



Advent Devotional 2016

Based on Year 1 of the LBW Lectionary

for members and friends of the

North American Lutheran Church

by

The Rev. Dr. David M. Wendel



Introduction



The Rev. Dr. David Wendel

I have the blessed opportunity to begin writing for this edition of the Advent Devotions while at a conference in Wittenberg, Germany, in October. Although it's still some time to the beginning of Advent, it is a gray, damp and cool day, allowing me to imagine what it may have looked and felt like when Dr. Martin Luther walked these streets, preached in the Parish Church and warmed himself by the hearth with his beloved Katie and family as they had devotions at the fireside in preparation for their annual celebration of Christ's birth.

Next to redemption through the death and resurrection of Jesus, Luther cherished the incarnation—God become flesh in Jesus. For how could we be saved from our sins, if the Word had not become flesh to dwell among us full of grace and truth? I pray that we also value this special time of the Church year, availing ourselves of additional opportunities for Scripture, worship, meditation, prayer and devotion.

I trust that most who will use this little devotional booklet will also be worshipping regularly with their congregations. For this reason, I have not provided devotions for the Advent wreath, for saint's days or commemorations such as the Day of Saint Nicholas (December 6). This booklet is for home/personal devotion, in addition to communal Advent worship. My prayer is that it provides the reader with a brief, accessible devotion to deepen the Advent journey.

This Advent Daily Devotional, "Amen, Come, Lord Jesus!" is based upon the daily lectionary provided in the Lutheran Book of Worship, Year I. This series of daily lessons is intended for Advent prior to odd-numbered years. The daily lectionary appoints three lessons for each day, although for the purposes of this booklet, one or more verses from one lesson have been chosen as the basis for each day's reflection. As this is the second cycle of Advent devotions I have prepared from the LBW Year 1 daily lectionary, I intentionally chosen lessons for this booklet different from those used in previous years.

The entire lesson appointed for the day is listed after the verses cited, if you have time and wish to read the text in its entirety. Otherwise, read just the brief lesson printed at the top of each page.

May God bless you and all who make use of this Advent devotional, that your hearts and lives may be more prepared to welcome the Christ as he comes!

December 25, Christmas Day

In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

— 1 John 4:7-16

If Christmas Eve is more for the stable and the manger and the mother and the babe, then Christmas Day is for considering what these things mean. This reading is full of deep meaning about the love of God—how God loves us so much that he sent his only Son into the world, that we might live through Him.

We are set free to live through Him, by the forgiveness of our sins. Christ was born, became human, to give his life for us—literally. God sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins. In a Great Exchange, Jesus, the sinless one died for our sins, that we, the guilty, might not die, but live! This is the good news! The incarnation of our Lord took place so that Jesus, Son of God and son of man, might die for us on the cross and be raised to new life. As we said at the beginning of Advent, the incarnation is directly related to our redemption. No one else could effect our salvation. No one else could be the expiation for our sins. In this is the love of God, that He sent His Son into the world, for us.

And now John says, "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." There is no "Advent Action" for Christmas Day, as we are through Advent for another year. But John calls us to action. He calls us—invites us—to love another, as God so loves us.

In the coming year of the Lord, may we love because God loves us. May we love with a Christ-like love that is selfless and self-giving. May we think less of ourselves and more of our neighbor—the neighbor in the next room, the neighbor next door, the neighbor down the street, the neighbor around the world. Because God so loves us, we are to love one another. May God's love strengthen and encourage you throughout the New Year! Thank you for the chance to share Advent with you!

Lord God, we give you thanks for your love, manifested for us in the gift of your Son. Now, let us love one another! Amen.

Saturday, December 24th, Christmas Eve

Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion; for lo, I come and I will dwell in the midst of you, says the Lord. And many nations shall join themselves to the Lord in that day, and shall be my people; and I will dwell in the midst of you, and you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you. And the Lord will inherit Judah as his portion in the holy land, and will again choose Jerusalem.

Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord; for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling. — Zechariah 2:10-13

In the daily lectionary, there are no specially appointed readings for Christmas Eve, so we are reading the Old Testament lesson for Christmas Day.

It is appropriate, however, because it prophesies of that time when God will “rouse himself from his holy dwelling” and come to be with His people. And that Christmas Eve, God did indeed rouse himself and come to earth in Jesus, to make his holy dwelling with us!

Of all the times in the Church year, I especially appreciate time for silence and quiet on Christmas Eve. Oh, I love the crowd of worshipers, the wonderful carols and hymns. I even like seeing the “C and E folks”—those who only show up on Christmas and Easter! But still, as the congregation is gathered and candles are lighted for the reading of the Gospel, I love the silence in the warm, candle-lit church, as we proclaim, “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled...” (Luke 2:1)

As a pastor, I also very much cherished arriving home after the midnight service—when my family were nestled in bed—and having some quiet moments to myself in the soft light of our Christmas tree. “Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord...”

Lord God, we give you thanks that you did rouse yourself from your holy dwelling to live among us, full of grace and truth, in Jesus your Son. Amen.

Please take time—even a few moments in between worship and mealtime and family and fun—to be silent before the Lord!

Sunday of the Week of Advent I

And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast; and the door was shut. Afterward the other maidens came also, saying, “Lord, lord, open to us.” But he replied, “Truly I say to you, I do not know you.” Watch, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. — Matthew 25:1-13

Advent is all about timing. It’s amazing how Christmas can “sneak up” on us—as if we didn’t know it was coming on December 25th this year!

While we may think we are so much busier than generations that came before, surely that’s not the case. From the time of Jesus on, people have been hard at work to provide for their lives, their homes and their families.

Could that be why Advent developed in the Church so long ago—to remind busy people who are preoccupied with the troubles of the day that Christmas is coming? Mother Church gives us four weeks to realize and prepare. And not just outwardly, getting Christmas cards written and sent and gifts bought and wrapped. Advent is for inner preparation. Advent gives us time to replenish our supply of oil, so that we will have enough to keep our lamps lit while waiting for Christ’s coming.

In the parable of the wise and foolish maidens, the bridegroom comes unexpectedly, while five were out buying more oil for their lamps. They can’t believe that he would come while they were away! And yet, it’s all about timing. They knew how wedding celebrations happened. They knew that they were to be prepared to wait as long as necessary. Sadly, they were distracted and missed the bridegroom and the party!

We have been given the gift of Advent. It is a time for renewing and refreshing our spiritual lives. It is a time for emptying so that we may be filled. It is a time for the Word of God and the Sacrament of Christ’s presence among us. It is a time for quiet, and for joyful gatherings, and for prayer—alone and with others. May we watch and wait faithfully, as Christmas comes!

Lord, give us oil for the lamps of our lives—that they will still be burning in us, until you come! Amen.

Advent Action: Make and use an Advent wreath—either elaborate or with four simple candles—as you mark the four weeks of Advent.

Monday of the Week of Advent I

...And how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. — I Thessalonians 1:1-10

Paul writes today full of gratitude for the faith, love and hope he has witnessed in the Church at Thessalonica. He speaks of them in glowing terms, as we all want to give thanks for brothers and sisters who testify to Christ's presence in their lives. And yet, it was all because they had "turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven..."

There was a time when Christians gathered for worship prayed for unbelievers and believers in idols, asking God to turn their hearts that they might be saved. Parents and grandparents prayed for their errant children and grandchildren, hoping that the Holy Spirit would bring them back to serve the living and true God. But then, it fell out of fashion in some ways, as it seemed impolite to pray for someone's salvation. Or maybe some bought into the silliness that "all will finally be saved anyway, so what does it matter?"

It does matter, doesn't it? It matters that children and young people serve the living and true God, whose Son came from heaven to die and be raised, to deliver us from our sins. It matters that those who believe in false idols turn from them to worship the living and true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It matters that Christians share the good news of Jesus with those who don't yet believe in Him, that they may come to faith and have hope and joy. People in our world need to turn to the Prince of Peace, so that forgiveness, love and mercy may one day rule hearts and minds, that there will be an end to terrorism, violence and hatred.

Almighty God, turn the hearts of all in our world to you, to serve the living and true God, in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Advent Action: Call or send a note to a child, any child, and mention the "reason for the season"—the birth of Jesus!

Friday of the Week of Advent IV

And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea; and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, "What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him. — Luke 1:57-66

When any child is born, we ponder, "What then will this child be?" Maybe it's better we not know in advance—as we might spend our every waking moment trying to control how our child grows, what they wish to be or to do. Better to trust our newborn to God and His wisdom and will.

Our reading for today is another chapter in the unfolding story of who is this child to be born of Mary. First, we are challenged to consider what then will this child be who is born to Elizabeth and her husband, Zechariah. Zechariah is in the temple, struck dumb until the child would be born. And in a miraculous way, both Elizabeth and Zechariah choose the unexpected name, "John." And immediately, Luke tells us, Zechariah's tongue was loosed and he spoke, blessing God!

All is happening in accordance with God's will. Elizabeth has given birth, they have given their son the name John, Zechariah has regained his speech, and it is clear to all that this child will be someone special. Who he will be, they haven't quite figured out—but they were certainly talking about John, in fear and uncertainty, because the hand of the Lord was with him.

And the hand of the Lord was upon John, because it was also part of the Father's will to prepare the way for His Son. Elizabeth and Zechariah, John, Mary and Joseph—all had yielded to the Father God's will in preparation for the coming of Jesus, who would be Emmanuel.

May we also yield our lives, our homes and our families to God, praying "Thy will be done!"

Lord God, our prayer is simple—thy will be done! Amen.

Advent Action: Pray for all expectant mothers and fathers today and tomorrow—that God's will be done in the lives of their children.

Thursday of the Week of Advent IV

“For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.” And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed...” — Luke 1:39-56

There is no more beautiful passage in Scripture and no more wonderful depiction of Mary than this account in Luke 1. Mary conceived of the Holy Spirit and, carrying the baby Jesus in her womb, visits her cousin, Elizabeth, who is also with child. When the two meet, John the Baptizer leaps in his mother’s womb—from being in the presence of Jesus, also still in Mary’s protective womb. What a story! What a meeting! What a miracle! God has chosen this woman to bear the Christ child, and in joyful response, Mary sings her song, the Magnificat.

We sing this beautiful hymn during Evening Vespers in the daily prayer of the Church. There are numerous, beautiful, musical settings of this hymn of thanks and praise. The words themselves, however, are beautiful enough. “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!”

It is still a few days until Christmas, but even now we are mindful of the wonderful things God has done for us—for me. He gives us life, health, food, shelter—what we call “daily bread” in the Lord’s Prayer. But more, He gave Jesus Christ to be our Savior! And still God gives Himself to us, in Jesus—as we celebrate both His birth at Bethlehem and His coming to us in Word and Sacrament, the means of grace, as mentioned before.

How do we respond to these gifts of grace? We could sing with Mary, “My soul now magnifies the Lord!” God has done marvelous things for us, regarding our low estate, raising us up, giving us His only Son. How blessed are we, with Mary, that we are called to receive Christ, and bear Christ as a loving gift for the world!

Lord God, our souls magnify you, singing your praise, giving thanks for your mercy and loving-kindness, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Advent Action: Read the account of the Nativity of our Lord, Luke 2:1-20.

Tuesday of the Week of Advent I

Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness. But rebels and sinners shall be destroyed together, and those who forsake the Lord shall be consumed. — Isaiah 1:21-31

Repentance, judgment and wrath seem far removed from a baby, a stable and a loving mother and father. If the world, and some misguided Christians had their way, we would do away with any call for repentance, any discussion of sin, any threat of judgment. Why can’t we just focus on the babe in the manger who loves us all unconditionally?

Although “unconditional love” has become the rallying cry of liberal, so-called “progressive” Christianity, the Scriptures contain conditions, or at least expectations. There is a call to repent, to receive forgiveness. And yes, there is a call to “prepare the way of the Lord,” by making His paths straight. This call to prepare comes from John the Baptizer, and he’s calling us to repent. Whether one considers repentance a condition or an expectation, it is certainly a form of preparation for the Lord who came, who comes, and who is coming.

Our reading from Isaiah is a warning of judgment and wrath to come. The prophet, speaking for the Lord, pulls no punches and makes no attempt to soft-pedal the message. In God’s kingdom there will be justice. The desire, however, is for repentance. The Lord’s desire is for Zion to return to Him and be saved. Those who refuse—those who continue to rebel against God, to revel in their sin—shall be destroyed, finally. Those who repent and return will be saved, by God’s grace, as a gift.

O God, day by day, turn us toward you. By your grace, save us from our sin, through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

Advent Action: Think of one sin you struggle with. Pray for God’s forgiveness, that He will free you from this sin.

Wednesday of the Week of Advent I

And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the Word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the Word of God, which is at work in you believers.

— I Thessalonians 3:13-20

St. Paul is writing here about those who heard his preaching and received it as the very Word of God, as opposed to those who would not receive it. He relates those who opposed the Word of God to those who rejected Jesus, killing both Him and the prophets of old who spoke the word of the Lord.

We live in a time when again there are those who hear the Word of God, in Scripture and in preaching, yet will not receive it. To dismiss the Word of God, they pick and choose what is God's Word and what is not. They claim the Bible, for example, "contains" the Word of God, but will not say that the Bible "is" God's Word. There is a world of difference between these two statements. The first opens the door to doubting and questioning God's Word so that there is no certainty with regard to Holy Scripture. The first sets humanity over God's Word. The second affirms that God's Word stands over humanity. To say that the Bible is God's Word means that God's Word judges us, rather than the other way around.

For example, it is all too common today for people to doubt and question that Jesus was conceived in Mary by the Holy Spirit, apart from human biological processes. They claim such a thing could not happen, asserting that it really doesn't matter if Jesus was born of a virgin. To doubt the virgin birth, however, leads one to doubt whether a dead man could be raised from death! Logic and human reason and natural processes don't prove or disprove the Scriptures. Rather, the Scriptures proclaim God's actions that are above and beyond nature and science—indeed, the Scriptures announce God's super-natural activity!

O God, make your Word dwell in us richly—as we receive the Word made flesh to dwell among us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Advent Action: Write down a favorite Bible passage to keep before you during Advent—on your phone, in your car, on your bathroom mirror—so that you see it and read it every day.

Wednesday of the Week of Advent IV

... Therefore behold, I will again do marvelous things with this people, wonderful and marvelous; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hid.

— Isaiah 29:9-24

The Lord God knew full well of the sin of his people, as they went through the motions of obedience while their hearts were far from Him. The book of the prophet Isaiah declares God's judgment upon His wayward people. And yet...

There is always hope and promise! The Lord God announces through the prophet that, in spite of His people, He would again do marvelous things—wonderful and marvelous things—that would confuse the wise and discerning.

What sense has human thought and reason been able to make of the virgin birth of the Son of God, conceived in Mary by the Holy Spirit? Wise and discerning men question whether such a thing can be so. People claim that babies can't be conceived in a virgin. So-called intelligent folks chuckle at what they consider the Christmas "story."

Can God not do marvelous things? Is God limited by natural biological process? Can God only do ordinary, common-sensical things? Can God raise a person three days dead? We run to the manger, not with reason and rationalizing, but with faith—faith in the God who does marvelous, wonderful things!

We give thanks for the miracle of Jesus' birth, O God, and pray that you give to us, always, eyes of faith. Amen.

Advent Action: List two or three wonderful, marvelous things God has done in your life, and pray a prayer of thanksgiving.

Tuesday of the Week of Advent IV

And he who sat upon the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true."

— Revelation 20:11–21:8

I believe some may find it disconcerting to hear a reading from Revelation so close to Christmas. But the lectionary will not us forget the real meaning of the birth of the Christ Child. The Scriptures will not let us romanticize or emotionalize Christmas as if the most important thing is the joy of new life that comes with the babe in the manger, surrounded by ox and ass, a loving mother and caring father. What is most important is what that new life brings—a new heaven and a new earth, new life for the faithful dead, the end of tears and grief and mourning and crying and pain—for the former things will have passed away.

Our reading from Revelation reminds us, as we approach the Nativity of our Lord, that it's all about "God-with-us!" John the Revelationist says he saw the throne, and a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them..."

God will not be distant or removed far from us. God will not be watching us dispassionately, curiously interested in how we will face life's troubles, trials and tragedies. God sent His own Son to be with us, to dwell with us—now present for us in God's holy Word, written, read and preached, and in the Lord's Supper, the Sacrament of Christ's presence among us. One day, however, the new heaven and the new earth, the holy city New Jerusalem, will come down—and God will live with us and we will live with Him forever. This is the new thing God is doing, in the birth of His only begotten Son.

As we look into the eyes of the Christ child this Christmas, let us see the new heaven and the new earth, our new future, and the Son of God who would be the Alpha and the Omega—the beginning and the end!

Lord Jesus Christ, come to us, not only at Christmas, but every week in the means of grace, Word and Sacrament—to be truly, God with us! Amen.

Advent Action: Read the seven beatitudes or blessings in the book of Revelation: 1:3, 14:13, 16:15, 19:9, 20:6, 22:7, 22:14.

Thursday of the Week of Advent I

O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.

— Isaiah 2:5-22

I hope you have some time to read the entire appointed lesson for each day, especially today. The prophet is speaking words of judgment against the house of Jacob for turning away from God, focusing instead on silver and gold, earthly treasures and possessions—warning them that the Lord has a day coming when they will be brought low, humbled so that they hide from fear of the Lord.

Yet the prophet calls to this same house of Jacob, saying, "Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord." Though we are sinful people living in a sinful generation, we are always being invited to return, to walk again in the Lord's light.

Martin Luther spoke of Holy Baptism as a daily return, so that the Christian would awake each new day forgiven, cleansed, and ready to walk anew in the light of Christ. Some have claimed that once baptized, the new Christian is never to sin again. While that may be a worthy goal, it is never reality! We are at the same time saints and sinners, Luther says. Baptism is a daily renewal, a daily drowning of the old Adam and Eve—the sinner in us—to be raised daily to new life in Christ. The law convicts us of our sin daily. The promise of God is that, forgiven, we walk in the light of the Lord.

Live each day in Advent as a new opportunity to walk in that light. As you go to bed, acknowledge the day's sin and let it be buried with Christ in His tomb. Then awake anew and afresh, filled with forgiveness and grace, ready to bask in the light of Christ!

Lord, I want to walk as a child of the Light! Help me to walk in your light, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Advent Action: Talk with someone in your home or church about what it means to "walk in the light of the Lord."

Friday of the Week of Advent I

Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury; and he saw a poor widow put in two copper coins. And he said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all the living that she had.”

— Luke 20:41-21:4

The story of the widow’s two coins, given out of her poverty, speaks to us today. We wrestle with abundance and need. We struggle with whether we have too much or too little. We want to be generous but we have to provide for those who depend upon us. We want to give for the right reasons, rather than for the recognition of others.

One might think that, during the season of Advent, an appropriate devotion on this passage would encourage a proper focus on giving and gifting. It might be aimed at challenging folks to remember the poor in our midst who have little more than two small coins. Or, a devotion might be expected to beat up a bit on those who are wealthy and well-to-do who give but a pittance out of their abundance.

As we approach Christmas and our celebration of God’s gift of his Son, isn’t it worth considering the Son’s complete, total gift of himself on the cross, as we hear of the widow’s gift? We don’t often consider it, but Jesus’ is the greatest gift—a once-for-all sacrifice for us and our salvation. And was this out of poverty? While Jesus was poor in earthly terms, he was rich—as His whole life was lived in obedience to the Father, giving his life, yet receiving it back again. Though Jesus gave out of a poverty of worldly wealth and possessions, he gave from an abundance, truly.

O God, help us to consider not our poverty or our abundance, but the joy of giving, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Advent Action: Consider sending an offering to a mission congregation—a totally unexpected gift at Christmas-time!

Monday of the Week of Advent IV

“He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. But the testimony which I have is greater than that of John...” — John 5:30-47

In our Gospel reading for today, our Lord speaks of John the Baptizer—the forerunner sent to prepare the way of the Lord. Jesus says that John was truly a burning and shining lamp, which gave people cause to rejoice for a time in his light. But the point is that John’s light was momentary and limited. It burned and shone only for a time, until it was overpowered by the consuming, transforming Light of Christ!

We are called to burn and shine, but not in John’s light, and certainly not in our own. We burn and shine, we dance and shout for joy in Jesus’ light, even as He says, “I am the Light of the World!” (John 8:12) He affirms that his testimony is greater than John’s, because the Son was sent by the Father—and the Son’s voice is the voice of the Father. When we see Jesus, we see the Father, by the power of the Holy Spirit. When we bask in the Light of the Son, we are being enlightened by the glory of the Father!

As we are now in the darkest days of Advent, let the Light of Christ burn in you richly! The world needs His light, shining through you. We say in the baptismal rite, “Let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16) It is not your light first, but the Light of Christ, reflected in your life!

Lord Jesus, let your light burn and shine in me, that I may give glory to our Father. Amen.

Advent Action: Remember your baptism! Find your baptismal certificate, or ask a family member or call the church where you were baptized, so that knowing the date of your baptism, you can celebrate the day, each year—and celebrate the Light of Christ anew!

Sunday of the Week of Advent IV

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. — Isaiah 11:1-9

In the book of the prophet Isaiah there is judgment proclaimed upon Israel, but hope and promise for restoration. The prophet has proclaimed that Israel would be cut off because of sinful disobedience, a diseased tree cut down before it would fall down.

But now Isaiah prophesies that the Lord God would provide for a new lineage from the old—a stump that would sprout and grow! And this shoot from the stump of Jesse would be inspired by the Spirit. Indeed, the very Spirit of the Lord would rest upon him—the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

Maybe you remember hearing these words spoken over the newly baptized, as we pray for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. But we speak these words over the new Christian because they were first spoken over the Messiah, the Christ come to save His people! Our Savior is the one who has the Spirit of the Lord upon Him! Our Savior is the one who has the spirit of wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge and the fear of the Lord!

Today, we step into the final week of Advent, and our preparations become more focused. May these last days of Advent be truly blessed by the Spirit of the Lord, that we may not be preoccupied by many things, but attend to the main thing—the birth of our Spirit-conceived Lord!

Almighty God, cleanse our hearts and minds as we journey through this final week of Advent—and keep our eyes focused on Jesus. Amen.

Advent Action: Pray to the Holy Spirit today, asking that the Spirit will increase in you the gifts of wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge and fear of the Lord.

Saturday of the Week of Advent I

Then Jesus said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilence, and there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you... This will be a time for you to bear testimony.” — Luke 21:5-19

Lutherans have not dwelt much on “end times.” We have trusted Jesus’ words that no one knows the day or hour—but only the Father in heaven—so we are to be about his work now, while we have time.

It’s hard to hear Jesus’ words, then, without thinking that Jesus may be speaking about “end times” to get us ready for times such as these! This passage sounds very much like our day and age. And not just when he speaks of nation against nation, and earthquakes and famine. Our Lord seems to be speaking directly to us when he speaks of persecution. Never have we in North America experienced such opposition for our faith, just as we have never faced Christians being tortured and put to death for their faith in our day. But our Lord knew it would happen—in the first century, but also in the 21st!

And what does Jesus tell us about this? This will be a time for us to bear testimony! This is not a time for us to hide behind closed doors; to lock ourselves inside our well-stocked “panic room” in the basement; to distance ourselves from places and people who might challenge our Christian faith. Rather, this is time for us to bear testimony! For finally, our Lord says, “By your endurance you will gain your lives.”

Pr. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, while imprisoned by the Nazis, wrote, “The day will come... when people will once more be called to speak the word of God in such a way that the world is changed and renewed... in a language proclaiming that God makes peace with humankind and that God’s kingdom is drawing near.” (Letters and Papers from Prison)

Lord Jesus, give us courage and strength to boldly testify to the truth! Amen.

Advent Action: Pray today for those who are being persecuted for their faith, that they may stand fast in the time of trial.

Sunday of the Week of Advent II

Let me sing for my beloved a love song concerning his vineyard... for the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting... — Isaiah 5:1-7

The Old Testament reading for today tells of the Lord God's great love for His vineyard. The whole of Scripture can be understood as a love song for the vineyard that God cleared, tilled, planted and watched over—intending that good fruit would be borne on the vines. That was God's intention and deep desire. We hear the love of the Lord in every verse today.

But we read that while the Lord looked for it to yield grapes, it yielded wild grapes. In other words, God's people disobeyed, went their own way, and bore fruit not worthy of the vineyard of the Lord.

When we hear of judgment and wrath, we think of it as punishment, and that would not be wrong. But always, God treats his vineyard with an eye toward what will finally restore the vineyard and once again bring good fruit. Sometimes God lets the vineyard be overrun and overgrown, other times God is pruning and hoeing. All towards bringing His vineyard back to health and vitality.

Advent is a time, also, when God is working to restore His vineyard to health and vitality. The call to repentance, the call to reflection and renewal, the call to prepare the way of the Lord—all serve this purpose. From our human perspective, God might very well abandon His wild vineyard altogether! But God is eternally patient and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will never give up on his errant vineyard!

O God, we are your vineyard. Do what is needed that we may bear good fruit, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Advent Action: List three ways God is strengthening your faith—and offer a prayer of thanksgiving!

Saturday of the Week of Advent III

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill brought low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” — Luke 3:1-9

As we draw nearer to the Fourth Week of Advent, we hear again from John, the forerunner of Jesus. He is calling us, today, to prepare the way of the Lord, removing every barrier and impediment to Christ's coming. And why this monumental feat of civil engineering?

The goal is that “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” We are “universalists” in the sense that God desires that all shall be saved, and so do we. Hopefully, we pray for that as well. As we heard yesterday, the Lord God desires that none should perish, eternally. That should be our hope also. But how are people saved? By Christ and only Christ!

Christ is coming, but his road to many is filled with potholes, ruts, mountains and hills. John calls us to do whatever we can to level out and smooth down the path for His coming. Certainly, the voice in the wilderness was crying out for Israel to prepare for Christ's coming at Bethlehem, but his cry echoes through the centuries to you and me, as well!

What can we do to prepare the way for Christ's coming, to those who live in darkness and sin? How can we speed the Lord on His way? What does it mean for you and me to make His paths straight, fill the valleys, smooth out the rough ways—that all flesh shall see the salvation of our God?

Lord God, as we, too, desire that all flesh shall see salvation, show us how to prepare the way of the Lord, in our day. Amen.

Advent Action: Is there a messy or cluttered area in your home or church? Take time this week before Christmas to straighten things out, clean things up, and live out John's call to prepare the way of the Lord.

Friday of the Week of Advent III

They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption; for whatever overcomes a man, to that he is enslaved. — 2 Peter 2:17-22

In our reading from Peter, we hear about those who are newly converted to Christianity, but are once again “entangled” in the defilements and licentious passions of the world. Peter says, “the last state has become worse for them than the first.”

Although Advent is not now thought of as a penitential season, it has been through the ages. That means it was a time of reflection, repentance and renewal as the faithful prepared for celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. People wanted to observe the festival forgiven and freed from their sins.

It’s not easy to escape from defilements and licentious passions which entangle us, is it? We all struggle with such temptations to sin, and some more than others. Some of us can’t stop gossiping, speaking ill of others, bearing false witness. Others are caught in a cycle of addiction, alcoholism and abuse. Where is the good news in this? We hear it in the next chapter, actually, 3:9, where Peter writes, “The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”

We are convicted by the reality of our own situation: That we return to our enslavements and disobedience, time and time again. But the Lord doesn’t wish that any should perish, so he is always calling us to repentance, for the sake of forgiveness.

Lord God, may your offer of forgiveness move us to true repentance and amendment of life, that we may truly be set free. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Advent Action: Do you know someone who struggles with sin, finding it hard to escape from it? Call them and offer your support, care and prayer.

Monday of the Week of Advent II

But as to the times and seasons, brethren, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night... therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. — I Thessalonians 5:1-11

Do we know well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief, as did the Christians in Thessalonica? Most live today as if that day will never come. St. Paul fully expected that the day of the Lord would come soon, in his lifetime. He writes continually about how to live knowing that the return of the Lord was imminent. Some of Paul’s advice, such as to not marry, isn’t applicable today. If Christians were to stop marrying and having children for the Lord, Christianity would die out!

But Paul’s advice about how to live in this in-between time is as relevant today as it was then. In our lesson, Paul writes, “let us keep awake and be sober... put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation...” And finally, our passage concludes, “encourage one another and build one another up.”

It’s hard enough for us to survive during this time between Jesus’ ascension and His second coming. But even more so when we tear each other down and hinder the mission of Christ by bickering, unkindness and lack of charity within the Church. We would like to think that it is in our congregations as it was in Thessalonica—that the faithful are encouraging one another and building one another up. The opposite is often the case, as congregations fuss with one another, pastors and church leaders bash and bite at each other, the body is torn apart rather than built up.

As we await Christ’s return, let us not be found tearing down rather than building up! Beloved, let us love one another in the Body of Christ!

Lord Jesus, help us be your Church! Use us to build up and encourage one another. Amen.

Advent Action: Write an encouraging note to your pastor, congregational staff member or lay leader.

Tuesday of the Week of Advent II

But we beseech you, brethren, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.

— I Thessalonians 5:12-28

We can appreciate that the daily lectionary often provides us with continuous readings in Scripture. Our reading today continues the reading cited yesterday, and it is worth continuing to read in I Thessalonians. We might say today's devotion is "Encouraging and Building Up, Part 2."

We can say without hesitation that the struggles and tensions in the early Church were much the same as ours. People then, as now, chafe under leadership—even in the Body of Christ. So much so that Paul needed to remind the Thessalonians to respect those who labored among them and were over them in the Lord. Although some are called to positions of leadership in the Body, the Lord makes it clear that we are not to lord it over others, but to serve lovingly and faithfully. Church leaders are sometimes guilty of failing in that. At the same time, members forget to show leaders respect and forbearance. Surely it was the same in Paul's day, causing him to plead, "Be at peace among yourselves." And how does that happen in the Church?

Paul goes on: admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all. Don't repay evil for evil. And above all, rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances... do not quench the Spirit, but test everything; hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil.

A church council and every congregation would do well to begin and end every gathering with these words—and especially during the season of Advent, as we prepare for the coming of the Prince of Peace!

Lord Jesus, give peace in our hearts, our homes, our churches and our world. Amen.

Advent Action: As you share the peace during worship, wish others not just "peace," but "The Peace of the Lord!"

Thursday of the Week of Advent III

In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand... bear fruit that befits repentance..." — Matthew 3:1-12

Today, I visited the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany and saw, again, the place where Luther posted his 95 Theses. It causes me to want to write about Luther and repentance! How can I not, when the Gospel reading for today is John the Baptizer calling people to repent—and Luther begins his theses with number 1, saying:

"When our Lord and Master said repent, he intended that the entire life of the believer be one of repentance."

Did you know that the 95 Theses are really about proper repentance? The medieval Church was offering forgiveness, eternal life and salvation without repentance! People were buying indulgences for themselves and their dead relatives, as if they could be saved without repentance and confession of their sins. The Church in that time offered that—for a price! Luther comments that his parishioners in the Wittenberg Town Church were no longer coming to confession, because now they had purchased an indulgence, so they were forgiven of all their sins, now and in the future, and therefore had no need to confess to the priest! Luther responded by writing the 95 Theses and nailing them to the door of the Castle Church, the equivalent of a university bulletin board, intending to spur a theological debate among scholars. He got more than he bargained for!

Repentance, as preached by John and affirmed by Luther, is at the heart of the life that is reconciled to God, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Scripture, John and Jesus call us to repent for the forgiveness of sins. Advent is an opportune time to engage in heartfelt, deep reflection on our sins, leading to confession and repentance, whether in worship on Sunday or during the week with the pastor. Our Lord and Master intends that our entire lives be of repentance!

Lord God, you are always more ready to offer forgiveness than we are to repent. Humble us, that we may acknowledge our sin, turn from it, and be forgiven, for Christ's sake. Amen.

Advent Action: Pray a prayer of confession, using the Ten Commandments, Exodus 20:1-17, as a guide.

Wednesday of the Week of Advent III

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their licentiousness, and because of them the way of truth will be reviled. — 2 Peter 2:1-10a

Peter is speaking to us when he warns, “false prophets arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you.” In our time, destructive heresies are flourishing at the same time that others are questioning biblical truth. It seems we have come to the place in history where all truth is considered relative, as if there is nothing that is deemed objective truth. Yes, that’s the way of it.

Peter cautions that “the way of truth will be reviled,” and that’s the reality of our situation today. Jesus himself says, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me.” (John 14:6) Yet, even some who consider themselves Christians today reject Christ’s claim to be the unique Savior of the world.

It would be great if we could just ignore the “noise” of all the false teachers—but people are being led astray, to their own destruction. For this reason, we are called to stand for God’s truth, revealed in the Bible, as passed down to us from the apostles, to Luther, to faithful bishops, pastors and church leaders today. Not all adhere to the apostle’s teaching and fellowship—but thankfully, there are some. Thankfully, there are those who reject false teaching and false teachers, saying, with Luther, “Our conscience is captive to the Word of God. Here we stand!”

Almighty God, keep us steadfast in your Word, rejecting those who would wrest your kingdom from your Son, bringing to naught all He has done. Amen.

Advent Action: Recite the Apostles’ Creed today, either by yourself or with others. Listen to the truth about God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Wednesday of the Week of Advent II

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up... Above him stood the seraphim... and one called to another and said, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

— Isaiah 6:1-13

The more people realize that our liturgy and hymns come directly from Holy Scripture, the more we will appreciate the depth and richness of our worship! The trouble is that folks often speak of Lutheran liturgy and the historic worship of the western Church as if someone somewhere made it all up.

Many have begun to print Scripture citations in their bulletins and worship folders so that worshipers will realize the dialogue and responses are biblical—so that liturgy is truly a three-way conversation between God, His people and the pastors called to shepherd the flock. I can’t imagine anything emptier and more meaningless than a worship service I created out of nothingness—with no Scripture, just my own thoughts and intentions.

Our reading for today from Isaiah presents us with the prophet’s vision of the Lord God on His throne, with winged creatures around Him, singing praise and glory. These words are cited as we greet the risen Jesus, incarnate in the Bread and Wine of the Lord’s Supper, as we sing the “Sanctus,” which translates, “Holy.” In Holy Communion, the Lord God comes to us in Jesus, broken and poured out for us. It also is quoted in the beloved hymn, “Holy, Holy, Holy.” We are singing and praying Scripture, as we worship each week.

A meaningful adult class or gathering in your congregation might be to find the Scripture citations used in our Lutheran worship, considering their context in the Bible and how they function in the Sunday service. Who is speaking? Where are they found? Why are they used in worship?

Lord God, give us mouths to sing continually, holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts! Amen.

Advent Action: Email me at dwendel@thenalc.org and I will send you the booklet I wrote for my congregation in Colorado Springs, highlighting the Scriptural basis for the Lutheran liturgy and explaining why we do what we do.

Thursday of the Week of Advent II

And then the lawless one will be revealed, and the Lord Jesus will slay him with the breath of his mouth and destroy him by his appearing and his coming. — 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

Most anyone who reads our lesson for today may find it somewhat obscure. Our Lord refers to the coming of “the man of lawlessness” who will be revealed by the activity of Satan. This one will come pretending to be lord and god, setting himself up in the temple of God. Through the ages, in times of false religion and deception, Christians have pointed to one or another, asking whether this might be the “lawless one.” We trust that this one will be revealed in due time. What is reassuring is that the Lord Jesus will “slay him with the breath of his mouth and destroy him by His appearing and coming.”

When reading Scriptural prophecies of Satan and his evil minions, novels, art and films often present the forces of darkness as equal to God. It would seem that as God and the devil do battle, one really couldn't know who will win and who will lose. We suppose that makes for a suspenseful story. But how does Jesus slay and destroy the lawless one sent by Satan?

Paul reminds us that the Lord will overcome by the breath of his mouth—and merely by His appearing and coming! This is not to minimize His power. To the contrary! It affirms that God has all authority on heaven and earth, even as the Father has given it to the Son, and the Son will defeat the devil and all his agents. And Jesus will do so with a huff and a puff! The lawless one will be no match for the Son of God, as Jesus has the same breath of God which blew over the waters at creation and the same breath that God breathed again into Jesus at His resurrection. And lest we forget, it is the same breath that is the Spirit of God breathed out upon the Church at Pentecost! We need not fear Satan or the lawless one(s)—for we have the power of God at work in us!

Lord God, give us courage to trust, in the midst of evil and darkness, that with your Word, with a holy breath, Jesus overcomes sin, death and the devil. Amen.

Advent Action: Do you know someone who is struggling with evil in his or her life? Ask if you may pray with and for them—laying hands on them as you pray.

Tuesday of the Week of Advent III

For to us a child is born, to us a Son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called ‘Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.’ Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end. — Isaiah 9:2-7

Although we don't see it every day in the daily lectionary, in the Sunday readings for worship, the Third Sunday in Advent sees a turn—from thinking of eternal things and the last judgment and all the themes that are drawn from that, to intentional focus on the coming of the babe of Bethlehem.

The Third Sunday of Advent was traditionally termed “Gaudete Sunday,” or Sunday of Joy. The color for the day was rose or pink, to remind us in the increasing darkness of winter and the long season of Advent that joy is coming!

Our reading for today also reminds us of the coming of joy, as we hear at the beginning that “the people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light, on them has light shined. Thou hast multiplied the nation, thou has increased its joy.”

We read Isaiah 9:2-7 on Christmas Eve as we hear the prophecy of the coming child to be born to us—the Son of God who would be our Wonderful Counselor, Prince of Peace, who would bring never-ending peace! What a message of hope and joy in the midst of the season of Advent, but even more, in the midst of this troubled generation. We do indeed live in a land—yes, a world—of deep darkness as terrorism, violence and division continue. We need the prophecy and the promise now more than ever!

Father in heaven, we give thanks for the child born for us—Jesus Christ. May he bring everlasting peace—now! Amen.

Advent Action: Even if you haven't been keeping an Advent Candle Wreath in your home—light a candle for joy and peace!

Monday of the Week of Advent III

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises... for this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. — 2 Peter 1:1-11

We sometimes wonder why Christians turn to all manner of “self-help” books, strategies, exercises and gurus. Do we not have sufficient tools in the Christian’s biblical toolbox to help people who struggle in their daily lives? Is Christianity truly for the sweet by-and-by, offering little practical guidance for day to day living?

It’s not that Scripture doesn’t offer such guidance; it’s that Lutherans, at least, don’t know the Bible well enough to know where to look for such advice and counsel. If you don’t know where to look, then for a start, look at our reading from 2 Peter!

The beauty in this passage is that Peter begins by reminding us that, in His divine power, God has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness. He does this through the knowledge of Him, Christ Jesus, who calls us to share in His own glory and excellence! We are not called and gifted for mediocrity, but to share in Christ’s own glory and excellence! And then Peter goes on to tell us how to incorporate this glory and excellence, putting it into practice in our lives.

Without repeating it word for word, the apostle encourages us to make every effort to supplement faith with virtue, virtue with knowledge, knowledge with self-control, self-control with steadfastness, which leads to godliness, brotherly affection and love. This is a recipe for a happy, joy-filled, balanced, Christ-like life! And it flows from the gifts and promises of God, given to us freely, so that we might have all things “pertaining to life and godliness.”

Almighty Father, thank you for granting us these gifts and promises, that we may have healthy, joyful lives as followers and disciples of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Advent Action: Write the verse above on a card—and then make several copies to share with those who may need God’s help in their lives.

Friday of the Week of Advent II

Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed on and triumph, as it did among you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men; for not all have faith. But the Lord is faithful; he will strengthen you and guard you from evil. — 2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5

I once had a member of my congregation in Colorado Springs who was a spry and delightful 99½ years old. Although bedridden, she had hoped to make it to 100. An admirable goal, although she didn’t make it.

During a visit, she once lamented that she was of no earthly use. She couldn’t help at church or even show up for worship, and she was unable to do much for herself or the daughter with whom she lived.

Knowing her as I did, I asked if she prayed. She said, “Oh yes, Pastor, I pray for you and for our church every day!” I encouraged her to continue to pray, as that was the most important thing that could be done for our congregation and me as her pastor. It may very well be that those who clean the church, prepare for the Lord’s Supper and bake for the monthly covered dish supper may be too busy to pray regularly. For this reason, it is helpful to have those who will faithfully pray for the church and pastor.

Paul didn’t hesitate to ask the Thessalonians to pray for him and his companions in mission. He solicited their prayers—not only for his own health and well-being, not only for deliverance from wicked and evil men (and women) but that the word of the Lord he was proclaiming might speed on its way, triumphing as it went forth!

Lord God, as you are always ready to hear, make us always ready to pray—for our loved ones, for our church and yes, for pastors! In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Advent Action: Pray for your pastor and congregation daily!

Saturday of the Week of Advent II

But the Lord of hosts, him shall you regard as holy; let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. And he will become a sanctuary, and a stone of offense, and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many shall stumble thereon; they shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken. — Isaiah 8:1-15

Those who know Martin Luther's Small Catechism, know that each of the explanations of the Ten Commandments begin with the words, "We are to fear and love God so that..."

Some suggest it would be better to translate Luther's word "fear" as we are to be in "awe" of God. But what's wrong with loving God while also fearing Him? God is not, as I once heard, a white-haired old grandfatherly type who looks upon our sin and disobedience with a wink and a smile. God hates sin. God loves the sinner, but sin displeases God and alienates us from God and from one another. A healthy dose of fear reminds us that, while God surely loves and cares for us, He is still the almighty creator of the world and all that exists, who condemns sin and seeks the repentance of sinners.

Some may have heard me wonder whether the disrespect we see in our culture for parents, teachers, pastors and all in authority might have started with lack of fear and respect for God. As Lutherans, we have typically trained young persons to serve as acolytes, teaching them such reverent behavior as silence, bowing to the altar, being humble in the presence of God, because it teaches fear and love of God! Could it be that a faithful, well-heeled young acolyte corps might be the key to transforming our out-of-control culture—and bring children and youth back to worship? Hmm... might be worth consideration!

*Lord God of hosts, you are holy and deserving of our fear and love!
Amen.*

Advent Action: Without making a show of it, find an additional posture or motion to show fear and love of God in worship. For example, bow your head when addressing God, make the sign of the cross, etc.

Sunday of the Week of Advent III

John [the Baptizer] answered, "...You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before Him.' He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice; therefore this joy of mine is now full. He must increase, but I must decrease." — John 3:22-30

When preaching at the installation of one of our pastors, I often remind the congregation that their pastor is not their Savior. This usually warrants a chuckle or two, but it's not intended to be humorous! I wish you could hear how call committees and congregations speak of their yet-to-be-called new pastor in such glowing terms and with such high expectations that no one will be able to live up to them!

Many believe the new pastor will bring all the children, youth and inactive folks back to church the first month, while visiting every home, increasing membership and stewardship, restoring the church to its glory days post-WWII, when the pews were full to overflowing and there was always talk of expanding the church building!

And pastors must confess we are not always the most humble and unassuming servants, either. The motto for every pastor ought always to be, "Jesus must increase, but I must decrease!" This is not to say that the pastor is unimportant or unnecessary. God calls pastors to be His ministers of Word and Sacrament, for gosh sakes! We are to treat our pastors with kindness and respect as they seek to bring us the means of grace, being faithful under-shepherds of the flock.

But pastors are simply under-shepherds and ministers of God's gifts of grace. No more and no less. With John the Baptizer, we wish to always be pointing to Jesus as Lord and Savior—not to ourselves and our own identity or personhood. This is why, historically, pastors have worn simple black clothing during the week, and robes to cover themselves on Sunday—to remind themselves and everyone else—that it's all about Jesus!

Lord God, help us to always be pointing to Jesus, that He increase and I decrease. Amen.

Advent Action: Add a new Christmas ornament or decoration that is all about Jesus—and maybe make this a tradition!