, perfection, beauty, and joy.

All of this is accomplished because our Lord Jesus, springing forth from the remnant of Israel and anointed by the Spirit of God for the ministry of the Gospel, has acted on our behalf in righteousness and equity. He brought judgment on sin, bringing a sword instead of peace against all manner of unrighteousness and wickedness, and he has borne the judgment in his own flesh and blood on the cross.

What is it that delivers peace to the world? It is the knowledge of the Lord – that He is slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquities, healing by His wounds, becoming sin for us, so that we can become the righteousness of God. That makes for a better kingdom, by far, than any kingdom of this world. And he is a better Lord than any our sinful hearts could desire.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, receive our gratitude for ruling over our hearts with righteousness and peace. Teach us to seek first your kingdom, to honor you as our Lord, and to trust in you as our Savior for all eternity. Amen.

December 22 by Rev Zach Hoffman

Text: Zech 6:9-15; Hymn: 394 (Songs of Thankfulness and Praise)

The *Epiphany* hymn (I'm calling out the editor for the hymn selection) "Songs of Thankfulness and Praise", is a reminder of how sudden Christ's appearing will be: "Sun and moon will darkened be, Stars shall fall, the heavn's shall flee; Christ will then like lightning shine, All will see his glorious sign" (st. 3).

God's promises have a way of coming suddenly and abruptly, and it leaves us gob-smacked. By His declaration you are instantaneously forgiven and made righteous. In three splashes of water combined with the Word, you are brought out of utter darkness and into his marvelous light. Likewise, within the span of a heartbeat, "All the trumpet will hear, All will see the judge appear" (st. 3).

The Great Epiphany is coming, and it will come like lightning. Christ will be revealed before the whole earth, and every knee will bow and tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. More than that, the earth will be new, and God's temple will be restored. People from every tribe and nation will serve him there.

The people of Israel were once shocked to hear that the Messiah would come and rebuild the temple that was destroyed. **"It is he who shall build the temple of the Lord and shall bear royal honor, and shall sit and rule on his throne. And there shall be a priest on his throne, and the counsel of peace shall be between them both" (Zech 6:13).** They were in darkness, but God would bring light.

The promise of Christ's return is still ahead. Let us sing our Advent and Christmas hymns in light of this truth, and if by the grace of God, we make it to the season of Epiphany, we'll sing then as well. All that God has spoken through his Son will be fulfilled with suddenness. Just don't get used to the dark.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, your Son Jesus Christ is the light that shines in the darkness, strengthen us that we may look forward to the Last Day when we will need no sun or moon for Christ himself will be our light. Amen.

December 23 by Rev Bruce Timm

Text: Isa 52:7-10; Hymn: 388 (Go Tell It on the Mountain)

Jesus has feet. That may sound like a silly assertion, but it should cause you to bow down in deep humility and great joy. Your God became a man. When He was born, we might imagine Mary doing what mothers do – counting his 10 little fingers and his little toes and proclaiming to Joseph, “He’s all here.”

Jesus has beautiful feet. Wherever He walked He brought the good news of God’s Kingdom. He brought the reign and rule of forgiveness, of freedom from demons, sickness, suffering and death. Read the Gospels, and you’ll see Jesus walking here and walking there. Making wine there. Healing lepers over here. Casting out demons on that seashore. Healing a sick woman on that street. Raising a dead boy at this city. Wherever He went people could declare, “Your God reigns.”

His feet were the most beautiful when they were most ugly. Mary was there at the cross and you wonder if she was able to look on her Son hanging there naked, large spikes through his hands and feet. Simeon had told her three decades earlier that a sword would pierce her soul on account of her child. His words were fulfilled at the cross.

Our eyes would have us look away from those ugly feet, until we are informed by our ears, that those feet carried Jesus to the cross bearing our sins. It’s His feet that crushed the serpent’s head at Golgotha, the place of the skull. The Son of God became a man for us men and our salvation.

It is somewhat ironic that during Advent we enjoy putting out nativity sets and creches, but that we don’t set up crucifixes on our lawns or mantles at Easter. Faith sees both the infant feet of Jesus and His crucified feet as beautiful, for they bring the great good news – “Your God reigns.” With His feet He has comforted us, redeemed us and together with His holy arm He has shown us our salvation.

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, how beautiful are Your feet for they bring us the good news of Your reign over sin, death, and hell. Amen.

December 24 by Rev Joshua Reber

Text: Matt 1:18-25; Hymn: 361 (O Little Town of Bethlehem)

Christmas isn't Christmas without hearing the name "Quirinius." (Lk 2 tells us that he was governor of Syria when Jesus was born.) I'm willing to bet you'll hear that story tonight, but first, let us reflect on the first Christmas story recorded in the Bible, Matthew 1.

If pronouncing Quirinius shows you that Christmas is filled with real people with real names, then reading Matthew's Christmas story shows us that Christmas has always been messy.

Mary was pregnant, and she wasn't yet married (it's always gone against the 10 Commandments, but it also used to be socially problematic). To make matters worse, her fiancé knew that the child wasn't his. What would you think if your fiancée told you she was a virgin and yet was pregnant?

If you belong to a mixed family, you know how divorce complicates Holidays. When Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant, he knew he wasn't the father, so he complicated divorcing her. The idea of divorce is introduced at the very first Christmas!

What a mess, and yet, look what comes out this mess. Since Gen 3, we've done a pretty good job of making a mess out of things. We've matured in our messiness. We became professional mess makers. And yet does God abandon us? If I were God, I would've left this planet and galaxy a long time ago.

But God doesn't leave us. He loves His creatures and creation so much that He becomes a creature. The message of Christmas is this – God doesn't hate you. He loves you. He desires communion with you. (For the record, Bethlehem means "house of bread.") He is Emmanuel, God with us. And that doesn't stop at Christmas, it simply begins there in a new and profound way. **"Behold, I am with you *always*, until the end of the age" (Matt 28:20).**

Prayer: Dear Father, thank you for sending Your Son to take on human flesh to become my Savior. Give me faith in Him, that I may cling to Him always, as He has promised to be with me always. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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