



NALC ADVENT DEVOTIONAL 2021

WRITTEN BY THE NALC EXECUTIVE STAFF

Introduction

Advent is a time of preparation! As John the Forerunner called people to “prepare the way of the Lord,” this Advent many Christians will look for additional opportunities to prepare inwardly while also preparing outwardly. As we prepare our homes and churches for celebrating Christmas, most hope to have additional time to read Scripture, pray, worship and meditate, and we look for quiet time to prepare our hearts and lives for the many ways the Lord comes to us.

These devotions are for home and personal devotion, in addition to communal Advent worship. Our prayer is that they provide the reader with a brief, accessible devotional to deepen the Advent journey. They are written for those who may regularly spend in-depth time in Scripture and prayer but are also prepared in the hope that those who do not have a practice of daily devotions may find them a useful tool in developing a holy habit that may continue on long after Christmas.

This Advent daily devotional booklet — appropriately titled *Come!* — is based on the two-year daily lectionary provided in the North American Lutheran Church’s *Devoted To Prayer* daily prayer and reading guide, which is also an adapted version of the daily lectionary in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, Year II. This series of daily lessons is intended for Advent prior to even-numbered years. The daily lectionary appoints three lessons for each day, and seasonal psalms. For the purposes of this booklet, typically one reading has been chosen as the basis for each day’s reflection. Each author has provided a section of the reading for reflection, but when the biblical text is longer, we have provided that entire text with a shorter devotion because the Word of God is more powerful than our humble reflections.

The executive staff of the NALC have prepared devotions for each day from the First Sunday of Advent to Christmas Day. The prayer following each devotion may be seen as a “prayer starter,” encouraging your thoughts to go deeper into prayer, or you may find them sufficient as printed. On some days there is an Advent Action, encouraging an appropriate and thoughtful simple response to the reading and reflection. For your information, these devotions are available in a variety of formats at thenalc.org/advent. We would like to consider these devotions a conversation. Email the authors if you would like to comment or share a thought.

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THE FIRST WEEK OF
ADVENT

The First Sunday in Advent | November 28, 2021

Kamehameha IV, 1864, and Emma, 1885, King and Queen of Hawaii

Amos 1:1-5, 13-2:8; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Luke 21:5-19; Psalms 24 & 150 (AM); Psalms 25 & 110 (PM)

^{21:5} And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, ⁶ “As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.” ⁷ And they asked him, “Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?” ⁸ And he said, “See that you are not led astray. For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is at hand.’ Do not go after them. ⁹ And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things must first take place, but the end will not be at once. ¹⁰ Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. ¹¹ There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. ¹² But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name’s sake. ¹³ This will be your opportunity to bear witness. ¹⁴ Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, ¹⁵ for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. ¹⁶ You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. ¹⁷ You will be hated by all for my name’s sake. ¹⁸ But not a hair of your head will perish. ¹⁹ By your endurance you will gain your lives.

— Luke 21:5-19



It has often struck me that as we begin the season of Advent, looking forward to the celebration of our Lord’s birth, that we are also encouraged, if not challenged, to look forward to the day He will return. Today’s passage is one that does just that. It speaks of the destruction of everything in this life that is not of God, and of the kind of events that will take place as the world, as we know it, comes to an end. Apocalyptic literature is what we often call it—passages that speak of cataclysmic events, ones that can only be seen as signs of the beginning of the end. Today’s passage is certainly apocalyptic. It speaks of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, of nations rising against nations, of wars, of earthquakes, of famines and plagues, and of how followers of Jesus will be persecuted and betrayed. Before the end is to come, Jesus says, all kinds of apocalyptic events will take place. At the same time, our Lord also tells His disciples to never lose sight of the calling we have in Him, and to never forget the promises that belong to us through faith. When the world begins to fall apart, Jesus says, remember whose world it is. When life begins to turn upside down, use it as an opportunity to tell the world where to turn. More than anything, as we look forward to our Lord’s return, make sure you are building your life on a foundation that will last. The disciples of Jesus were as vulnerable as people are today. They looked at the Temple, they looked at the foundations set in stone. They could not imagine the possibility of anything being more solid and secure. Remember what Jesus said? He said, “As for what you see, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down.” And so it was in the year 70 AD; that Temple that seemed so indestructible was destroyed. You tell me. What are the foundations upon which people build their lives today? Are they any more secure than the ones from long ago? Good health? A solid stock portfolio? Job security? Money in the bank?

World history is filled with stories of people who have built their lives on the wrong foundations. People whose life’s details are vastly different from one another, but whose stories end up in the same place. Jesus says, “Be careful where you are building. Do not forget what will last and what will not.” Isaiah writes, “The grass withers, the flower fades; but the Word of our God will stand forever.” The psalmist asks, “If the

foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?” Paul says, “But God’s firm foundation stands...For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” The lesson is simple and clear. “If it is of this world,” Jesus says, “then it is of this world. And if it is of this world, then it will not last.” Not one stone in this life will be left upon another! Every one of them will be thrown down! As we begin this season of Advent, take our Lord’s words to heart. Build your life on the foundation of His Word. Secure your life on a foundation that will last.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, as we prepare to celebrate your birth into this world and as we look forward to that day when You will return, help us to build our lives on foundations that will last: Your Word, Your promises, the work You have accomplished for us on the cross and in the empty tomb. Amen.

Advent Action: Make a list of the foundations upon which you are building your life, and then make another list of the changes you need to make to ensure that your foundation is secure.

November 29, 2021 | Monday of the Week of Advent I

Amos 2:6-16; 3:1-11; 2 Peter 1:1-21; Matthew 21:1-22; Psalms 122 & 145 (AM); Psalms 40 & 67 (PM)

^{1:5} For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge,
⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness,
⁷ and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.⁸ For if these qualities are yours
and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus
Christ.⁹ For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was
cleansed from his former sins.¹⁰ Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and
election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall.

– 2 Peter 1:5-10



In the world of teaching and learning today, we hear a lot about what pedagogues call “Evidence-Based Teaching.” Basically, it is the use of best practices that have proven effective in the classroom. Students today have so much more to learn, it seems, and they have to learn it faster than ever before. Think about when you were in kindergarten. Were you reading by the end of the year? Today, students are expected to be reading in kindergarten and know numerous words by sight. How they perform by the end of the first year of school is evidence whether the teaching was effective or not.

In Peter’s second letter he took on a challenge that believers still face today. Peter’s concern was that the pure faith in Christ was being obscured among God’s people. This urgent message was a follow up to his first letter where he reminded the Church of their holiness in Christ (1 Peter 1:13). Peter had made it clear that Jesus — the stone that the builders rejected — became the Chief Cornerstone of the Church. Those who follow Jesus are living stones in His holy house (1 Peter 2:4-5).

However, among Peter’s audience, a problem had surfaced when some preachers came along and twisted the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They had been misled with religious-sounding myths and stories, inspired by their human imagination and desires. So Peter wanted to remind the Church of some key teachings of the faith, and the importance of putting what we believe into practice. In essence, he was saying, “Don’t you remember you were baptized? If you do, then show the evidence of your faith.”

Peter put forth two major points in this first chapter:

- 1) Only faith has power to make a person holy.
- 2) Faith cannot exist without good works.

We know that faith in Christ is what justifies us and makes us right with God. It’s not by good works that we are saved, but by grace and grace alone. But that doesn’t mean that we ought to sit tight and watch the world go by. We know that our good works don’t save us — but when faith is present, there is a natural outpouring of goodness that is directed to our neighbors.

When a person comes to faith in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit compels us to do good in the world. Martin Luther said it this way, “[Peter] wants to exhort believers to give evidence of their faith by means of good works. For he does not want faith without good works or works without faith. But he wants faith first and good works in addition to and flowing from faith” (*LW*, Vol. 30, p. 152-153).

For Lutherans, to speak of “evidence-based faith” probably makes our spiritual antennae go up. But Peter is not adding conditions on to our faith. He is simply encouraging the faithful to put their faith into action — not for the sake of salvation, but for the sake of their neighbors who benefit from their goodness and mercy. He spells out how the evidence creates spiritual strength within us:

“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. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:5-8).

Peter is right. We have been given everything in Christ! Our prayer is that our faith would reach out into the world so that all may know His love, His life, and His salvation. But this all begins and ends in Him. When we hold fast to the promise we have been given, God himself provides the evidence of faith through His will being done in us. Never forget, you are baptized, and God’s power is at work in you!

Prayer: Holy God, you are the source of our strength and thank you for the gifts of life and salvation. Help us always to show our faith in ways that lift others up, tend to their needs and inspire them to know you. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

November 30, 2021 | Tuesday of the Week of Advent I

ST. ANDREW, APOSTLE

Deuteronomy 30:11-14; Romans 10:8b-18; Matthew 4:18-22; Psalms 19 & 146 (AM); Psalms 85 & 94 (PM)

^{4:18} While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

– Matthew 4:18-20

^{10:14} How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? ¹⁵ And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!”

– Romans 10:14-15



Names are important. In fact, for many of us, our names were given to us for some particular reason — perhaps to honor a family member, or exemplify a biblical character. Throughout much of history, converts to Christianity were actually given a “Christian name” at their Baptism, usually as a sign of their new identity in Christ.

I have always been honored to have been named after the apostle Andrew, but it was only recently that I began to understand the significance of sharing in his legacy. Andrew is only mentioned a handful of times in the New Testament; he’s a character mostly behind the scenes. Here in Matthew, we learn that Andrew is one of the first disciples called by Jesus to follow him. And in the first chapter of John’s Gospel, we learn a little more detail: Andrew has an incredible early moment of faith and action. After spending a day with Jesus in his home, Andrew not only recognizes him as the Messiah, but instantly ventures off to share this news with his brother, Simon, who then receives a new name and identity when discovering the Christ.

“He (Andrew) brought him to Jesus” (John 1:42). It’s a short and simple story, and yet in this moment, Andrew — who responded to the invitation to come and see — then did his own small part to share Christ with his brother and throughout his town. In this Advent season, we have a great opportunity to reflect on the coming of Christ to this world as we prepare for Christmas. As much as we need this season of preparation, there are others who need to be brought to Jesus as well. The Church of Jesus Christ needs a whole lot more Andrews, people who believe in Christ so much that they are willing to talk about Christ to their closest relatives, friends and those they encounter. May we remember the call, and have courage to share the grand story of Jesus with others during Advent, Christmas and Epiphany! After all, “how beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!”

Prayer: Almighty God, You gave Your apostle Andrew the grace to obey the call of Your Son and to bring his brother to Jesus. Give us also, who are called by Your Holy Word, grace to follow Jesus without delay and to bring into His presence those who are near to us, for He lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Advent Action: Ask the Holy Spirit to place people in your path during this Advent season with whom you can share the hope of Christ’s redemption and reign.

Wednesday of the Week of Advent I | December 1, 2021

Nicholas Ferrar, Deacon, 1637

Amos 3:12-4:5; 2 Peter 3:1-10; Matthew 21:23-32; Psalms 50 & 147:1-12 (AM); Psalms 53 & 17 (PM)

^{21:23} Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you this authority?”
²⁴ Jesus replied, “I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. ²⁵ John’s baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?” They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’ ²⁶ But if we say, ‘Of human origin’—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet.” ²⁷ So they answered Jesus, “We don’t know.” Then he said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

– Matthew 21:23-27 NIV



While He was here on earth Jesus was doing His ministry with absolute authority. He was unlike any other religious teacher or religious leader of His time. Most of them inherited their offices through their family lineage and others joined religious ranks for some benefit or artificial gain. However, Jesus came from the region of Galilee out of nowhere and started to teach with absolute authority and perform so many works of power.

This authority that Jesus was manifesting in His mission and ministry among men were clearly manifesting three powerful things. The first manifestation was *disruptive manifestation*. It was disrupting the status quo and tradition of His time. It’s not something that was deduced from culture or lineage, but it was something that came straight from heaven. So, for thousands of years the status quo that was established in tradition and culture of religious circumstances was disrupted by what Jesus was doing.

The second nature of Jesus’ authority was *revealing authority*. This authority that was exercised by Jesus revealed the person and identity of Jesus. This authority clarified to everyone listening and watching the mission and ministry of Jesus that this Jesus was unlike any other religious leader. There was no one like him before and there is no one like Him now. Therefore, the authority that was displayed in the mission and ministry of Jesus clearly indicated that He was the son of the living God.

The third impact of Jesus’ authority was *attractional authority*. When He was teaching with that authority and when He was performing so many miracles, particularly miracles of healing, thousands and thousands of people were attracted to him. The ultimate goal of Jesus’ mission and ministry was not for them to only benefit from the miracles that Jesus was performing but to bring humanity to the saving grace of God — disruptive authority, revealing authority and attractional authority. Even today that authority of Jesus is still working throughout the world disrupting the status quo, revealing the person of Jesus Christ and ultimately drawing people closer to the saving grace of God.

Prayer: May God continue to disrupt our reality, may God reveal Jesus Christ fully to us and may God draw us closer to Him so that we can work with Him and experience the miraculous saving grace of God. Amen.

Advent Action: For the rest of Lent, each morning when you get up, make the sign of the cross in remembrance of your Baptism. Remember who, and Whose, you are.

December 2, 2021 | Thursday of the Week of Advent I

Amos 4:6-13; 2 Peter 3:11-18; Matthew 21:33-46; Psalms 18:1-20 & 147:13-21 (AM); Psalms 126 & 62 (PM)

^{21:43} Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. ⁴⁴ And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.

– Matthew 21:43-44



Anyone who's been around for some time has seen events occur — whether it be accidents, horrific weather, crime or the like — and may say to themselves, "Wow, that could have been us! Glad that wasn't the case though!" If a political event affected many negatively, but could have been averted, one might ask, "Why did they do that?". In Amos 4 and 2 Peter, the authors ask much the same of the reader in telling the story, especially when the Lord has done so much for them. God Himself points out what He has done for Israel and yet they do not return to Him. I remember telling my parents as a teenager when they were reminding me of what I ought to be doing, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know, I know, I know" to which my mother would ask, "If you know, why are you doing (name it)?" I didn't usually have much of an answer.

This is the awesome reality of Jesus' coming despite our proclivity to sin and our response to Him. Are we responding at all? Advent is a time of waiting, of preparation and a remembrance of His promises kept in the death and resurrection of our Lord, and His promise to come again. But as Bonhoeffer says, "Our whole life is an Advent season, that is a season of waiting for the last Advent, for the time there will be a new heaven and a new earth." (*God is in the Manger*, p. 2). How are we to be watching, waiting, being found faithful as disciples in the mean meantime of the times we live in? Are we living out the Gospel as we ought to be as we eagerly anticipate, if we are, that is, the coming of Jesus once again?

Prayer: Lord God, God of all goodness and patience, stir our hearts to remember and walk in Your ways. Amen.

Advent Action: Remember when God acted in your life. How are you waiting today?

Friday of the Week of Advent I | December 3, 2021

Francis Xavier, Missionary to Asia, 1552

Jantine Auguste Haumersen, First Ordained Female Lutheran Pastor, 1967

Amos 5:1-17; Jude 1-16; Matthew 22:1-14; Psalms 102 & 148 (AM); Psalms 130 & 16 (PM)

^{22:8}Then said [the king] to his servants, “The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹ Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.” ¹⁰ And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So, the wedding hall was filled with guests.

¹¹“But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment.

¹² And he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?’ And he was speechless.

¹³ Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ ¹⁴ For many are called, but few are chosen.”

— Matthew 22:8-14



This parable of the kingdom of God ends with some bad news — at least for the poorly dressed wedding guest. He accepted the invitation, but evidently, he was either ignorant or uncaring of the dress code. So, was he politely asked to leave and find more suitable attire? No, he was bound “hand and foot and cast into the outer darkness.” The point seems to be that there is a great difference between accepting an invitation and personally taking responsibility for preparing to attend.

When the invitation was first sent out, it was ignored, then spurned. So, the king invites everyone within earshot. “Come, both good and bad, rich and poor, men and women, Jew and Gentile, black and white, people of every nation!” Fortunately for us, Jesus (the king) is not overly fastidious about those he invites.

However, to accept the invitation calls for preparation. How do we prepare to enter the King’s wedding feast? That seems to be the crux of the issue. Looking elsewhere in the New Testament, Christians are called to clothe themselves in Christ (Romans 13:14) and “with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience...and over all these virtues put on love” (Colossians 3:12, 14). Preparation means transformation.

We are called and invited into the Kingdom of God. Advent is about getting ready.

Prayer: Thank You Almighty Father, that in my Baptism You have clothed me with Christ, washed me in His blood, and called me to discipleship. Grant me grace to clothe my life with deeds of faith, hope, and love. I ask this through Christ Jesus, my Lord. Amen.

Advent Action: What can I do this Advent to prepare for the coming kingdom? Is there a special act of “compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience or love” that God is calling me to put on?

December 4, 2021 | Saturday of the Week of Advent I

John of Damascus, Priest, c. 760

Amos 5:18-27; Jude 17-25; Matthew 22:15-22; Psalms 90 & 149 (AM); Psalms 80 & 72 (PM)

^{22:15} Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. ¹⁶ And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone’s opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” ¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the coin for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” ²¹ They said, “Caesar’s.” Then he said to them, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” ²² When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.

– Matthew 22:15-22



Who wants to talk about taxes during Advent, as we try to focus our minds, hearts and lives on the coming of the Incarnate Son of God into the world? It’s hard enough to stave off the pressure of work, family and secular holiday activities without having *taxes* appearing in our Advent devotions! So, what might this reading say to us about our Advent journey to the Christ-mass?

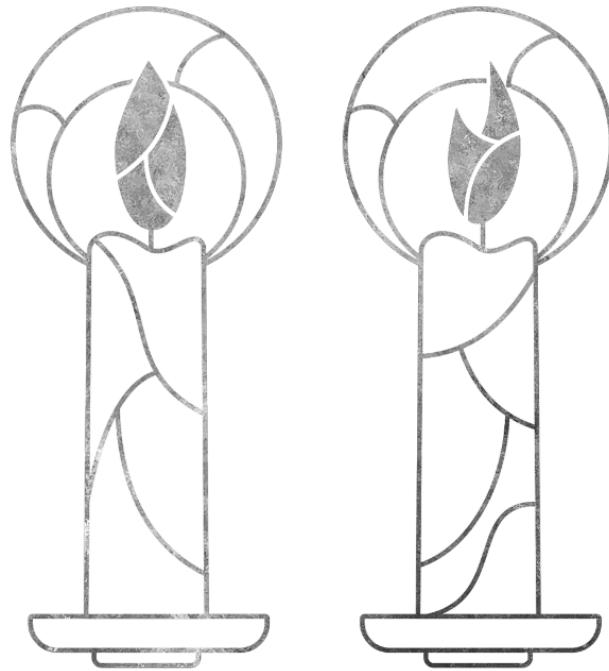
In the Gospel of Matthew, we see that the religious establishment have been threatened by the teachings of Jesus and His apparent authority, and rightly so. Jesus has challenged their position and their power. He is perceived as one who has the very authority of God, speaking and acting with that authority. Now, Jesus has been challenged by Pharisees, priests, scribes and soon Sadducees. They have enlisted the Herodians in their fight, who have authority from the Roman emperor. The proverbial deck seems stacked heavily against Jesus. If they can now get Him to speak against Caesar, He will have incriminated Himself, entangling Himself in such a way that He may now be arrested and silenced, which has been the plan all along. As often happens, Jesus turns the question back on His interrogators, giving no easy answer to their question, while suggesting a powerful truth.

If the question is not, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?” but rather, “What is there in this world which doesn’t belong to God?” — the religious leaders are challenged to wrestle with a deeper, more profound issue — the sovereignty of God over all human principalities and powers! “When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.”

For those of us who are observing Advent, in preparation for Christmas, we are aware there are those who challenge the divinity of the Christ child, question Jesus as God’s only begotten Son or claim that the virgin birth is a myth. We are not deterred or disheartened by those who question and challenge the Holy Scriptures. We cling to the faith of the apostles, the Church Doctor/Fathers, like John of Damascus (commemorated today) and our own spiritual parents in the faith! We hold fast to the beautiful great, glad tidings which were sung by angels and even now, ring from earth and heaven, proclaiming the Good News of the Word made flesh.

Prayer: Holy God, give us courage and good cheer as we observe Advent and Christmas, despite challenge and questions from those who don’t believe. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Advent Action: Learn something about St. John of Damascus, c. 760, Church Doctor/Father.



THE SECOND WEEK OF
ADVENT

December 5, 2021 | The Second Sunday in Advent

Clement of Alexandria, Priest, c. 210

Amos 6:1-14; 2 Thessalonians 1:5-12; Luke 1:57-68; Psalms 24 & 150 (AM); Psalms 25 & 110 (PM)

^{1:57} Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸ And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. ⁵⁹ And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, ⁶⁰ but his mother answered, “No; he shall be called John.” ⁶¹ And they said to her, “None of your relatives is called by this name.” ⁶² And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. ⁶³ And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And they all wondered. ⁶⁴ And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. ⁶⁵ And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, ⁶⁶ 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. ⁶⁷ And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, ⁶⁸ “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people.”

— Luke 1:57-68



The final verse of today's text is the first verse in what is often referred to as the *Benedictus*. From the Latin word meaning “blessed,” the *Benedictus* is a word of blessing offered to God. More specifically, the words of the text form what we speak about as the *Benedictus Dominus Deus*: “Blessed be the Lord God.”

In this case, the *Benedictus* is a word of blessing to the Lord God offered by Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. It comes at a time, in Zechariah's life, in which such a word of blessing was the natural result of what had just happened.

If you remember the story, earlier in this opening chapter of Luke's Gospel, while Zechariah was on duty in the Temple as a priest, an angel of the Lord appeared to him with some surprising news. He and his wife, Elizabeth, who were both old and who had been unable to have children, were told that God had heard their prayer. A child would be born. He would go before the Lord to prepare His way. And his name was to be John.

When Zechariah heard the news, he began to question the angel. “How can I be sure? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years?”

The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.”

And so it was that Elizabeth became pregnant and nine months later gave birth to a son. And so it was that the father, Zechariah, was unable to speak, just as the angel had declared ... until that day when it was time to give the child a name. Before he was to be circumcised, the child's name was to be made known. As was the custom of the Jewish people, everyone thought that the child would be named Zechariah, after his father.

But that was not the name they were told by the angel to give. The angel had said that his name was to be John. And so, that is what Elizabeth said. And when asked, that is also what his father Zechariah wrote.

And from that moment on, “his mouth was opened, and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, in a *Benedictus*, praising God.”

For Zechariah, who was chosen by God to be the father of the forerunner of Jesus, a song of praise was a natural response. God’s word had been fulfilled. His promise to Zechariah and Elizabeth had come to pass. What better way to say thanks, than to offer his words and his life in a song of praise.

Two thousand years have come and gone since Zechariah first heard the angel’s words in the Temple. Since that time, also, John the Baptist was born, his ministry pointed to Jesus, and you and I, through the life, death and resurrection of Christ have been blessed.

What better way for us to respond than to offer our own word of thanks and praise to God. And what better response to make than to open our own mouths and to use our own tongues and to let the world know, just like Zechariah did, what God has done for us in Jesus.

May this day be one in which we declare our own words of *Benedictus Dominus Deus*, “Blessed be the Lord God,” to the God who has saved us and blessed us eternally in His Son.

Prayer: *Benedictus Dominus Deus*: “Blessed be the Lord God,” who has planned and promised and fulfilled His saving work for us in Jesus. Amen.

Advent Action: Spend time in prayer, thanking God for the abundance of His mercy, for the gracious love shown to us in Jesus, and for the blessings He has poured upon us and fulfilled for us in Christ.

December 6, 2021 | Monday of the Week of Advent II

Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, c. 342

Amos 7:1-9; Revelation 1:1-8; Matthew 22:23-33; Psalms 122 & 145 (AM); Psalms 40 & 67 (PM)

^{1:1}The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John,² who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.³Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

— Revelation 1:1-3



The story of Saint Nicholas is one that inspires us to serve and bear witness to our neighbors of Christ's love and mercy. In a culture that all too often gets bogged down in shopping for gifts for family, friends and coworkers this time of year, it is good to take a step back and reflect on the life of this saint whose actions pointed to Jesus, the Savior.

Saint Nicholas was born in the third century to wealthy parents who lived in what is modern day Turkey. His parents died in an epidemic leaving Nicholas orphaned and alone. Nicholas devoted his life to Christ and as a young man he was chosen to serve as the bishop of Myra. In those days, Christians suffered greatly for their faith as many around the world today still do. It has been written that Nicholas was moved by Jesus' words to the rich young man in Matthew's Gospel, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" (Matthew 19:21). Unlike the young man who encountered Jesus, Nicholas felt convicted to give away his possessions in order to help the poor and in need. We all know the traditions that emerged from the stories of the life of this patron saint of children. His faith became a witness to the generosity and care of the Lord Jesus.

In the revelation that was given to John, the apostle, we hear a call to bear witness to the life and salvation of the living God. Coincidentally, John wrote down the Word of the Lord around 250 years before Nicholas was born, from an island called Patmos off the coast of Turkey. This letter to the churches in Asia Minor begins with John identifying himself as the one who "bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ" (1:2). John describes Jesus as the "faithful witness," the "firstborn of the dead," and the "ruler of kings on earth" (1:5). He goes on to say that on the last day when Christ returns, every eye will see Him. There will be no mistake. This is good news for us who wait and watch for our Lord's return, who call on Him in pain and suffering saying, "Come, Lord Jesus!" There will be no doubt in the hearts or minds of any human being when Jesus comes again to take us home. In the meantime, however, we are called to bear witness to His love, mercy and salvation. If we don't give this testimony, who will? Like Saint Nicholas, and John before him, we have been given God's holy Word and are commissioned to share this life-giving, life-saving revelation with all we meet. We are sent into the world to bear witness to the one who is the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead and the ruler of all kings. Amen.

Prayer: Loving God, You have called us to be witnesses to the goodness of your Son, Jesus. Give us a boldness to share His love and to remind our world that Christmas is about Christ and that this Advent time is about waiting and watching for His return. Amen.

Advent Action: Who needs to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ in your family or friend group? Who needs to be urged to refocus this season on Christ instead of what to buy for everyone? Bear witness to Christ and bring joy and comfort to those who need a good word.

Tuesday of the Week of Advent II | December 7, 2021

Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, 397

Amos 7:10-17; Revelation 1:9-16; Matthew 22:34-46; Psalms 33 & 146 (AM); Psalms 85 & 94 (PM)

^{94:1} O LORD God of vengeance, O God of vengeance, show yourself. ² Rise up, O Judge of the world; give the arrogant their just deserts. ³ How long shall the wicked, O LORD, how long shall the wicked triumph? ⁴ They bluster in their insolence; all evildoers are full of boasting. ⁵ They crush your people, O LORD, and afflict your chosen nation. ⁶ They murder the widow and the stranger and put the orphans to death. ⁷ Yet they say, “The LORD does not see, the God of Jacob takes no notice.” ⁸ Consider well, you dullards among the people; when will you fools understand? ⁹ He that planted the ear, does he not hear? He that formed the eye, does he not see? ¹⁰ He who admonishes the nations, will he not punish? He who teaches all the world, has he no knowledge? ¹¹ The LORD knows our human thoughts; how like a puff of wind they are. ¹² Happy are they whom you instruct, O Lord, whom you teach out of your law; ¹³ to give them rest in evil days, until a pit is dug for the wicked. ¹⁴ For the LORD will not abandon his people, nor will he forsake his own. ¹⁵ For judgment will prevail be just, and all the true of heart will follow it. ¹⁶ Who rose up for me against the wicked? Who took my part against the evildoers? ¹⁷ If the LORD had not come to my help, I should soon have dwelt in the land of silence. ¹⁸ As often as I said, “My foot has slipped,” your love, O LORD, upheld me. ¹⁹ When many cares fill my mind, your consolations cheer my soul. ²⁰ Can a corrupt tribunal have any part with you, one which frames evil into law? ²¹ They conspire against the life of the just and condemn the innocent to death. ²² But the LORD has become my stronghold, and my God the rock of my trust. ²³ He will turn their wickedness back upon them and destroy them in their own malice; the LORD our God will destroy them.

– Psalm 94 LBW

Advent is a season of longing, of yearning for our God to *come*. We may have sentimental feelings when we remember the coming God in the form of a human baby over 2,000 years ago, but we should also be filled with discomfort and anticipation. The world is not right. There are evils and injustices everywhere we turn, every time we turn on the TV or scroll through the news on our smartphones: the killing of innocents, young and old, born and unborn; violence and cultural bloodlust; judges and juries that seem to allow grievous wrongs; active racism, prejudice and the advocacy for ethnic supremacies; the abandonment of the widows, the elderly, and the orphans in our midst; the rejection of refugees, strangers, and all those who need good news both materially and spiritually. We are sad. We are angry. We are also ashamed of our own contributions to these tragedies, our “thoughts, words, and deeds” both “done and left undone.” We are utterly unable to “love the Lord [our] God” or “love [our] neighbors as [ourselves]” (Matt. 22:37, 39). Like many prophets and psalmists, we, too, call out to Jesus, “how long?” *Come, Lord Jesus!*!

If you’ve been following along the devotional this Advent, you surely have noticed that each Tuesday evening, we have prayed Psalm 94, traditionally called *Deus ultionum* or “God of vengeance.” Today’s passage in Amos gives us a taste of what that vengeance looks like. As Christians, we believe that God is restoring and renewing His whole creation, but that means that He will root out any form of evil that serves as an obstacle to His purpose — an eternal relationship of life and love with His people. To those who perpetuate injustices, advocate on behalf of evils, and do not know the Lord, his “snow-white hair,” “fiery eyes,” “bronze feet,” and “roaring voice” are the terrifying condemnations of the Law (Rev. 3:14-15). But to those of us that follow in the way of Christ; participate in the Good News of the Kingdom by word and deed; and suffer with Him on this earth; welcome the life-giving Gospel of the God of vengeance. *Come, Lord Jesus!*

Prayer: Lord Jesus, do not abandon Your people, nor ignore the power of the enemy against Your Church. Grant that those who suffer for the sake of justice may find consolation in the cross and be filled with Your joy now and forever. Amen.

Advent Action: Intimately familiar with suffering and injustice in his lifetime was Ambrose of Milan, whom we commemorate today. Ambrose was constantly suffering from persecution at the hands of the Roman emperors during his time in church leadership, and took deep inspiration from Job's life in his writings. At one point in his life, Ambrose stood at the front doors of his cathedral and refused to allow the Emperor Theodosius to enter after he had participated in a slaughterous massacre of the innocent inhabitants of Thessalonica. Ambrose's courage in the face of injustice allowed the Holy Spirit to convict the emperor, who fell down in tears of repentance and confessed of his sin before Ambrose. Consider meditating on (1) the evil and injustice in the world — whether global or in your own community, and (2) the Christian call to cruciformity — a “cross-shaped” life of sacrifice and suffering following the footsteps of Jesus. Perhaps use Psalm 94 as a starting place to pray for the Lord to *come* and renew and heal our world. If you have extra time, read or sing Ambrose's great Advent hymn, *Veni redemptor gentium*, or “Come, Redeemer of the nations” (sometimes translated “Come, thou Redeemer of the earth”).

Wednesday of the Week of Advent II | December 8, 2021

Amos 8:1-14; Revelation 1:17-2:7; Matthew 23:1-12; Psalms 50 & 147:1-12 (AM); Psalms 53 & 17 (PM)

^{23:1} Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: ²"The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. ³So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. ⁴They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. ⁵Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; ⁶they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; ⁷they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called 'Rabbi' by others. ⁸"But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers.⁹ And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. ¹⁰Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah. ¹¹The greatest among you will be your servant. ¹²For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

— Matthew 23:1-12 NIV



One of the most explicit virtues that we see and learn from the life of Jesus is the virtue of humility. The apostle Paul writes about this clearly in the Book of Philippians chapter 2. Jesus went from the highest possible place of divinity to the lowest possible place of humanity. He did this absolutely willingly and in total submission and obedience to His Father. Therefore, humility is something critically important in the life and witness of a Christian.

On the other side — arrogance, pride, rebellion and a life of disobedience is the most revealing character of Satan. However, we also see those kinds of behaviors and characters among people who consider themselves religious. That's why Jesus is challenging that nature of sin in humanity through this text in Matthew 23. No one can see and no one can follow God without humility. Humility is coming and standing before God and admitting and confessing our shortcomings and declaring before the God of the universe that there is absolutely nothing that we can do without Him. And faith is standing before the God almighty and declaring that there is nothing impossible with him. Humility is the other side of faith and faith is the other side of humanity. Therefore, faith is a means of salvation which means humility is also another means of salvation.

The Law of God brings us to humility while the Gospel of Jesus Christ brings us to faith. Through humility and faith, we complete our salvation in Jesus Christ. Those who exalt themselves will ultimately be humiliated while those who humiliate themselves or humble themselves before God will always be exalted by God.

Prayer: Dear God, please bring the power of Your Law and the power of Your Word into our life constantly, so that we can walk humbly. Dear Jesus, please pour out the power of Your Gospel into our soul so that we can walk and follow You by faith. Amen.

December 9, 2021 | Thursday of the Week of Advent II

Amos 9:1-10; Revelation 2:8-17; Matthew 23:13-26; Psalms 18:1-20 & 147:13-21 (AM); Psalms 126 & 62 (PM)

^{23:13} “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in.¹⁵ Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.¹⁶ Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’¹⁷ You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred?¹⁸ And you say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.’¹⁹ You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred?²⁰ So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it.²¹ And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it.²² And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.²³ Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.²⁴ You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!²⁵ Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.²⁶ You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.”

– Matthew 23:13-26



It's a difficult and painful thing to be judged and found wanting. Advent by many in today's world take it like an early extension of Christmas, at least many stores do, reducing the holy season to another opportunity to make a buck. Our attention becomes commingled with the consumerism of the day and we become distracted yet again, like one satisfied with the hors d'oeuvres at a grand dinner party when the feast is yet to come, our eyes and hearts are elsewhere than they ought to be.

One does not gloss over bad manners or inappropriate clothing when one is preparing to greet the Lord of the second Advent. The Scriptures use many parables about clothing and dinners and the like to refer to the state of one's being before the Almighty. Advent is such a time to be looking in the mirror and remembering what has been done and what will be, and what we are clothed with ought to reflect the state of our heart. Hypocrisy is denounced soundly in Matthew and elsewhere and the word as an acting term means, speaking from “under a mask as an actor” would in those days of old. These days of preparation call us to contemplate whether we are acting the part or living faithfully. The good news is, despite the glossing over of the holy by the secular and at times profane, the Spirit of who is to come seeps through the veil and some still anticipate and celebrate the goodness of the God who knows our weaknesses and gives us time, mercy and grace until that day we confess in the Apostles’ Creed, “He will come again to judge the living and the dead.”

Prayer: Lord God, by Your Holy Spirit, teach me to live in truth. Amen.

Advent Action: Think about how you might be seen as a hypocrite by some and remember the mercy of God.

Friday of the Week of Advent II | December 10, 2021

Haggai 1:1-15; Revelation 2:18-29; Matthew 23:27-39; Psalms 102 & 148 (AM); Psalms 130 & 16 (PM)

^{23:29} “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!...O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you desolate.”

— Matthew 23:29, 37-38



Last Friday we looked at the story of the wedding guest who was tossed out of the wedding party because he wasn't wearing a wedding garment (Matthew 22:1-14). This is not about outward attire, but about inner transformation. Jesus brings this truth to a boil when He calls His opponents “hypocrites.”

In the ancient world a hypocrite (*hypocrites*) is a term used in the theater. It referred to an actor who wore a mask and played a role. There is a stage personality and then there is the “real” person. Jesus called the scribes and Pharisees “hypocrites.” They were living before an “audience” of their peers. They masked their true selves. Jesus says to them, “woe to you...” (Matthew 23:13, 16, 23, 25, 27, 29).

The woeful problem with hypocrisy is that we hide ourselves from the truth. We resist being unmasked, known for who we truly are because if you (or God) really knew me — would you still love me?

But, there is a good surprise. J.R.R. Tolkien called it a *eucatastrophe* — *a good catastrophe*. We let God see us and wonder of wonders, we discover that God loves, forgives and calls us to come to Him like a mother hen calls her wandering brood. Our unmasking is not our undoing. It is our salvation.

Yet, sadly it is possible that we live a masked life. We'll go to our graves rather than be unmasked. We'll watch everything we love destroyed behind the supposed safety of our masks of righteousness, or self-importance, or superiority, or respectability, or prestige. Jesus, with a breaking heart, cries out, “Woe to you ... How often would I have gathered you together under my wings, but you were not willing!”

Prayer: Oh loving heavenly Father, You sent Your beloved Son to reconcile the world to Yourself. You see deeply into every part of my heart. You know my secret sins, and still You call me to take shelter under Your wing. There I rest securely. In Jesus Name, Amen.

Advent Action: Take some time to reflect. Are there things in your life that make you feel unlovable? What are you hiding? Prayerfully consider going to a trusted pastor. Allow that pastor to hear your confession. Our unmasking is our salvation.

December 11, 2021 | Saturday of the Week of Advent II

Lars Olsen Skrefsrud, Missionary to India, 1910

Haggai 2:1-19; Revelation 3:1-6; Matthew 24:1-14; Psalms 90 & 149 (AM); Psalms 80 & 72 (PM)

^{24:1} Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. ² But he answered them, "You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." ³ As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" ⁴ And Jesus answered them, "See that no one leads you astray. ⁵ For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray. ⁶ And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. ⁷ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. ⁸ All these are but the beginning of the birth pains. ⁹" Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. ¹⁰ And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. ¹¹ And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. ¹² And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold.¹³ But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ¹⁴ And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

– Matthew 24:1-14

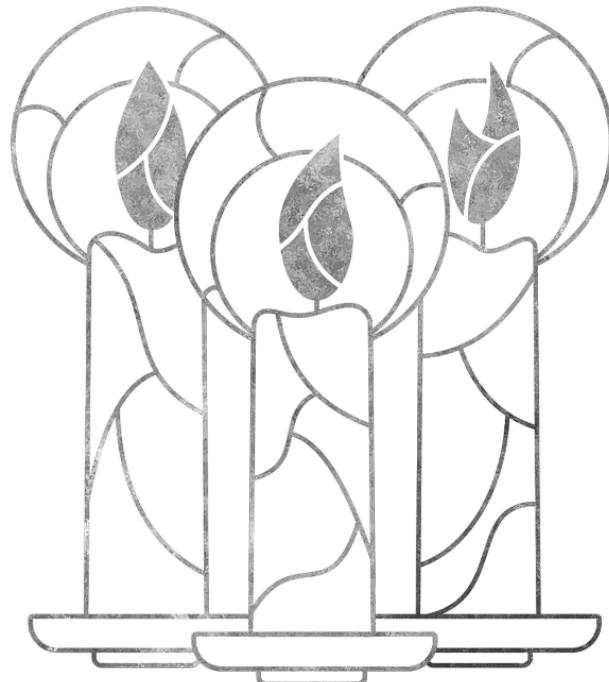
There would be good reason for some to look around at the world as it is today, and conclude, "Well, this is surely the coming of the end times!" There is conflict and division, internal national strife, as well as tension between nations and peoples. At the same time, we live in a post-Christian North American culture which seems hell-bent on doing away with biblical Christianity, the truth and authority of Holy Scripture and our Judeo-Christian foundations. Jesus says at that time "many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray." And ... "because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold."

Does that not seem a haunting reflection of our current reality in North America? There have been TV commercials, YouTube videos and podcasts by evangelistic preachers recently, pointing to these as signs of the end times. And guess what? Jesus Himself says this is so. Shocking as it might seem to Lutherans, Jesus appears to agree with TV preachers. This is not the end time, but these are signs that we are moving toward that time when He will come again in power and glory. Jesus describes them as the "beginning of the birth pains."

And what does it mean that these are the "beginning of the birth pains?" As with childbirth, the birth pangs (or discomfort, as the nurses describe it) may worsen, but finally, there will be something better — a new birth, a new beginning, new life. The end times are not to be feared but welcomed, as we will then see the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven. In the meantime, we are to spread the Gospel of the Kingdom to the whole world — then the end will come.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help us hold firm to the Word we have learned and not be led astray. Amen.

Advent Action: Learn about Lars Olsen Skrefsrud, Norwegian missionary to India, 1910, commemorated today — and then, say to at least one person, "God loves you!"



THE THIRD WEEK OF
ADVENT

December 12, 2021 | The Third Sunday in Advent

Amos 9:11-15; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3, 13-17; John 5:30-47; Psalms 24 & 150 (AM); Psalms 25 & 110 (PM)

^{5:30} “I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me. ³¹If I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not true. ³²There is another who bears witness about me, and I know that the testimony that he bears about me is true. ³³You sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. ³⁴Not that the testimony that I receive is from man, but I say these things so that you may be saved. ³⁵He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. ³⁶But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me. ³⁷And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, ³⁸and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent. ³⁹You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, ⁴⁰yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life. ⁴¹I do not receive glory from people. ⁴²But I know that you do not have the love of God within you. ⁴³I have come in my Father’s name, and you do not receive me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him. ⁴⁴How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? ⁴⁵Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. ⁴⁶For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. ⁴⁷But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?”

— John 5:30-47



The passage in front of us today makes a crucial connection between a right understanding of the Scriptures and a direct application of what they reveal. Both are essential to the Christian faith and life. To have knowledge of the Scriptures without applying what they tell us, leads to a religion that is grounded upon nothing more than what we choose for ourselves to believe. And to apply the teachings of Scripture in life without knowing whether they are true, is an exercise in uncertainty at best and complete and utter failure and destruction at worst. The passage also gives us, along with a clear understanding of Scripture and a consistent and hope-filled application for our lives, a strong and secure and saving witness, rooted and grounded in the person of Jesus Christ.

Jesus speaks in this passage of the testimony that points to Him. In the first seven verses alone, He uses the word “testimony” or “testify” nine different times. To testify means to bear witness or to give an account. A testimony is that which provides evidence or proof of something beyond itself. John the Baptist testified to Jesus, speaking of the One who was to come who would be greater than him. The works Jesus performed gave testimony to the power of God the Father at work in Him. Even the Father testified to Jesus, by speaking of Him in the Scriptures and by offering and sending Him into this world. Jesus said, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me.” He said, “If you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote of Me.” (John 5:39, 46)

In other words, it is all over the pages of the Bible that the work God is doing and the plan He is carrying out is all being done and fulfilled in Jesus. It is the testimony of the Bible, and of the Father Himself, that our salvation is found and secured and made real in the person and work of Christ.

That brings us back to the connection between a right understanding of Scripture and a direct application of what is revealed. Once we understand what the Bible is telling us, it is foolish to consider living in ways

inconsistent with what we know to be true. Jesus' critique of the religious leaders of His day was because of their failure to make that crucial connection. They believed the Scriptures, but they failed to believe in the One to whom they testified. They understood the words of the Bible, given to them by the Father, but they failed to trust in the One whose testimony pointed to Jesus, and to apply His words and actions in their lives.

As a result, they missed the point of the witness. They failed to understand the words of the testimony. And in missing the witness and failing to understand the testimony, they never made the life-changing and life-giving application offered and found only in Jesus. As we move one week closer to the celebration of our Lord's birth, let us not fail to hear the testimony of the Scriptures and believe in the witness offered to us in God's Word. It all points to Jesus. It all finds its fulfillment in Christ.

Prayer: Lord God, as we hear the testimony of the Scriptures and as we look for ways to apply what we have learned in the everyday events of our lives, help us to trust in the testimony offered by You that points us to Jesus. Amen.

Advent Action: Spend at least 5 minutes considering the implications of the witness of the Scriptures for your life, and then, as a result, look for ways to solidify the relationship you have with the One to whom the Scriptures point, Jesus Christ.

December 13, 2021 | Monday of the Week of Advent III

Lucy, Martyr at Syracuse, c. 304

Zechariah 1:7-17; Revelation 3:7-13; Matthew 24:15-31; Psalms 122 & 145 (AM); Psalms 40 & 67 (PM)

^{3:8} I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.

— Revelation 3:8



How often in this world do we feel like we have zero power to make any sort of difference? This is especially a strong feeling when we are facing a diagnosis that seems daunting, or are caring for a loved one who is sick or suffering. As parents we often feel helpless to protect our children from negative influences, bullying and danger. We stand by wishing, hoping against all hope, that there would be something, anything, we could do to help. That feeling of helplessness can be despairing. That's because we are doers. We are fixers. We like to be active, solving problems, working things out, making an impact.

It's that way for the Church as well, but especially small churches. In small communities of faith we aren't sure that we can make any difference beyond gathering for worship on Sunday. Sometimes even that is a struggle with a shortage of pastors, COVID-19 shutdowns and a serious lack of resources at our disposal. It's almost as if the apostle John was speaking to those in smaller congregations, "I know you have little power or influence, but you have remained faithful and have not denied Jesus!" There's something important about simply being faithful, but as doers we like to see results! We forget that it is faith in Christ that actually sustains us. There's a spiritual depth and maturity to being steadfast, relying solely on Jesus, and trusting that He will use our lives no matter how much or how little we have.

This was the case for the Christians in Philadelphia, a city in Asia Minor. The Word of the Lord came to them through the apostle John and it was a word of encouragement in the face of trials and rejection. They didn't have a lot, but they were faithful, and Jesus made a solemn promise, "Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth. I am coming soon. Hold fast (to) what you have, so that no one may seize your crown" (Revelation 3:10–11).

What we have is Jesus, now and forever! When we have nothing else in all the world, be it a lack of power, health, influence, resources, or anything else we think we need, we always have Jesus. He has promised us an eternal crown and a place in the New Jerusalem, the city of God, with Him. He has given us faith and has strengthened and sustained us through every trial. He has opened a door for us to His kingdom, a door that no one can shut. Furthermore, He promises to protect us from those who seek to steal our faith, threaten our bodies, or lead us into sin. "Hold fast," He exclaims. "Hold onto me!"

We don't have to be fixers, doers, or solvers of all problems because we have the living Lord on our side, and this is all we need as we wait for His imminent return. Amen.

Prayer: Loving God, help us to wait patiently for Christ's return. In the face of our penchant to fix everything, remind us that all we need is Jesus. He will give us what we need and sustain us in faith until He comes again in glory. Amen.

Tuesday of the Week of Advent III | December 14, 2021

John of the Cross, Renewer of the Church, 1591

Zechariah 2:1-13; Revelation 3:14-22; Matthew 24:45-51; Psalms 33 & 146 (AM); Psalms 85 & 94 (PM)

^{2:6} Up! Up! Flee from the land of the north, declares the LORD. For I have spread you abroad as the four winds of the heavens, declares the LORD. ⁷Up! Escape to Zion, you who dwell with the daughter of Babylon. ⁸For thus said the LORD of hosts, after his glory sent me to the nations who plundered you, for he who touches you touches the apple of his eye: ⁹“Behold, I will shake my hand over them, and they shall become plunder for those who served them. Then you will know that the LORD of hosts has sent me. ¹⁰Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion, for behold, I come and I will dwell in your midst, declares the LORD. ¹¹And many nations shall join themselves to the LORD in that day, and shall be my people. And I will dwell in your midst, and you shall know that the LORD of hosts has sent me to you. ¹²And the LORD will inherit Judah as his portion in the holy land, and will again choose Jerusalem.” ¹³Be silent, all flesh, before the LORD, for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling.

— Zechariah 2:6-13



Here, near the very end of the Old Testament, the prophet Zechariah speaks to the Israelites who have been in exile. This particular passage records the third of eight visions received by the prophet (vv. 1-5), which describes the unlimited size of the restored city of Jerusalem (cf. Isaiah 49:19-21) assuring the people that God's glory will be there (cf. Ezekiel 43:1-5; Haggai 2:9) and He will protect them like in the past (Exodus 13:21). The passage then continues with a section where the Lord calls His people in exile to return to the city where He is about to dwell and all nations will come (verses 6-13). For the Israelites, this Zecharian prophecy was a beacon of hope! “I come and will dwell in your midst!” Little did they know that in roughly 500 years, the Lord would come to dwell with them in the flesh as God became man (John 1:14). *The Lord is coming soon!*

There is hope for us, too, because the prophecy from Zechariah notes that “many nations shall join themselves to the LORD,” and He will dwell with them and call them His people, as well. Zechariah’s purpose is both theological and pastoral. His main emphasis throughout the book is that God is at work and all His good deeds — including the construction of the Second Temple — are accomplished “not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit” (4:6). Ultimately, YHWH plans to live again with His people in Jerusalem. He will save them from their enemies and cleanse them from sin, however, God requires repentance — a turning away from sin towards faith in Him.

Just like many of our passages during the Advent season, these ones are about the first coming of the Messiah, but it is also a reminder to us about His second coming. In Matthew, Jesus tells a parable to exhort His followers to be ready for His return, and to steward well His creation and the authority He has given them. In Revelation, we hear the Lord speak to the church in Laodicea, who have become complacent and “lukewarm” in their faithfulness; perhaps they began to mirror the world around them once more, instead of Kingdom of God and His righteousness, or perhaps they had become too comfortable and forgot that following Christ would result in a life of sacrifice and suffering. Soon after, Jesus gives another exhortation, “Behold, I stand at the door at knock!” In both passages, we are reminded once more: *The Lord is coming soon!*

There is hope once more, however. Zechariah 2 speaks as much to us today as it did for the Israelites all those years ago. We, too, are in exile — surrounded by a culture that looks more like Babylon than Jerusalem.

The Lord calls us home, to Himself. For those of us who know and walk with Jesus, this is a moment of celebration and joy! Mirroring Zechariah, in the final passages of the New Testament, John prophesies in Revelation: “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God” (21:3). *The Lord is coming soon!*

Prayer: “You have been gracious to your land, O LORD; you have restored the good fortune of Jacob. You have forgiven the iniquity of your people and blotted out all their sins. You have withdrawn all your fury and turned yourself from your wrathful indignation. Restore us then, O God our Savior; let your anger depart from us. Will you be displeased with us forever? Will you prolong your anger from age to age? Will you not give us life again, that your people may rejoice in you? Show us your mercy, O LORD, and grant us your salvation. Amen” (Psalm 85:1-7).

Advent Action: Like Zechariah, John of the Cross, whom we commemorate today, was a prophet in his time who called the church out of lukewarmness and into renewal. Consider meditating on (1) the state of the Church in the world — whether global or in your own community, and (2) the Church’s call to cruciformity — the “cross-shaped” way of repentance and grace following the footsteps of Jesus. Perhaps use Psalm 85 as a starting place to pray for the Lord to *come* and renew and heal His people. If you have extra time, read some of John of the Cross’ *Spiritual Canticle* or *Dark Night of the Soul* to understand why he asked the question, “What shall I give you, Lord, for all you have done and suffered for me?” and believed the answer was a renewed life where the Christian “suffer[s] and [is] despised for [Him].”

Wednesday of the Week of Advent III | December 15, 2021

Zechariah 3:1-10; Revelation 4:1-8; Matthew 24:45-51; Psalms 50 & 147:1-12 (AM); Psalms 53 & 17 (PM)

^{24:45} "Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? ⁴⁶ It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. ⁴⁷ Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. ⁴⁸ But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, 'My master is staying away a long time,' ⁴⁹ and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. ⁵⁰ The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. ⁵¹ He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

— Matthew 24:45-51



Throughout the Bible God is always looking for faithful, persevering, persistent and patient servants. In this day and age when everything is so fast and instantaneous, people are always looking for short cuts and quick outcomes. However, the essence of mission and the essence of ministry throughout the Bible is faithfulness.

Starting from the time we were created, God is always looking for fruitfulness in our life — and the bedrock of fruitfulness is faithfulness. In this text Jesus is clearly speaking about the relationship between time, dedication, commitment and more importantly, faith. The combination of all these virtues is going to produce faithful, persevering and persistent servants.

When people are looking for fame in exchange for faithfulness, and results in exchange for perseverance, their ministry is going to be short lived. In mission and in ministry it's inevitable that we are going to face a lot of challenges and problems. In the middle of all these challenges and problems we have to fix our eyes on Jesus who is the beginner and the finisher of our calling.

The most tragic thing in the mission and ministry of many called, ordained, commissioned and deployed missionaries is to see their ministry cut short and come back from the mission field with a sense of failure. Failure is not measured by the amount of fruit we produce or by the kind of result we get, but failure is ultimately lack of faithfulness and lack of faith in the everlasting grace of God. The greatest remedy for those problems is having a dedicated life of prayer, commitment to daily reading of the Scriptures and, more importantly, relying on and absolutely trusting in the ever-living grace of God.

Prayer: Dear God, please give us faithfulness in this day and age where so many things are challenging us. When we are tempted to give up help us not to quit. When our life is in despair and when hopelessness is taking over our life, fill us with the grace of faith. Amen.

December 16, 2021 | Thursday of the Week of Advent III

Zechariah 4:1-14; Revelation 4:9-5:5; Matthew 25:1-13; Psalms 18:1-20 & 147:13-21 (PM); Psalms 126 & 62 (PM)

^{4:11} Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.

– Revelation 4:11



In this day and age filled with so many fantastic inventions, technology, trillionaires, incredible web of information, the reality of artificial intelligence and much more, it would be so easy to think very highly of ourselves. In fact, I believe we do! But despite all the extolling of human achievement, self-entitlement, self-congratulations and self-aggrandizement that's out there, original sin is still the most easily seen doctrine humanity experiences not only individually, but corporately. In the beginning, our Lord left us a garden that's become in many places polluted by the excesses of our self-centered desires for sensual fulfillment of all sorts — to have stuff because we can create it becomes a value above common sense. We forget in our extravagance toward ourselves that we are created as well, that we are not the end-all and be-all to everything, but there is One to whom we are accountable, personally, societally and nationally. Advent is a time to think about that, that we *are* because it is by God's Word that all exists and that we contribute nothing except derivatively by His grace. Where is our gratitude and hence humility?

Prayer: Father, Your Son is the arché of all things, not us. Teach us to remember this truth, and to live in humility and gratitude. Amen.

Advent Action: Read Genesis 1, John 1, Romans 1 and Revelation 1.

Friday of the Week of Advent III | December 17, 2021

O Sapientia/O Wisdom

Zechariah 7:8-8:8; Revelation 5:6-14; Matthew 25:14-30; Psalms 102 & 148 (AM); Psalms 130 & 16 (PM)

^{25:25} ...so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.

— Matthew 25:25



The parable of the talents is a parable about life. Or rather, it is a parable of life well-lived. Jesus wants us to live well and that means He wants us to invest in God's future. He has this crazy notion that this life is not the final life. We sow in this life and reap in the age to come. Of course, both then and today there are hard-headed realists who deny the reality upon which Jesus staked his life. Jesus preached the reality of a kingdom which was not of this world and called His disciples to invest in that reality.

Most of us know the story, a man leaves on a journey and entrusts his estate to his servants. To each servant he gives talents. (A talent was a unit of money — about 10,000 denarii which was a whopping sum of cash!) Two of the three invested, did well, and were rewarded. The third hid his talent because he was afraid. The New Testament scholar Frederick Dale Bruner writes that, “This parable is unique in attacking humility.” That is, “false” humility. The humility that refuses to believe that “little ol’ me” can make a difference. So why bother? In other words, the faithless servant’s problem is just that — faithlessness. He refuses to believe that God can use His small gifts to make a difference.

The great missionary William Carey (1761-1834) famously said that we should attempt great things for God and expect great things from God. That’s true, but what are “great” things? St. Teresa of Calcutta put it like this, “Do small things with great love.”

Greatness often begins with something as mundane as getting out of bed, putting our best foot forward, and trying to do something (however small) for God’s kingdom. Something that “advents” God’s love and goodness to others. Yes, it begins at home. It doesn’t need to be something “big and important.” Praying for someone, making that phone call, writing a note, giving a few extra dollars away. We take the talents (opportunities) we have been given and invest them in a future we see only with the eyes of faith. Give and forgive a little each day. Offer to God the talents we receive, invest them, and let Him do the math.

Prayer: Almighty God, the world is filled with frightening things. I confess that my fears sometimes seduce me into apathy. Help me to overcome fear and to live faithfully. As Your servant, and a disciple of Your Son, help me to do small things with great love. Amen.

Advent Action: Each day through the rest of Advent and the Christmas season, intentionally do one small “Advent Act” that brings God’s kingdom a little closer to a family member, friend, neighbor or someone from whom you are estranged. It makes a difference.

December 18, 2021 | Saturday of the Week of Advent III

O Adonai/O Lord of Might

Zechariah 8:9-17; Revelation 6:1-17; Matthew 25:31-46; Psalms 90 & 149 (AM); Psalms 80 & 72 (PM)

^{25:31} When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?’ ³⁸ And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you?’ ³⁹ And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ ⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’ ⁴¹ “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

– Matthew 25:31-46

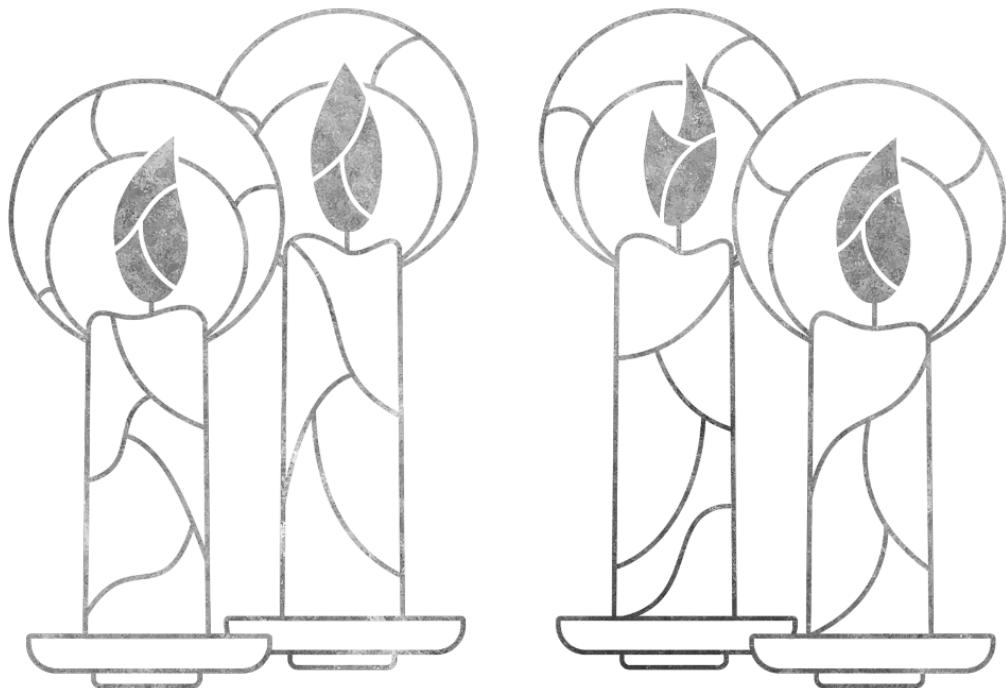
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This may seem a harsh and out-of-place biblical text for the weekend before Christmas week, as this passage is often labeled, “The Judgement of the Nations.” In this passage, we hear about the second coming of the Son of man, when He will sit on His glorious throne, separating His sheep from His goats; the sheep to the Kingdom of the Father as His blessed children, but the goats will go away into eternal punishment. A stark reality as we are pre-occupied with Advent-Christmas preparations full of joy, laughter and light.

And yet, we who have been saved by the blood of Jesus, by His grace as a gift, have no need to fear or cower under this biblical passage, for we have the hope and promise of salvation in and through Him. Because we have been saved, we need not fear judgement. Because we have been saved, then, we respond as Jesus encourages us to respond — by feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick and the imprisoned. These are the good works of those who have been saved by Jesus Christ and His death and resurrection. As children of God, we are called to live and serve in this way. And we serve, not only in Advent-Christmas-time, but every day. The Church of Jesus Christ is a living, loving, active army of Christian soldiers, marching *as* to war, but truly, moving forward to serve and care for those in need — whether the sick, the lonely, the grieving, the hungry, the homeless.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, as we respond to Your love by caring for others, help us to see Your face in the faces of those we meet. Amen.

Advent Action: In a big or small way, care for someone who is hungry, sick, grieving or lonely.



THE FOURTH WEEK OF
ADVENT

December 19, 2021 | The Fourth Sunday in Advent

O Radix Jesse/O Root of Jesse

Genesis 3:8-15; Revelation 12:1-10; John 3:16-21; Psalms 24 & 150 (AM); Psalms 25 & 110 (PM)

^{3:16}"For God so loved the world,^[A] that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.¹⁸Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.¹⁹And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.²⁰For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.²¹But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."

– John 3:16-21



Today we come to one of the most familiar and well-loved passages in all of Scripture. John 3:16 is a summary of what God's saving plan in Jesus is all about. Centered in God's love for the world and for all who have ever lived, God was willing to send His only Son to live among us, to die on a cross for our sin, and to, thereby, open the way, through our faith in Him, for us to become right with God and find ourselves eternally in the Kingdom.

Martin Luther called it "the Gospel in miniature." He said it was as concise a statement of what the Bible is about as you will ever find. If you understand what this verse is saying, if you dig into what it means and why it matters for your life, you will not only understand what is behind the entire biblical story, but you will also have a solid foundation upon which to build your life.

There are many ways to talk about the Gospel. We call it the "Good News." We refer to it as the life of Christ, what Jesus accomplished for us while He was here. Do you know what the Bible says about the Gospel? The Bible says the Gospel is "the righteousness of God." It says the Good News is that the righteousness that belongs to God is given to us in Jesus Christ.

In seminary, they spoke of it as the doctrine of imputation. To impute means "to attribute" or to "ascribe to someone else", something that was not originally theirs. That is what happens for us in Jesus. In the cross, we become what Christ is, and on the cross, He became what we are. His righteousness is attributed to us, and our sin is attributed, ascribed, given to Him.

That is what this summary verse tells us. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son." Jesus became our sacrifice. Jesus paid our penalty. He took upon Himself our sin. The Gospel is that in Him, in Jesus, we are forgiven. In Him, in Christ, we are made to be right and righteous in the sight of God.

It is the Gospel in miniature. ("For God so loved the world"). It is a summary of what the entire biblical story is all about ("that He gave His only Son").

And so, why did God give His Son? What was it that caused the Father, out of love, to send Jesus to the cross? It was our sin. It was the fallen nature of our lives. The Bible talks about our transgressions, our trespasses, our iniquities and our rebellion. Most literally, to sin means "to miss the mark."

To miss the mark is a term taken from archery. When an archer is aiming at a target, the goal is to hit it straight on, in the exact place where you aim. When we sin, the Bible says, we miss the mark. We do not end up hitting the target we are intended to hit.

As we find ourselves only a few days away from the celebration of our Lord's birth, we need to be asking ourselves that question. You know your life. You know how far and how often you have missed the mark.

In the world, everyone is trying to do it for themselves. They are trying to work their way up to God. Better than my neighbor, grading on a curve, the family plan, my grandma was a Christian...you know how it works. We think we can do it, but we cannot. It is not possible.

The Gospel comes to us in our sin and tells us that God has come to us. And He has come to us in His Son. He comes to us and He is with us in Jesus. And not only has He come to us and is He with us, but He has done everything needed to pay the price. The Bible says, "Jesus paid it all for us upon the tree. He forgave all of our trespasses...nailing them to the cross" (Colossians 2:14).

As we make our final preparations for Christmas, let us not forget why Jesus had to be born and how eternally grateful we must be. Amen."

Prayer: Lord God, thank You for sending Your Son to our world, to be born among us, to die on a cross, and to make us right with You. Help us to trust our lives to the Gospel-work You have accomplished for us in Jesus. Amen.

Advent Action: Read the first two chapters of Luke's Gospel account and, while reading, give thanks to God for the saving plan He worked out for us in Jesus.

December 20, 2021 | Monday of the Week of Advent IV

Katherina von Bora Luther, 1552

O Clavis David/O Key of David

Zephaniah 3:14-20; Titus 1:1-16; Luke 1:1-25; Psalms 122 & 145 (AM); Psalms 40 & 67 (PM)

^{122:6} Pray for the peace of Jerusalem! “May they be secure who love you! ⁷ Peace be within your walls and security within your towers!” ⁸ For my brothers and companions’ sake I will say, “Peace be within you!”
⁹ For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good.

— Psalm 122:6-9



Katharina Von Bora was a child when her widower father sent her off to a boarding school run by Benedictine nuns. Her mother had died and her father quickly remarried a woman who had children of her own. Katie had a couple of brothers and probably an older sister as well (scholars aren't quite sure), but with the young daughter in the care of nuns it was one less mouth to feed even if it cost her father a sum at first. She was a smart girl who loved school, and this particular school would ensure her a life that led to the cloister. At just 5 years old, when children today are enrolling in kindergarten, Katie Von Bora was on her way to becoming a nun.

At such a young age, Katie never dreamed that she would have a life married to a rebel pastor from Wittenberg University. However, as Martin Luther wrote about the issues of the medieval Church, especially that a person should not enter the monastic life unless they are called by God to such a vocation, word reached the Cistercian nunnery in Nimbschen, Germany. Many of the nuns read Luther's tracts and subsequently ran from their holy orders (or rolled away in emptied out pickle barrels).

Today is the feast day of Katie Luther, a saint in her own right and not just because she was the wife of Martin. She inspired the reformer and cared for him and their children. She comforted him when they lost a child to sickness, and they lost two girls — Elizabeth at eight months, and Magdalena at twelve years. Katie fed Martin's students who gathered in their home and even chimed in on the conversations. She understood her husband's ministry and encouraged him in his darkest days when the enemy attacked him fiercely. Mrs. Luther made sure that the Luther household was filled with the peace of Christ.

The psalmist sang with the people of Israel as they marched to Jerusalem, “Peace be within your walls and security within your towers!” We still pray for peace in Jerusalem and all of Israel, but we also pray and yearn for peace within our own walls, at our own kitchen tables, in our family rooms where the most precious among us dwell. As we draw nearer to the nativity of Christ, we sing out with the angels the same cry for “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (Luke 2:14).

This kind of peace we long for is not simply an absence of strife. It's not just being free from conflict or heartache. It's more than getting along to get along. Rather, the peace of Christ — the very Prince of Peace — is “shalom” the Hebrew word for peace which means “I hope all is well with you.” This is a deep, satisfying state of being that occurs *even* when there is strife and conflict. It is a peace that only God can provide for His people, and He sent it to the world in the form of a helpless infant, lying in the feed box of some farm animals in Bethlehem.

As we look to the cattle stall behind the inn where Mary and Joseph sought refuge, as we think of Katie and Martin and the peace and refuge of their home, may our hearts be filled with true peace, the peace of Christ. May our homes be filled with that same peace, and may our children know and trust the Prince of Peace. Amen.

Prayer: Lord Christ, You are the source of all shalom, that peace which passes all understanding. Grant us Your peace and fill our hearts with such great love that we would share the truth of Your saving grace with all whom we meet. Help us to be peacemakers in the world and to praise Your name in Advent, on Christmas and forever. Amen.

Tuesday of the Week of Advent IV | December 21, 2021

ST. THOMAS, APOSTLE

O Oriens/O Dayspring

Habakkuk 2:1-4; Hebrews 10:35-11:1; John 20:24-29; Psalms 126 & 146 (AM); Psalms 85 & 94 (PM)

^{2:2b} “Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it.³ For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay.”

— Habakkuk 2:2b-3

^{10:37} “Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay;³⁸ but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.”

— Hebrews 10:37-38



In much of the Western Church, Friday began the “O” Antiphons — antiphons used in evening prayer for the last seven days of Advent. Since at least the fourth century, these texts have prepared the faithful for the coming of Christ in the final week spent journeying towards the eve of his nativity. You can find these antiphons in various Lutheran sources: pp. 175-176 in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*; hymn #257 in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*; hymn #357 in the *Lutheran Service Book*.

Each year, December 17 begins these seven striking descriptions of Jesus, and these “O” Antiphons have several beautiful features that enrich the faith practice of the church during this season. Each antiphon begins with the letter “O” followed by a titular name of God from the Hebrew Scriptures — each name also referring to an Isaian prophesy of the coming Messiah. Additionally, the first letter of these Messianic names (or titles): Sapiencia, Adonai, Radix, Clavis, Oriens, Rex, Emmanuel — form a reverse acrostic of the Latin words ERO CRAS (“Tomorrow, I will come”), reminding us of both Christ’s first advent as well as his second. Especially significant for us today is that these antiphons also inspired the seven verses of the popular hymn we know as “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.”

And so, today, as we contemplate the heavenly vision so long awaited in Habakkuk 2, as we reflect on the faithful promise that the “coming one will come” in Hebrews 10, as we read of Thomas’ incredulity that the risen Jesus had indeed *come* in John 20, as we are reminded in the great Advent psalm (146) that our hope and deliverance comes not from earthly rulers but from the Lord who will reign forever, and most importantly, as we look around us towards a conflicted, confused and hurting world, may these “O” Antiphons give us hope. May they instill in us the same yearning spirit from Mary’s hymn of praise (Luke 1:46-55). Ultimately, may they remind us — even when other persons, institutions and systems vie for the claim — of the one who is the true: Wisdom from on high, Lord of Might, Root of Jesse, Key of David, Dayspring, Desire of Nations, Emmanuel (“God with us”), the one whose name is Jesus and whose soon return fills us with holy anticipation and joy.

Prayer: O Dayspring (*Oriens*), splendor of light everlasting: Come and enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. Amen.

Advent Action: Consider praying and meditating on the O Antiphons before and after your evening psalms this week as you prepare your heart for Christ’s coming.

December 22, 2021 | Wednesday of the Week of Advent IV

O Rex Gentium/O King of Nations

2 Samuel 2:1b-10; Titus 2:1-3:8a; Luke 1:26-56; Psalms 50 & 147:1-12 (AM); Psalms 53 & 17 (PM)

^{1:26}In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee,²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.²⁸The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."²⁹Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.³⁰But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God.³¹You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.³²He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David,³³and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."³⁴"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"³⁵The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called^[b] the Son of God.³⁶Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month.³⁷For no word from God will ever fail."³⁸"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

– Luke 1:26-38 NIV



Mary was a virgin young lady who experienced an overwhelming greeting from this heavenly Angel, Gabriel. Above and beyond the overwhelming presence of the Angel Gabriel, and the greetings that she heard for the first time was the major shock of the content in the message she heard. She was about to conceive and give birth to a son and His name was going to be called Jesus. The prophecy about Him was that He's going to be great, and He is going to be called the Son of the most high God. He was going to be given the throne of His father, David, and He was going to reign over Jacob's descendants forever. His kingdom is going to be eternal. The message was extremely massive to comprehend. So, the only thing she was left with was asking endless questions and searching for meaning.

She could have asked "why me"? Or she could have asked "when is this going to happen?" ... Many questions. But she raised one question since this was miraculous in nature. She said, "how will this be?" Today there are so many promises that God has given us and we have many questions and we are so overwhelmed by the magnitude of the promises. We're asking how is this going to happen in my life because there are so many challenges and there are so many impossibilities around me.

But the Angel responded in clear terms that this is going to be fulfilled because it is going to be enacted and it's going to be accomplished through the power of the Holy Spirit. The most powerful statement in Luke 1:37 sums it up, "No word from God would ever fail!" The Word of God is powerful enough to be whatever God has promised or to bring whatever God has promised into being. Therefore, the miraculous birth of Jesus Christ has come about by the Word of God becoming flesh through the work of the Holy Spirit in the body of the Virgin Mary. The birth of Jesus Christ tells us there is nothing impossible with God.

Prayer: Dear God, when our life is surrounded with so many impossibilities and challenges, please help us to believe in her faith in the power of your Holy Spirit and also in the nature and power of Your word. You are a miraculous God, and You always fulfill Your promises. Please keep increasing our faith and blessing us with the grace of believing in the power of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Thursday of the Week of Advent IV | December 23, 2021

Thorlak, Bishop of Skalholt, 1193

O Emmanuel/O Come, Emmanuel

2 Samuel 7:1-29; Galatians 3:1-14; Luke 1:57-66; Psalms 18:1-20 & 147:13-21 (AM); Psalms 126 & 62 (PM)

^{7:14}I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, 15 but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you.

— 2 Samuel 7:14-15



Despite all the warnings and observations of God's people going astray and God reminding them of His goodness and their disobedience, and His promise of punishment, there is still His grace and mercy. In His conversation with David, the Lord speaks clearly of his actions regarding sinful behaviour that is unrepentant, but even more so he promises that His "steadfast love will not depart from him." Each of us are weak, frail, sinful beings whose hearts are prone to wander ("Come Thou Fount"), to walk the path of the desert when our Lord calls us to the garden with Him. Because we are incapable of redemption by our own efforts of any sort from our sin, Jesus did for us all what we cannot do for ourselves, became sin for us, giving us His life and Spirit that we might know grace and salvation by faith. The blessing of Advent is that it prepares the path to Christmas Day in that this season calls us to wait and to remember, probably one of the most important words in our language, especially in relation to God and His love. And so, remember, reflect, repent and be grateful — know yourself for who you are, a sinner, redeemed by the precious blood and love of the one who created you and gives you all that you are and have.

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, thank You for Your mercy. Teach me to be merciful as well. Amen.

Advent Action: Look about you and see the goodness of God!

December 24, 2021 | Christmas Eve
THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD

Jeremiah 31:10-14; Galatians 3:15-22; Luke 1:67-80; Psalms 102 & 148 (AM); Psalms 132 & 114 (PM)

^{1:76} And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways...

– Luke 1:76



We've spent time this Advent thinking about preparing for the coming of Christ. John the Baptist's clarion cry is, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths!" Once again, we ask, "How do we prepare?"

I'm certain that all of us have spent time preparing for Christmas — shopping, decorating, cooking, cleaning, sending cards and attending parties. Add to this list all the things that many of us need to do to prepare for Christmas in our congregations — choir rehearsals, caroling, the Christmas pageant, etc. All this busyness can leave us bushed!

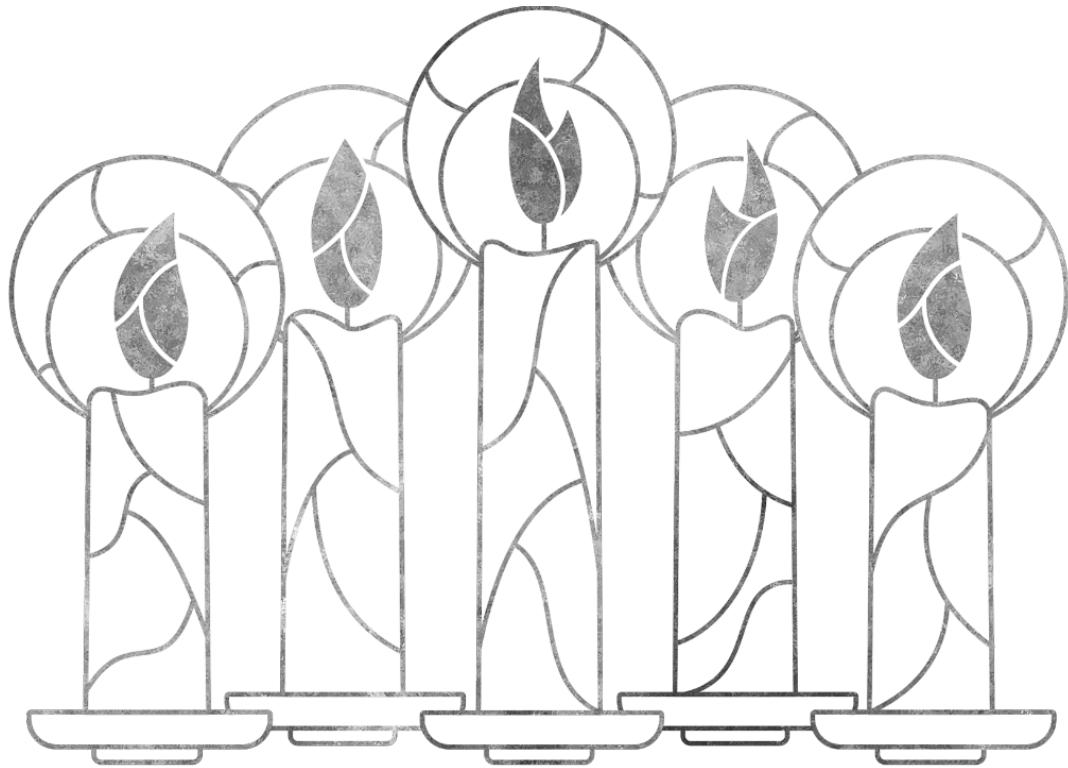
However, I suggest that there is something right about these preparations. Certainly, we can all get too busy, spend too much money and fill our calendars with too many things. But there is an "Advent instinct" which recognizes that we do all these things in order to celebrate something much bigger than these things — the most profound Mystery of all history. God became a man. The eternal Word of God became human flesh and blood and lived among us (John 1). Giving Christmas gifts is simply a faint shadow of remembering the Greatest Gift ever given.

Christmas is the good news that we are not alone in the darkness which shrouds this world. There is a Light that pierces the darkness. There is a joy that is deeper than our sadness. If this is true (and I believe it is), then let's sing, decorate and party. But don't stop there! On this holy night, let us worship, bow down and receive anew the God who wraps Himself in human flesh and offers Himself to us as sheer Gift.

All our preparations for Christmas are not in vain if they are motivated by an Advent instinct. The instinct which recognizes the holy Mystery of the Incarnation. I wish you all a very Merry Christmas filled with mystery, wonder and joy.

Prayer: Almighty God, tonight we celebrate the Mystery of the advent of Your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Send now His Holy Spirit into our hearts. Enable us to receive Him always with joy and thanksgiving. Let the Light of this holy night shine into the darkness of our lives and into the darkness of this whole world. In the blessed name of the Father, the + Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Advent Action: It's Christmas Eve. Take some time prayerfully to read and reflect upon John 1.



THE SEASON OF
CHRISTMAS

December 25, 2021 | Christmas Day

THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD

Micah 4:1-5; 5:2-4; 1 John 4:7-16; John 3:31-36; Psalms 2 & 149 (AM); Psalms 98 & 96 (PM)

^{6:67} He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all. ³² He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. ³³ Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. ³⁴ For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. ³⁵ The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. ³⁶ Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

— John 3:31-36



Greetings on this most holy day in the life of the Church, this most significant day in the history of our world. Without question, Christmas is the single-most important event that has ever happened. God became one of us. Jesus took on our human flesh. In so doing, He made it clear that our lives are of eternal value to Him. As a result, people throughout the world are remembering and celebrating the birth of Christ. There is more activity on this one day, tied to the work and actions of God in Christ, than perhaps any other day in the entire year. And yet, in spite of the many celebrations of Christmas, the things we do to remember and give thanks for the birth of Jesus — as appropriate as they are — today is a day centered, not in the activities of our lives and the things we do to remember Him, but in the actions He took and the things He did in remembering us.

The passage assigned for this Christmas Day is one that comes at the close of the ministry of John the Baptist. John was the forerunner of Jesus. His calling was to prepare the way for Christ. He baptized. He taught. He called people to repent of their sin. Ultimately, his ministry was to lead people to Jesus. The verse prior to the ones we read offers a good summary of what was taking place in John's ministry and how he understood his ministry in relation to Christ. He said, "He must increase, but I must decrease." He must become greater, as I (as his forerunner) take on a less prominent role. And so, it happened. From that moment on, Jesus took center stage. And from that moment on, the entire biblical witness, as it had been throughout all of salvation history, was centered and focused in Christ.

John pulls no punches in stating the essential difference between his own ministry and that of Jesus. "He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all... For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand." In other words, this world belongs to God. God has been in control from the beginning of time. And from the beginning of time, God had planned and purposed that He would save the world in Jesus.

And so He did, by sending His Son to become one of us. When the Christ-child was born in Bethlehem, there left no doubt that our lives matter to God. Not for the moment. Not for a given and limited time. But for eternity.

Everything in your life matters to God. Everything in your life is known by God. All of your mistakes. All of your misdeeds. Everything in your life that would have separated you from Him. God knows it all. God knows everything you have done. And He still loves. He still cares for you. And He always will.

In recalling the many ways in which God had spoken to His people in the past, the writer to the Hebrews makes it clear that God has spoken even more clearly in Jesus. “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.” (Hebrews 1:1-3)

The apostle Paul says the same thing, in his letter to the Galatians, making it clear that God has a saving purpose for us in sending His Son. “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Galatians 4:4-5).

As a result, our Lord’s birth into our world has immediate and eternal implications for our lives. His action on our behalf, in becoming one of us, leads us with no better choice than to respond to Him in lives of faith. All of history revolves around the birth of Jesus. Everything in life finds its ultimate meaning and purpose in what God has done for us in His Son. That includes your life and mine, and how, through our lives, we respond in faith to Him.

Much of our world does not know or understand the significance of this day. Many people in our world are not unaware of what this day is all about. Let it not be so with us. Let it not be so with you. God came into this world for you. He has loved you from the beginning of time, from before the time when you were born, and He always will. If ever there were any doubt about how deep and how real His love for this world is, that was all erased and washed away in the sending and the birth of Jesus. May God bless you on this most holy day, and may the blessings of God, revealed to us most clearly in the person of Jesus, continue to give you strength and encouragement to live for Him.

Prayer: Father, we thank You for this day and for the saving work You accomplished for us in Jesus. Help us to trust in Him, not only on this day when we celebrate His birth, but each day until You call us home eternally to live with You. In His name we pray. Amen.

Christmas Action: Be sure to include a prayer of thanks to God as you celebrate this day. Include that prayer with your family or friends, or simply as one between you and God. On that first Christmas, He came into this world for you. And now, on this Christmas, He is inviting you to trust in him.

