

ECHOES & EPIPHANIES

A Scriptural Journey with Jesus from Advent to Epiphany



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Table of Contents

Foreword <i>Echoes & Epiphanies: A Scriptural Pilgrimage</i>	4
The First Week of Advent.....	5
The Second Week of Advent	17
The Third Week of Advent.....	29
The Fourth Week of Advent / The Nativity of Our Lord	43
The First Sunday after Christmas.....	57
The Epiphany of Our Lord	67
The Baptism of Our Lord	69

Foreword | *Echoes & Epiphanies: A Scriptural Pilgrimage*

In the sacred tapestry of the Christian liturgical calendar, this year marks a significant expansion in our journey of faith as we extend our devotional reflections to encompass not only the season of Advent but also the joyous celebration of Christmas as well as the illuminating days of Epiphany and the Baptism of Our Lord. This extended pilgrimage, from the anticipatory silence of Advent to the resounding clarity of Epiphany, invites us into a deeper exploration of the scriptural narrative that echoes the omnipresence of Jesus Christ and culminates in the epiphanies of His divine revelation.

Advent, traditionally observed in the Western Church as the commencement of the liturgical year, is a period rich in anticipation and longing. It is a time when we immerse ourselves in the prophetic scriptures of the Old Testament, which foreshadow the coming of the Messiah. These ancient texts, brimming with expectation, sketch the contours of the Savior's purpose, characteristics, and the hallowed site of His birth, long before His incarnation. This season of Advent, therefore, is not merely a prelude but a profound engagement with the promise of redemption that resonates through time.

As we transition into the Christmas season, our focus shifts from the anticipation of Advent to the manifestation of these prophecies in the person of Jesus Christ. The New Testament, with its vivid narratives and teachings, illuminates the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies. The miracles, teachings, and the salvific work of Jesus stand as a testament to the prophetic Word-made-flesh. This period is a celebration of the tangible presence of God in human history, a divine intervention that alters the course of humanity.

The journey then leads us to the day of Epiphany and the Baptism of Jesus, a time of revelation and luminous clarity. Here, each echo of Christ in the Scriptures transforms into a moment of epiphany—a profound realization and understanding of His presence and redemptive mission. This isn't merely an auditory journey but a spiritual unveiling, where the divine narrative is deeply understood and internalized.

At the heart of this pilgrimage is the story of redemption. From the Fall in Genesis, which anticipates a Savior, through the shadowy figures of the Old Testament that hint at His coming, to the Gospels that narrate His life and sacrifice, and the rest of the New Testament that explores the profound implications of this sacrifice for humanity, the narrative of redemption unfolds. This journey through the Scriptures is not just a historical or theological exploration but a personal encounter with the living Christ.

As we move beyond the echoes of Advent and Christmas and reach the season of Epiphany—a time of steadfast faith and hope—the scriptures call us to embrace the eternal presence of Christ, to resonate with the clear, shining truth of His word, and to find solace in God's protective love as we await His return.

“Echoes and Epiphanies” is an invitation to embark on a scriptural pilgrimage, to discover the nuanced resonances and radiant epiphanies of Jesus Christ. It is an opportunity to appreciate the intricacy of God's redemptive story and to inspire a life attuned not just to Christ's gentle reverberations but to His moments of illuminating truth. May this devotional guide you in your reflections and deepen your faith during this extended season of grace and revelation.

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The First Week of Advent

Stir up your power, O Lord, and come.

*Protect us by your strength and save us from the threatening dangers of our sins,
for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

December 3, 2023 | First Sunday in Advent

Francis Xavier, Missionary to Asia, 1552; Jantine Auguste Haumersen, First Ordained Female Lutheran Pastor, 1967

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} Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God. But Jesus said, ⁶ “As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down.”

⁷ “Teacher,” they asked, “when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?”

⁸ He replied: “Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and, ‘The time is near.’ Do not follow them. ⁹ When you hear of wars and uprisings, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away.”

¹⁰ Then he said to them: “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. ¹¹ There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven.

¹² “But before all this, they will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. ¹³ And so you will bear testimony to me. ¹⁴ But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. ¹⁵ For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. ¹⁶ You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. ¹⁷ Everyone will hate you because of me. ¹⁸ But not a hair of your head will perish.

¹⁹ Stand firm, and you will win life.

– Luke 21:5–19 NIV2011



Dear friends, greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus as we begin a new year in the life of the Church, and a new season in the Church’s life. The theme chosen for this year’s devotionals, “Echoes and Epiphanies,” leads us from this first day in Advent—a time when we patiently wait for the coming of Jesus—to the Day of Epiphany—the clear declaration in His Baptism that Jesus is the promised Son of God.

That same declaration is echoed throughout all of Scripture. The Old Testament prophets spoke of the coming of the Messiah and of how God would fulfill His promises in and through His chosen One. The New Testament proclaims that the chosen One is here, and that in His presence and coming, in the person of Jesus Christ, we begin to see the face of the Father and the fulfillment of His saving plan and purposes for His world.

The passage we read today helps us to hear some of those same echoing promises being declared, as well as to be given an epiphany, a new insight and awareness, of how God is working in all things to save His world in Christ. 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. Nations rising against nations, wars and earthquakes, famines and plagues, followers of the Lord being persecuted and betrayed. It doesn’t take much imagination to begin to see how the end of this world might be sooner than we might expect.

At the same time, our Lord also tells us to never lose sight of the calling we have in Him, and to never forget the promises that belong to us through our faith. When the world begins to fall apart, remember whose world it is. When life begins to turn upside down, use it as an opportunity to tell the world where to turn.

World history, as well as current events, are filled with stories of people who have built their lives on the wrong foundations. Although the details of their lives are vastly different, their life stories end up the same. Jesus says, “Be careful where you are building. Do not forget what will last and what will not.”

As we begin this season of Advent, take the echo of our Lord’s words to heart. Build your life on the certainty of His promises. Secure your life on a foundation that will last. And as you do, don’t be surprised if you have an epiphany. God has been opening the eyes of His people from the time our world began.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, as we begin this Advent season, preparing to celebrate Your birth into this world, and as we look forward to that day when You will return, help us to hear the echoes of Your voice found in Scripture, revealed in Your Word. And as we do, lead us to new epiphanies, new insights and revelations that remind us and assure us of the security we have in You. In Your holy name we pray. Amen.



December 4, 2023 | Monday of the First Week in Advent

John of Damascus, Priest, c. 760

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

^{2:6} Thus says the LORD:

“For three transgressions of Israel,
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment,
because they sell the righteous for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals—

⁷ those who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the
earth and turn aside the way of the afflicted;
a man and his father go in to the same girl,
so that my holy name is profaned;

⁸ they lay themselves down beside every altar
on garments taken in pledge,
and in the house of their God they drink
the wine of those who have been fined.

⁹ “Yet it was I who destroyed the Amorite before them,
whose height was like the height of the cedars
and who was as strong as the oaks;

I destroyed his fruit above
and his roots beneath.

¹⁰ Also it was I who brought you up out of the land of Egypt
and led you forty years in the wilderness,
to possess the land of the Amorite.

¹¹ And I raised up some of your sons for prophets,
and some of your young men for Nazirites.
Is it not indeed so, O people of Israel?”

declares the LORD.

¹² “But you made the Nazirites drink wine,
and commanded the prophets,
saying, ‘You shall not prophesy.’

¹³ “Behold, I will press you down in your place,
as a cart full of sheaves presses down.

¹⁴ Flight shall perish from the swift,
and the strong shall not retain his strength,
nor shall the mighty save his life;

¹⁵ he who handles the bow shall not stand,
and he who is swift of foot shall not save himself,
nor shall he who rides the horse save his life;

¹⁶ and he who is stout of heart among the mighty
shall flee away naked in that day,”

declares the LORD.

– Amos 2:6–16 ESV



One of the main themes of the Advent season is the coming of the Lord. We live in the tension of what Lutherans have identified as the “already, but not yet.” We are already children of God, but we are not yet fully with God. We live in the here and now, and yet we long for eternity. We are sinners and yet we are also saints redeemed by Christ. We think about the coming of Jesus as an infant, born in a stable in Bethlehem, and yet we also think about His return on the last day.

On that last day, or the “Day of the Lord,” as the prophets hailed it, we will all be judged for what we have done and what we have left undone. Sin and death have held us captive in this life no matter how hard we’ve tried to be “good.” We live in the tension between deserving judgment and receiving forgiveness. As the prophet Amos spoke the Word of the Lord to God’s people in the eighth century BC, he proclaimed God’s judgment against the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Denouncing their pride, lust, extortion, tyranny, and oppression of the needy, the prophet reminded his audience, and us, that no one will be able to save him or herself from the righteous judgment of the Lord. This includes, but is not limited to, all of us who call ourselves, “strong, mighty, swift, stoic, pure, or faithful.” As Paul said in the first century AD, “None is righteous, no, not one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one” (Romans 3:10–12).

In the face of sinful greed and blatant abuse of power, God reminded His people that He was the one who delivered them out of slavery in Egypt, and freed them from the tyranny of Pharaoh. He was the One who brought His people out of bondage and journeyed with them for 40 long years in the wilderness. It was He who gave them the Law, and a land to call their own.

Before there is redemption, there is judgment. God’s judgment on Israel is likened to an earthquake which is destruction from which no one can escape. Thankfully, this is not the end of the story and the prophet goes on in chapter 9 with the good news. “I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them...I will plant them on their land, and they shall never again be uprooted out of the land that I have given them” (Amos 9).¹

As we remember where we are today, on this first Monday of Advent, we recall that it was the Lord God of Israel who took on flesh and came to live among us as one of us, in order to save us from all that holds us captive. In Amos’ prophetic words we hear the promise of a Savior, sent into the world for the sake of salvation for all who believe. We know this Savior, He is the infant Jesus, the son of Mary. We worship this Savior; He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. We follow this Savior, in trust and hope for the coming Day of the Lord, when all God’s children will be restored to Him—where death will be no more, sickness and pain will be no more, tears and weeping will be no more (Revelation 21). And, on that great and glorious day, we shall be judged righteous—not because of our merit, but because of our Savior’s.

Prayer: O Lord and Master Jesus Christ our God, who alone has power to absolve us from our sins, for you are good and love all, forgive all my transgressions done in knowledge or in ignorance, and make me worthy without condemnation to have communion of your divine and glorious and pure and life-creating mysteries. Amen. (St. John of Damascus)

¹ Gary V. Smith, *Amos, Mentor Commentaries* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Mentor, 1998), 130

December 5, 2023 | Tuesday of the First Week in Advent

Clement of Alexandria, Priest, c. 210

Amos 3:1–11; 2 Peter 1:12–21; Matthew 21:12–22; Psalms 33 & 146 (AM); Psalms 85 & 94 (PM)

^{21:12} Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. ¹³ He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a den of robbers.”

– Matthew 21:12–13 NRSV

Amid the gentle unfolding of Advent, today we continue to step into the sacred narrative that intricately binds the Old and New Testaments, celebrating St. Clement of Alexandria. His words, “All the scriptures breathe the spirit of Christ,” guide our contemplation today. The Old Testament prophets, like Amos, remind us of God’s covenant with His people and the call to uphold divine justice, an echo reverberating through the Psalms, orchestrating a longing for pure worship.

As the narrative transitions into the New Testament, the Apostle Peter underscores the authenticity and fulfillment of this prophetic message in Christ. The scene in Matthew’s Gospel vividly unfolds with Jesus, our true Temple, cleansing the earthly temple. His actions, far beyond a mere historical event, unveil a profound epiphany, highlighting the essence of pure worship and evoking a deeper communion with the divine.

The zealous act of Jesus, clearing the temple courts, challenges us. Do *our* places of worship mirror the reverence and sincere communion depicted by Jesus? As we inch closer to the coming of Christ, let’s allow this narrative to sweep our hearts clean of worldly distractions, kindling a sincere longing for authentic worship, reflecting the true Temple, Jesus Christ, in our lives and places of worship.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, as we traverse through Advent, grant us the grace to seek the purity of worship exemplified by Jesus, our true Temple. May our hearts be abodes of sincere communion with You, echoing the divine narrative across the tapestry of our lives. Let the Scriptures breathe upon us, nurturing our remembrance of and anticipation for the sacred morn when heaven will touch earth. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.



December 6, 2023 | Wednesday of the First Week in Advent

Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, c. 342

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} And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”²⁴ Jesus answered them, “I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵ The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?” And they discussed it among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ ²⁶ But if we say, ‘From man,’ we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet.” ²⁷ So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.

²⁸ What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ ²⁹ And he answered, ‘I will not,’ but afterward he changed his mind and went. ³⁰ And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, ‘I go, sir,’ but did not go. ³¹ Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. ³² For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.”

– Matthew 21:23–32 ESV



The issue of *authority* raises perennial questions and problems. As far back in history as we look, we see human societies trying to resolve these issues. Who has authority and how much authority do they have? How much authority does the state have? Or the Church? Or individuals? The Constitution of the United States was a means of trying to resolve these questions.

There has always been the temptation for the State, or the Church, or some political group to seek to tip the balance of power in their favor. Various groups have tried to grasp power and once they have it, they seek to consolidate their power. Just think of North Korea compared to Norway. These two countries resolve the questions of authority very differently. I'd much rather live in Norway than in North Korea!

The issues of power and authority are clearly seen in the New Testament. Jesus Christ was perceived as a threat to those who were in positions of authority and power. The religious leaders of Israel had carefully worked out a way to live peaceably with Rome. The Roman leaders gave the Jewish leaders some authority. For example, the Romans exempted the Jews from making the sacrifices that were required of other religious groups. In exchange, the Jewish leaders kept the population subservient to Roman rule. It was a delicate balance of power. A balance that could be easily upset.

If we look at today's Gospel lesson, we see that the Jewish leaders are afraid. They are afraid of losing power and peace. They ask Jesus, “Who gave you this authority?” Remember, Jesus had just thrown out the money changers from the temple! “By what authority are you doing these things?”

Jesus refused to give a direct answer. Rather, in good Rabbinic fashion, he answered their question with a question. “Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?” Listen carefully—Jesus wants to know if the religious leaders of Israel think that the message and ministry of John the Baptist had divine authority or not. The religious leaders won't answer because they are afraid of losing power and upsetting the peace.

If they said, “It was from heaven,” they were siding with John who had been beheaded. If they said, “It was from human authority,” they risked upsetting the population who believed that John was truly a prophet. In short, they were between the proverbial *rock and a hard place*.

The religious leaders, in their *will to power*, thought that keeping authority was more important than seeking truth. This was their weakness. This is a failure that all of us need to bear in mind. Seeking the truth needs to be more important than seeking power, authority, or even peace. Just think of Jesus. He never sought worldly authority and power. He only sought to live faithfully and obediently to the truth of God. Jesus lived the kind of life that gets a person crucified because He did not bend or manipulate the truth in order to gain power.

Lutherans are often not “big” on talking about Jesus as an example. We tend to focus on Jesus as a Savior. I think it’s time for us to be a bit more balanced. Jesus Christ truly did give us an example to follow. He showed us a pattern of the faithful life that refuses to play power games and to use religion to gain power over others. Jesus exemplified the truth that, “God’s power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). This is an example of courageous faith in the truth of God’s Word.

My dear friends, during these days of Advent I encourage all of us to reflect on what it means to follow the pattern of life given to us by our Lord. He refused to use worldly power to enforce His kingdom. Rather, He used the power of God to heal, forgive, and to turn sinners from their insane pursuit of selfish power and authority to the truth of God’s kingdom.

Prayer: Lord God, the prophets, apostles, and saints teach us to follow the example of humility, love, courage, trust and forgiveness given by Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Lord Jesus, help us follow Your example. Teach and inspire us to You, “The giver of every good and perfect gift has called upon us to mimic God’s giving, by grace, through faith, and this is not of ourselves.” In the name of Him who became obedient to You to the point of death, even death on a cross.



December 7, 2023 | Thursday of the First Week in Advent

Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, 397

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)

^{21:33}“Hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country. ³⁴When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. ³⁵And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. ³⁷Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ ³⁸But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.’ ³⁹And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. ⁴⁰When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?’⁴¹ They said to him, ‘He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.’”

⁴²Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures:

‘The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord’s doing,
and it is marvelous in our eyes?’”

– Matthew 21:33–42 ESV

In this Gospel passage for today, we read about Jesus telling the parable of the tenants—which ends with the second most quoted Old Testament passage in the New Testament, Psalm 118:22. “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.”

In the reading, the imagery is that of a vineyard given to sharecroppers to take advantage of the fruits that the owner’s labors created. The tenants do not share in returning the owner his due, but instead reject every servant sent to collect from them. They even kill the owner’s son.

With Advent in mind, we see God sent His own Son, who will be rejected and killed as well. The One who should be exalted is humiliated; rejected.

As a machinist, I know the most important cut I can make in a project is the first cut. Every carpenter, tile setter, and builder knows this. Seamstresses and chefs also know that the first step in their process will set the path to success. Jesus identifies Himself as the cornerstone of a building to be built; the foundation for the Church of the kingdom. That cornerstone then makes everything straight, plumb, and secure. He correctly says that He is the stone that will be rejected in humiliation by this world, but then will become that perfect cornerstone for His Church and therefore be exalted by God.

St. Paul so eloquently portrays this humiliation to exaltation in Philippians 2:5–11. With Christ as our cornerstone, the kingdom of God will most surely prevail. The strength and power of His Church is built on the very Word of God Himself.

Prayer: Gracious Lord, Heavenly Father; I pray that Your kingdom come, and that I receive Him as Your Son, my Savior, my cornerstone. May the Church always hold to Him as our foundation, even while the world around us rejects Him. This I pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

December 8, 2023 | Friday of the First Week in Advent

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

^{22:1} Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: ² “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. ³ He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. ⁴ Again he sent other slaves, saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.’ ⁵ But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶ while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. ⁷ The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. ⁸ Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹ Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ ¹⁰ Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

¹¹ But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, ¹² and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. ¹³ Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ ¹⁴ For many are called, but few are chosen.”

– Matthew 22:1–14 NRSV



I don't know about you, but I think that weddings are wonderful celebrations. They are great blessings; two families coming together, a celebration of growing up, optimistically celebrating a couple's future, and, in Jesus' time, much more. No wonder the king in Jesus' parable is so angered by a lack of response! Weddings were big deals. They were once in a life-time events of joy. They were an advancement of the kingdom itself. Indeed, there will also be a celebration on that great and glorious day.

But this parable takes a turn into darkness, and ends “where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” So, we are reminded in Advent that the great and glorious day will be wonderful for some, but not for others.

However, as usual, Jesus' parables cause us to ask the question, “Who am I in this story?!”

I hope I'm one of the slaves—and here is where we get some instruction about our discipleship. We are commissioned by the King to do His work in the time leading up to the banquet. Yes, a lot of running around. Yes, a lot of work. Streets were a messy place to be in the first century. But all this work serves the kingdom, and the call and invitation to the world leads to salvation. Even though we are slaves, we are free to serve, and free to let the Lord do the judging part. Note that in this parable, the slaves invited both the good and the bad; the rest of what happens was up to the king.

So, keep getting your feet dirty in the streets of your community. Keep inviting. It is the kingdom work we are commissioned for; to bring others into the household of God.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help us to look up from our feet as we run the path as Your servants. Pour Your Holy Spirit upon our words of good news and invitation this week, for the sake of Your kingdom. Amen.

December 9, 2023 | Saturday of the First Week in Advent

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

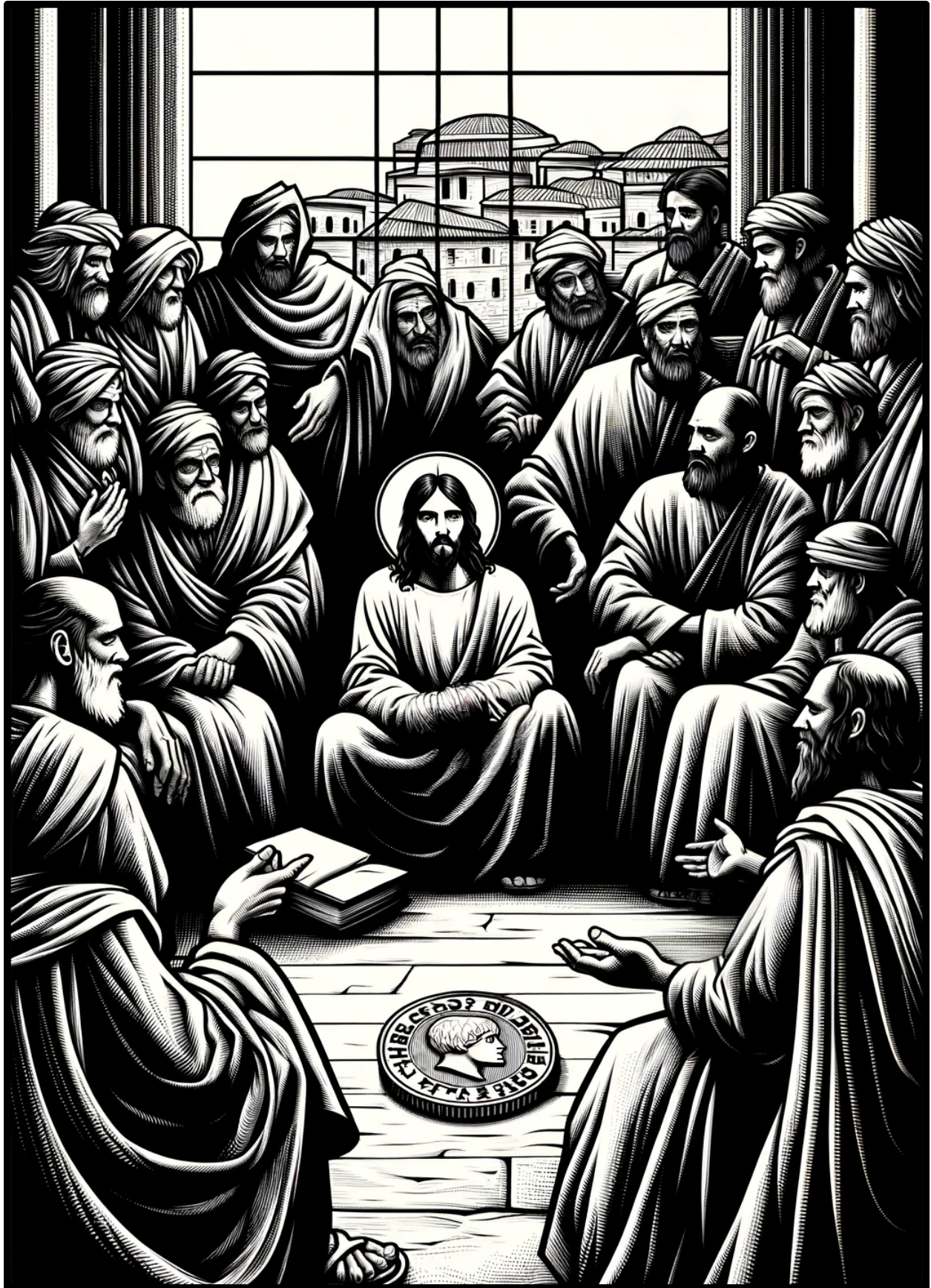
^{22:15} Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. ¹⁶ And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone’s opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. 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 ESV

In today’s text, Jesus instructs us to “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Well, how do we do that? First we notice that Jesus is distinguishing two realms in which we live, namely, the civil realm and the heavenly realm. We believe that God established civil authorities to provide us with law, order, and a just society. As Martin Luther reminds us, we are to obey our legitimate civil authorities as long as they are not requiring us to violate God’s Word. We also live in the heavenly realm. Here we are reminded that through our Baptism into Christ we were made citizens of the kingdom of heaven. As such God calls us to be in the world but not of the world. We are here to love and glorify God by loving and serving our neighbor. We are here to love and glorify God by being faithful disciples of Christ and making disciples for Jesus Christ. Our relationship to almighty God is to be the most important thing in our life and this is to be seen in our relationship with others. Thus, living simultaneously in these two “kingdoms,” Christians face challenges to live lives that are faithful to Christ.

For instance, there are those who say we cannot or should not mix politics and religion. Really? Separating religion and politics would be a foreign concept to the early Christian Church. Today Jesus’ words remain true for us too. How do we discern the difference of what to render to whom? Think about, and/or discuss this topic. What is difficult for you as a child of God? Are you asked to abide by any current world views that seem opposed to Christ’s teaching? As you wrestle with how to live in both kingdoms, know that you are given the resources to live a faithful life. Go to God’s Word and discover His direction. Make Bible study and fellowship with other Christians a dedicated routine in your life. Worship weekly and at other opportunities. Pray earnestly about your decisions. These daily practices will lead you to be a faithful disciple of Christ while living in this civil realm and our heavenly realm.

Prayer: Almighty and everlasting God, You have saved us from sin, death, and the power of the devil through Jesus Christ, the One who came as a baby born in Bethlehem, who comes to us daily through Word and Sacrament, and who will come again to fulfill His kingdom! Forgive us for times past when we failed to render according to Your will. Thank You for Your promise to be with us in the present and in the future, helping us by the Holy Spirit to know when and how to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to You the things that are Yours. Make us faithful disciples of Christ who consistently love and glorify You by loving and serving others for Christ’s sake; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.



The Second Week of Advent

Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to prepare the way for your only Son.

*By his coming give us strength in our conflicts and
shed light on our path through the darkness of this world;
through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen.*

December 10, 2023 | Second Sunday in Advent

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

^{1:59} 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.

– Luke 1:59–63 ESV



The season of Advent is surely a penitential time. Traditionally, the focus is less on our *individual* need of deliverance from the devil, the world, and our sinful self (as in the season of Lent), and more on our *corporate* need of deliverance from sin, death, and the power of the devil. As the days grow shorter yet, the darkness is a powerful reminder that “we are those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death.”

There is an old the tradition of taking the wheel off a wagon to make an Advent wreath, and this points to how we are meant to slow down and prepare for the birth of Jesus, the Savior of the world. Such a time of pondering and wondering invites us to take the opportunity to explore the Scriptures more deeply.

Today, I invite you to wonder with me—and baby John’s relatives and neighbors—what was so wrong with the name Zechariah? Zechariah, after all, was not only a good family name, but it was also the name of a prophet of Israel who described the hope and promise of a coming Messiah and his kingdom. The name means, “God remembers.” If you are talking about preparing for the coming Messiah, it seems to me that Zechariah would be a pretty good name for this child, ‘who shall be called the prophet of the Most High who shall go before the Lord to prepare his way’ (Luke 1:76). The Old Testament prophet spoke to those who wondered when God would restore Israel after the exile.

And so, at the risk of being made mute by the angel Gabriel, I wonder what was so wrong with the name Zechariah. Names in the Bible after all are not just names. Names can be bookmarks. Why the name John?

The name John means, “God is gracious.” The problem with the program outlined by the prophet Zechariah was that the coming Messianic kingdom seemed to depend on a big if. *If* the people returned to the covenant and kept it, doing justice and living righteously, *then* the kingdom would be restored as God promised. So the Messianic kingdom in some respects depended upon the people God had called under the covenant.

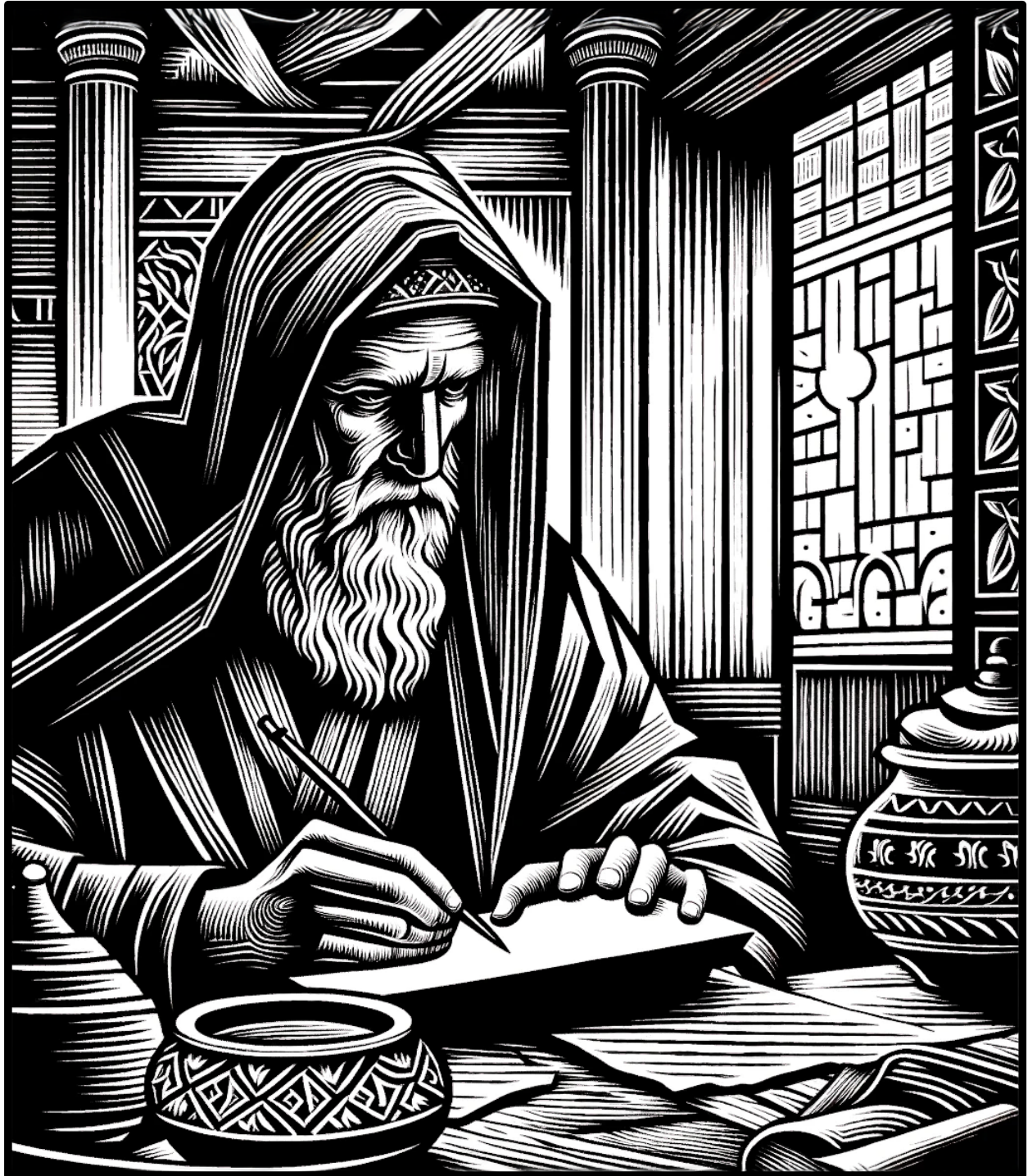
The name John sets this expectation on its head.

God did not wait for us to be ready or fulfill the preconditions. God broke into the world with unexpected grace. While much of the program of John’s ministry was set forth in the prophetic word of the prophet Zechariah, at the heart of John’s ministry was this good news sung by John’s father Zechariah: “You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way, to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins. In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us” (Luke 1:76–78).

We honor Christ Jesus by preparing His way in our hearts and lives. But He will not wait for us to be ready, to have our act together, to purge our lives of all their faults. He comes ready or not. In the end, the gracious

incarnation of God in Jesus is the birth of peace, hope, joy and love, for He comes to save us from all that would prevent the coming of His kingdom.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, Your mercy and grace are so great. As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ and our need of a Savior, we thank You for His coming, and His promise to come again. We continue to give thanks and to pray for the gift of His light to all who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, and we look for how He shall guide our feet into the way of peace. In His name we pray, Amen.



December 11, 2023 | Monday of the Second Week in Advent

Lars Olsen Skrefsrud, Missionary to India, 1910

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. ³ Blessed 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.

⁴ John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵ and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood ⁶ and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. ⁷ Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

⁸ “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”

– Revelation 1:1–8 ESV



One of the things I've learned about the book of Revelation is that its focus is Jesus Christ. How do we know that? John, the author, tells us. The first line of the book, chapter one verse one, clearly states that it is “the revelation of Jesus Christ.” John couldn't be more direct. The purpose of this book is to tell us about Jesus. We need to remember that in our modern day. Too often we try to turn Revelation into a roadmap for the future, or predictions of upcoming destruction. We would do better to listen to John—the purpose of Revelation is to focus us on Jesus.

And by the way, what a great focus for this Advent season! The purpose of Advent is to focus us on this Jesus who comes for us. So what does today's reading from Revelation have to tell us about Jesus?

- Jesus is “the faithful witness” (verse 5)—the one who completely fulfills God's plan and purpose.
- He is “the first born of the dead”—the One who has smashed the power of the grave once and for all!
- He is the “ruler of the kings on earth”—John is getting a bit political here. In the Roman Empire it was proclaimed that Caesar is the ruler of kings on earth—but John proclaims that Jesus is the ultimate authority.
- Jesus “loves us”—what a comfort that is to remember again and again!
- Jesus “has freed us from our sins by his blood.” We are redeemed, forgiven, set free through the cross of our Lord.
- He makes us “a kingdom and priests of God.” We are formed into a new community, the people of God!

This Advent, as Revelation proclaims, let's focus anew on Jesus Christ!

Prayer: Holy Lord, focus us anew. You are the Alpha and the Omega, the One who comes for us. Help us to direct our lives to You. Amen.

December 12, 2023 | Tuesday of the Second Week in Advent

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

^{22:34} But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. ³⁵ And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” ³⁷ And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

– Matthew 22:34–40 ESV



Loving one another is not always the easiest thing to do, is it? When people betray you, hurt you, or abuse you, it's hard to love those who take advantage of us. But that cannot be the end of the story. In Matthew 22:34–40, Jesus is literally commanding us to love the Lord our God with our whole being, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Also known as the Great Commandment, Christ is compelling us to love.

And this is only possible because God first loved us. In this time of Advent, as we prepare and get ready for Jesus' birth and second coming, Christ is being sent to save us from our sins because of the Father's love for His treasured creation. Any opportunity for us to love only comes from God's modeling.

I was extremely blessed as a child. I had parents who loved me in all circumstances. Did I always deserve this love? No. But I was still the recipient of this imperfect, consistent care in my life.

Whether we struggle with the aspect of loving others, we cannot just slough it off with no consequence. Jesus is calling us to love our neighbors as ourselves. Yes, this love won't be perfect. Yes, this love won't always be constant. Yes, this love will have ups and downs. Clearly, we must strive to love the best we can in the name of Christ. If loving another is so hard, then we need to give that person to the Savior to assist us in showing concern.

The Greek word for love in this context is *agape*. *Agape* is a sacrificial love, a love that comes from us to another. As we anticipate the Father's wondrous love for us by sending Jesus, may we be led to love others. Loving is difficult at best in some circumstances, but any love we have to provide comes directly from Jesus.

Prayer: Father, help us to love in Jesus' name. You know that we sometimes struggle to love others. Lord, since You first loved us, please provide us with the strength and grace to love the best we can. Even though our human love will fall short, let us follow Your command, and love our neighbors as ourselves. As we cling ever closer to You, may Your love flow through us. We pray all these things in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Amen.

December 13, 2023 | Wednesday of the Second Week in Advent

Lucy, Martyr at Syracuse, c. 304

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

^{147:1} Praise the LORD!

For it is good to sing praises to our God;
for it is pleasant, and a song of praise is fitting.

² The LORD builds up Jerusalem;
he gathers the outcasts of Israel.

³ He heals the brokenhearted
and binds up their wounds.

⁴ He determines the number of the stars;
he gives to all of them their names.

⁵ Great is our Lord, and abundant in power;
his understanding is beyond measure.

⁶ The LORD lifts up the humble;
he casts the wicked to the ground.

⁷ Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving;
make melody to our God on the lyre!

⁸ He covers the heavens with clouds;
he prepares rain for the earth;
he makes grass grow on the hills.

⁹ He gives to the beasts their food,
and to the young ravens that cry.

¹⁰ His delight is not in the strength of the horse,
nor his pleasure in the legs of a man,

¹¹ but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him,
in those who hope in his steadfast love.

¹² Praise the LORD, O Jerusalem!
Praise your God, O Zion!

¹³ For he strengthens the bars of your gates;
he blesses your children within you.

¹⁴ He makes peace in your borders;
he fills you with the finest of the wheat.

¹⁵ He sends out his command to the earth;
his word runs swiftly.

¹⁶ He gives snow like wool;
he scatters frost like ashes.

¹⁷ He hurls down his crystals of ice like crumbs;
who can stand before his cold?

¹⁸ He sends out his word, and melts them;
he makes his wind blow and the waters flow.

¹⁹ He declares his word to Jacob,
his statutes and rules to Israel.

²⁰ He has not dealt thus with any other nation;
they do not know his rules.

Praise the LORD!

– Psalm 147 ESV

In today's Psalm, the psalmist makes clear the importance of praising the Lord. It is He who has gathered His people from exile and bound up all their wounds. The Lord is worthy of praise as both the Creator of all that is and because of His universal care for all His creation, especially His care for His people. As Christians, we can rejoice that God the Father sent His Son to rescue and restore us.

Imagine for a moment, that you are the creator and founder of a large catering company. You personally crafted all the recipes and the menu. You selected, hired, and even trained the entire staff. You taught them exactly how the food should be made and how the company should operate. Because of all of this, your company is a great success. To top things off you've been invited to prepare and serve food at the city's largest gala. As your staff serves the food, everyone praises the delicious and well-prepared meal. As they talk after the meal, all the ingredients are analyzed and the methods of preparation are discussed, the taste is raved about, but no one ever acknowledges you as the creator, the developer, and the overseer of the company. You leave the event without being recognized or affirmed by anyone, even your own staff. You would feel hurt and unappreciated, I'm sure.

Do you ever wonder if God feels that way? When we look at the heavens with clouds, a grassy hill, beautiful birds, or strong majestic animals, and think how amazing creation is—but forget to acknowledge Him?

Here, the psalmist reminds us to praise the Lord. *“For it is good to sing praises to our God, for it is pleasant and a song of praise is fitting”* (147:1).

This Advent season as we thank God for sending His Son, let us also give thanks to Him for His entire creation.

Prayer: Dear Lord, You have revealed Your love for Your creation in Your Word, our Lord Jesus Christ. We offer our thanks and praise to You. Help us to always remember the Creator when we look at Your amazing creations. We pray this through Your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



December 14, 2023 | Thursday of the Second Week in Advent

John of the Cross, Renewer of the Church, 1591

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

^{126:1} When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
² Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then they said among the nations,
“The LORD has done great things for them.”
³ The LORD has done great things for us;
we are glad.
⁴ Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like streams in the Negeb!
⁵ Those who sow in tears
shall reap with shouts of joy!
⁶ He who goes out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
bringing his sheaves with him.

– Psalm 126 ESV

December 14th is the day we celebrate the Feast of Saint John of the Cross, a 16th century mystic, monk, and reformer. Saint John was a prolific writer but is probably best known for his poem, “The Dark Night of the Soul.” In his treatise on the poem, Saint John describes this “Dark Night” as a time in our faith journey when it seems as if God has withdrawn His presence from us. We are left feeling lost, alone, and confused. Saint John goes on, however, to explain that if we fully surrender ourselves to God, it is exactly at these low points that we have the greatest potential for spiritual renewal. Indeed, a journey through the “Dark Night of the Soul” may actually be necessary if we are to truly embrace the wonder of our living God. As Saint Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12:9, “*Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.*”

We have all had times when we have felt a bit lost in our faith journey. The trials of life descend upon us and we struggle to hold on to our faith. It is at these time that the Psalms can be a source of great comfort and encouragement. We don’t know the exact circumstances of Psalm 126. All we have are the cryptic words of verse 4, “*Restore our fortunes, LORD, like the streams of Negev.*” Something has happened, we don’t know what, but it is evident that the people of Zion are feeling as if everything has been taken from them.

Yet the writer of the Psalm will not allow the people of Zion to dwell in this dark place of despair. I love the way the Psalm begins, “*When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed.*”

The writer tells them to not dwell on present circumstances, but to remember that their God is a God of restoration and not desolation. He invites them to rest in the comfort of knowing that God never has, and never will, abandoned them. He assures them that the day will come when all the tears and fears will fade away like a dream. He calls them to remember the promises of God and be assured that “*those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy.*”

In 1874, the “Singing Preacher,” Knowles Shaw, wrote a hymn based on the final verses of Psalm 126. If you are currently struggling through a “dark night” let it be your song this day:

Bringing in the Sheaves

*Sowing in the sunshine, sowing in the shadows,
fearing neither dark clouds nor winter’s chilling breeze;
By and by the harvest, and the labor ended,
we shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.*

*Going forth with laughter, sowing for the Master,
Though the loss sustained, Our spirit often grieves;
When our weepings over, He will bid us welcome,
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.*

*Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves,
we shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves,
Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves,
we shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.*

Prayer: Good and Gracious God, it is sometimes difficult to feel Your presence in our lives, especially when we are overcome by grief, depression, fears and are uncertain about the future. Give us Your strength when we are feeling weak. Give us faith when doubts arise and give us hope when despair threatens to overwhelm us. Help us to daily remember our Baptisms and the love You have for Your children. We pray this in the name of the One who promised to be with us always, Jesus Christ our Lord and savior. Amen.



December 15, 2023 | Friday of the Second Week in Advent

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

^{23:37} “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! ³⁸ See, your house is left to you desolate. ³⁹ For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

– Matthew 23:37–39 ESV

I'd like to open this devotion with a story.

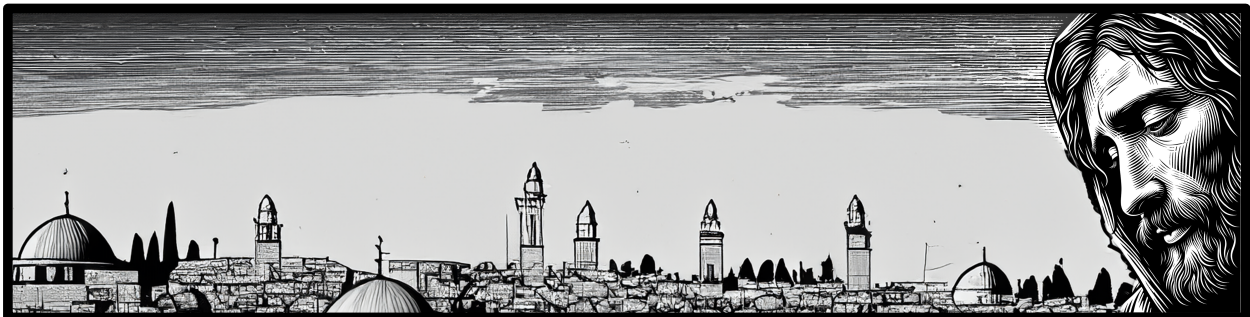
A woman named Cheryl began to have chest pain during her board meeting for the public library. Occasionally they were sharp, but then they would be gone. The pain became less later that afternoon, but occasionally she would feel a sharp pang. After the library had closed for the evening and she had sent all the employees home, she was still experiencing pangs in her chest and shortness of breath. She thought perhaps she should drive herself to the local hospital to get it checked out. In the ER, Cheryl's EKG showed normal electrical activity of her heart, but her bloodwork told a different story.

Cheryl was suffering from broken heart syndrome, a very real condition that affects the heart and blood flow to the rest of the body. Broken heart syndrome is a stress-induced condition of the heart that doctors believe is caused by a surge of stress hormones.

In today's Bible text, Jesus' heart was filled with compassion for the children of Israel. He desired that all the people of Jerusalem, all the woeful religious leaders would know the love of God and His mercy. Jesus desired that they would truly see their heart condition that was far from God. Jesus lamented over God's beloved city, the city of His Presence.

When your own heart condition is far from God, far from what Your Lord desires for you, Jesus desires to gather you under His wing. Christ desires for you to receive His loving mercy so that in His mercy He might mend your broken heart condition of sin that separates you from God, your Father. Therefore, Christ came to offer His own blood poured out on the cross of Calvary, His sacrificial love, healing your broken heart and life. Christ alone gives you peace.

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, I offer You my prayers of thanks and praise for gathering me under Your gracious wing. You alone heal my broken heart condition drawing me ever closer to Your own heart of mercy. Lead me in Your way of peace. Thanks be to God. Amen.



December 16, 2023 | Saturday of the Second Week in Advent

Haggai 2:1–9; Revelation 3:1–6; Matthew 24:1–14; Psalms 90 & 149 (AM); Psalms 80 & 72 (PM)

^{2:1} In the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet: ² “Speak now to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to all the remnant of the people, and say, ³ ‘Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes? ⁴ Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, declares the LORD. Be strong, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the LORD. Work, for I am with you, declares the LORD of hosts, ⁵ according to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt. My Spirit remains in your midst. Fear not. ⁶ For thus says the LORD of hosts: Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. ⁷ And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the LORD of hosts. ⁸ The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, declares the LORD of hosts. ⁹ The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the LORD of hosts.’”

– Haggai 2:1–9 ESV



Two of the greatest challenges to our faith are discouragement and delay, and Jews in Haggai’s day experienced both. The temple where God had promised to meet with them laid in ruins, along with their hopes. For their idolatry, God allowed His people to be exiled in Babylon, and when their captivity ended seventy years later, they returned to rebuild. But their initial excitement for the project gave way to opposition, delays, and lack of funds. Progress stalled. Years went by. Discouragement set in.

The prophet Haggai encouraged the nation to be strong and trust the Lord. “*I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory,*” he declared. Some versions say, “*the desire of nations.*” The things that the nations desired would pour into Jerusalem for the rebuilding of the temple. And so they did.

Yet 500 years later, our Gospel reading reveals that the “desire of nations” is Christ Jesus himself. *He* is the treasure, brought into the temple for His presentation by Mary and Joseph. Simeon recognized Him immediately as “a light to the Gentiles and the glory of [God’s] people, Israel” (Luke 2:32).

Jesus brought into God’s house the true wealth of forgiveness, eternal life, and salvation that are ours today through Word and Sacrament. We need not be discouraged, for He dwells with us and in us. We are His temple of living stones, a witness to the nations of His love and power. No king ever sat on a throne again to reign in Jerusalem, where foreign powers dominated. But Christ is the new and better King, born in a manger at Christmas. He is the Restorer of all things, the One sent to rebuild what is broken in our world and in us.

Prayer: Lord God, our treasure and our desire, when we are faced with change, delay, and discouragement, teach us to lift up our heads and trust in both Your presence and Your precious promises; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



The Third Week of Advent

*Almighty God, you once called John the Baptist to give witness
to the coming of your Son and to prepare his way.*

*Grant us, your people, the wisdom to see your purpose today and the openness to hear your will, that we
may witness to Christ's coming and so prepare his way;
through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God now and forever. Amen.*

December 17, 2023 | Third Sunday in Advent

O Sapientia/O Wisdom

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

^{9:11} “In that day I will raise up
the booth of David that is fallen
and repair its breaches,
and raise up its ruins
and rebuild it as in the days of old,
¹² that they may possess the remnant of Edom
and all the nations who are called by my name,”
declares the LORD who does this.
¹³ “Behold, the days are coming,” declares the LORD,
“when the plowman shall overtake the reaper
and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed;
the mountains shall drip sweet wine,
and all the hills shall flow with it.
¹⁴ I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel,
and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine,
and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.
¹⁵ I will plant them on their land,
and they shall never again be uprooted
out of the land that I have given them,”
says the LORD your God.

– Amos 9:11–15 ESV

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God the Father and His Son, Christ Jesus on this third Sunday in Advent.

Wouldn't it be great if our lives could be mapped perfectly into our GPS system, and all we had to do was follow the arrow? During this season of Advent, we may particularly wish we had such a device. We could get all the Christmas cards written and in the mail by December 10; all the baking would occur without mistake, and the gifts would be wrapped and labeled well in advance of December 24. And everybody in the household would be polite, content, and motivated to go beyond what is expected.

It's a nice dream, but life doesn't unfold exactly as we desire. Instead, we are often stressed, irritable, noticeably quiet, and exhausted. We find ourselves longing for something more.

In today's Old Testament reading, the prophet Amos recalls wanting something different for the people of Israel. God gave Amos a hard job to do when He directed him to say to the people “Behold the days are coming, declares the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the Land—not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord” (Amos 8:6). Amos delivers that message to the people, but it is a two-fold message; words of judgment followed by words of restoration.

Restore means to “renew, make useful again, or to make over.” There are people who love to restore things—and often their reason for doing so is because there was something about the project that made it worth saving. When God sees us, He promises to rebuild what is broken. As the master craftsman, He repairs the damage we have done to ourselves and to others. He restores us to Himself again through His Word and Sacraments.

God cares deeply about us. Whatever is weighing heavy on your mind and heart can be given to God in full confidence that He will forgive and return you to wholeness. He is the Master of restoration.

Prayer: “Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word. Amen” (2 Thessalonians 2:16–17).



December 18, 2023 | Monday of the Third Week in Advent

O Adonai/O Lord of Might

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

^{3:7} “And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:

These are the words of the holy one, the true one,

who has the key of David,

who opens and no one will shut,

who shuts and no one opens:

⁸ “I know your works. Look, 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. ⁹ I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but are lying—I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. ¹⁰ Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth. ¹¹ I am coming soon; hold fast to what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.

– Revelation 3:7–11 NRSV



In our reading from the book of Revelation, we hear the Lord speaking to the church in Philadelphia. He says:

“I know that you have little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name” (3:8b).

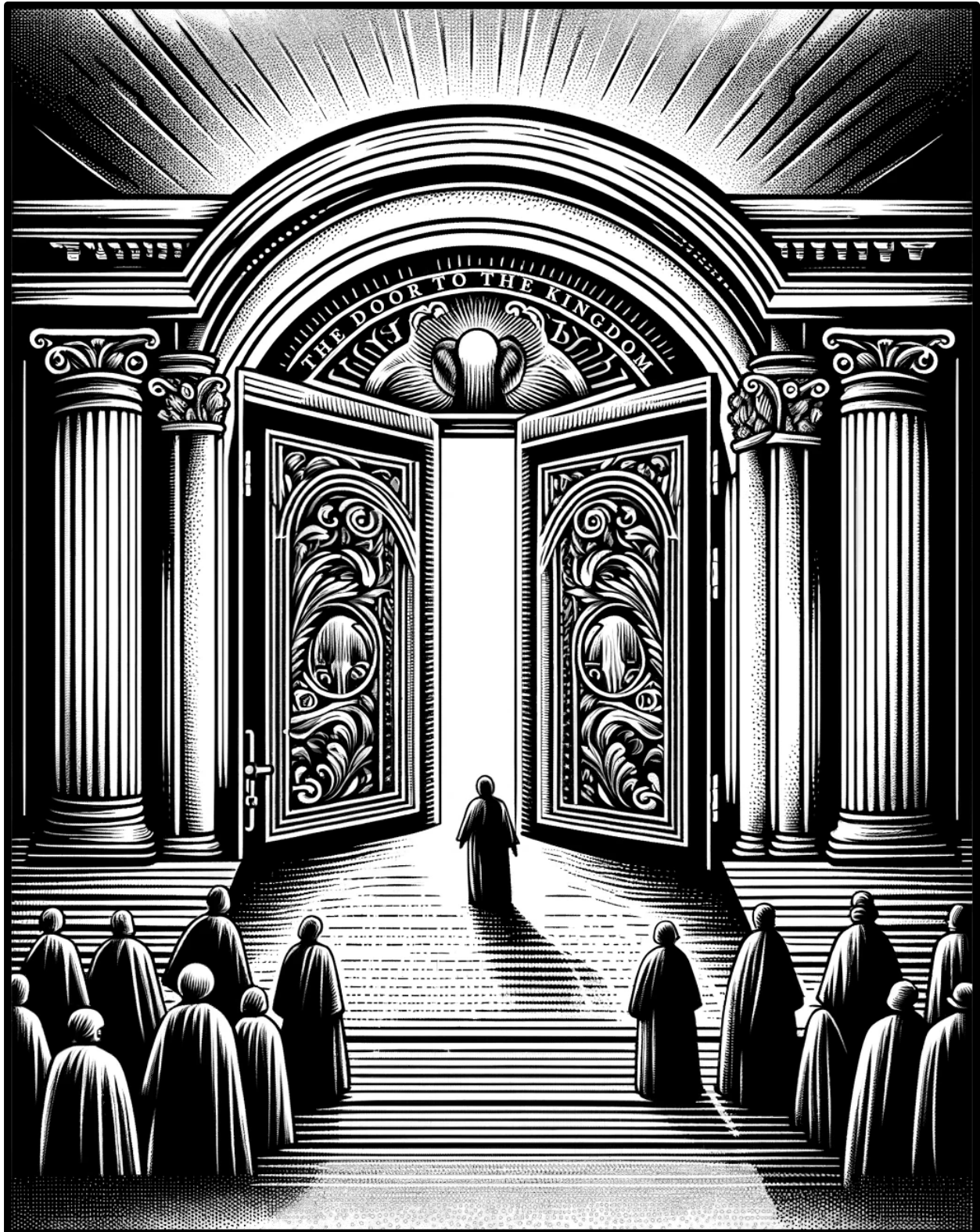
We may often think that because we are small and have little strength or influence that we are not very important. Our congregation may be small; we may be few in number and feel that we don’t make much of a difference in this world. As we are called to be Jesus’s disciples, we know that we are to be about the business of making disciples of all peoples and nations. It’s a daunting task and I daresay we often feel wholly inadequate and unprepared to carry it out as well as we should.

But the Lord sees things differently. He honors and loves those who hold fast to His Word. He treasures those who are faithful to His name. He loves to see us studying His word and pondering it in our hearts, as His mother Mary did. Our Lord loves to see His beloved children clinging to His gracious promises with tenacity, especially in difficult and challenging times. For when we truly treasure His Word in our hearts, we can’t help but bear witness to His loving and gracious presence in every circumstance of our lives, including times of trouble.

The Lord also says this: “Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut” (3:8c).

Jesus has opened the door to His kingdom—for us! As faithful followers of Jesus who hold fast to His Word, we have an open door before us. It is a door of promise and possibilities beyond our wildest imaginations! And though we ourselves may be small and of little power, we are invited to walk through that door with Jesus who is big enough and has enough power for all of us! After all, it is His kingdom and His mission, and He has chosen us to be a part of it. How incredibly blessed we are!

Prayer: O Lord of might, You sent Your only begotten Son to open the door to eternal life for all who trust in Him. Hold us steadfast in our faith that, though we are of little power, we may find our hope and strength in Jesus, our Lord and King, in whose name we pray. Amen, come Lord Jesus!



December 19, 2023 | Tuesday of the Third Week in Advent

O Radix Jesse/O Root of Jesse

Zechariah 2:1–13; Revelation 3:14–22; Matthew 24:32–44; Psalms 33 & 146 (AM); Psalms 85 & 94 (PM)

^{24:32} “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. ³³ So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁴ Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. ³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³⁶ “But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. ³⁷ For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. ⁴² Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

– Matthew 24:32–44 ESV



In my household, I share living space with a teenager, a reminder of my own adolescent years. I distinctly recall living with an ever-present sense of urgency back then, often hearing the impatient call of “Let’s go!” when I was particularly slow with my daily tasks. Interestingly, I now find myself communicating with my teenager in much the same way, urging them to “get ready” and “let’s go.”

Today’s Scripture from Matthew resonates with a similar urgency. We find ourselves in the dark about the precise moment of the Lord’s return, but we possess an advantage: the ability to prepare for that moment. Jesus entered the lives of the faithful by His birth in Bethlehem, He returned through His resurrection, and we now anticipate His future coming. What we must do in the interim is to “get ready” because the hour of His return remains a mystery.

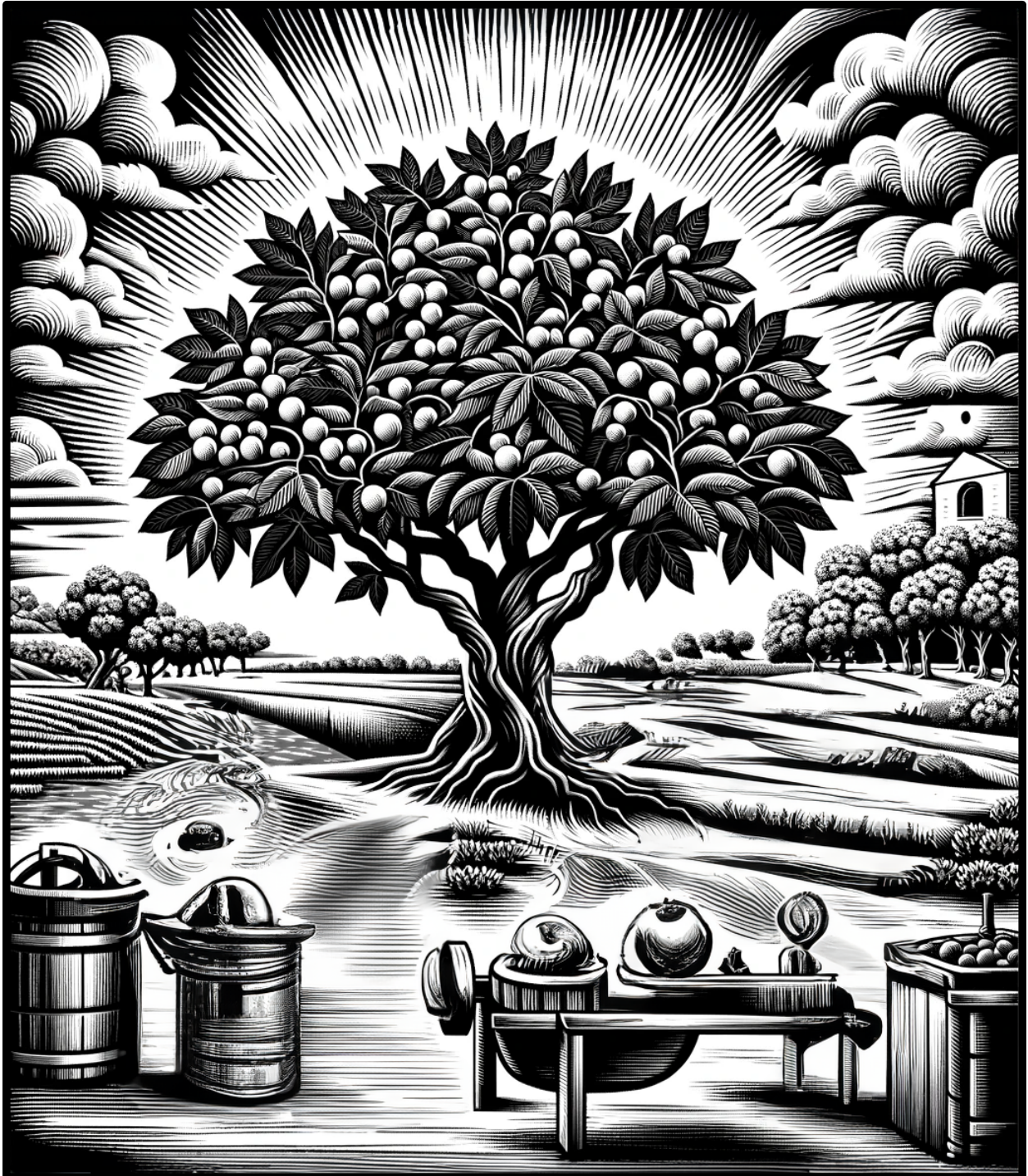
In this context, to “get ready” means to carry out our daily activities with the Lord close to our hearts. In today’s Scripture, we observe people engaged in their everyday tasks. Two men toiling in the field—one taken, and one left. Two women laboring at the mill—one taken, and one left. This serves not only as a cautionary message but also as a declaration that when we draw near to the Lord, when we invoke His name, and when we live in accordance with His Word, we will indeed be prepared for His coming, no matter when it occurs.

Reflecting on my teenage years, I recall hurriedly gathering my backpack and belongings just before rushing out the door. Today, I witness similar scenes with my eldest son—untied shoelaces, a half-eaten sandwich dangling from his mouth, and an open backpack spilling papers on the floor.

In our spiritual lives, we can prepare ourselves through God’s Word, through communal worship, and by partaking in the Sacrament of the Altar. Sometimes we are thoroughly prepared, while at other times, we find ourselves scrambling in what feels like the eleventh hour. There are moments when we may even be entirely unaware. The beauty lies in God welcoming us into His Advent, both in our readiness and in our

moments of chaos. Whether we have it all together one moment and are disheveled the next, the unknown hour of Christ's coming is a blessing that awaits us all.

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, we look for Your coming again this Advent. We know that sometimes we are prepared for Your coming, and sometimes we are not. Help us to find You always in the things we do from day to day, and in the things that help us come closer to You in our lives of faith. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.



December 20, 2023 | Wednesday of the Third Week in Advent

Katherina von Bora Luther, 1552, O Clavis David/O Key of David

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 his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? ⁴⁶ Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. ⁴⁷ Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. ⁴⁸ But if that wicked servant says to himself, ‘My master is delayed,’ ⁴⁹ and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, ⁵⁰ the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know ⁵¹ and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

– Matthew 24:45–51 ESV



The season of Advent is an annual reminder that God does not always act in keeping with our expectations. Jesus was born in a remote place, and under cover of darkness. Although He was the very fullness of deity dwelling bodily in our midst (John 1:14; Colossians 2:8), He came to a world that was not really looking for Him, and to a people that mostly did not recognize Him (John 1:9–11). The prophets of Israel had long promised that God would come (cf. Malachi 3:1–3), but for many living at the time of Jesus, it probably felt as if that blessed day would never arrive. It was undoubtedly a struggle for God’s people to maintain a living hope in God’s promises over such a wide expanse of years, and in the face of so many profound discouragements.

The Gospel text appointed for today reveals that our Lord’s second coming will again happen at a time and in a manner many do not expect. In the meantime, Christians are admonished to remain vigilant, not turning aside to the right or to the left, but walking in faithful obedience with eyes resolutely fixed upon the promise of Jesus’ certain return. Jesus issues a sober warning: the risk of distraction while we wait is real and spiritually perilous. The Church is to be a people ever mindful of the fact that the Master of the house will assuredly return, and all flesh shall give an account before Him (cf. Matthew 25:31–46).

Beneath the sober warning there is also rich comfort to be found here for Christians who find themselves struggling amid life’s many vexing trials and painful ambiguities. Jesus’ words offer to us the assurance that although it may not presently look like it, He will indeed come again. And when He does, the sorrowful groan of history shall give way to the blessedness of an eternal kingdom. Blessed are they who keep watch. Blessed are they who keep their eyes fixed upon the promise of Jesus to return and to set all things right.

Prayer: Almighty God, You are the Lord of history, and the one true hope of the weary. Mercifully grant to Your church a certain and unwavering confidence in the glorious return of Your beloved Son Jesus, so that we will neither be overcome by the adversities of our earthly sojourn, nor seduced by the allure of lesser things, but might rather walk with joy and sober vigilance while we await the coming of Your blessed kingdom. Through Christ our Lord, amen.

December 21, 2023 | Thursday of the Third Week in Advent

St. Thomas, Apostle; O Oriens/O Dayspring

Habakkuk 2:1–4; Revelation 4:9—5:5; Matthew 25:1–13; Psalms 18:1–20 & 147:13–21 (AM); Psalms 126 & 62 (PM)

^{4,9} And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, ¹⁰ the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying,

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.”

^{5:1} Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. ² And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” ³ And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, ⁴ and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. ⁵ And one of the elders said to me, “Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”

– Revelation 4:9—5:5 ESV



For many people today, the language of “faith” connotes an unreasoned judgment about what is true, what it means to be religious, or perhaps it even brings to mind what we Christians believe, “the faith.” But faith is much more common, and elusive, than we tend to assume. We exercise faith in order to acknowledge history, to learn details from our childhood, and to trust that those we love want what is best for us. Faith is not reducible to feelings. Nor is it simply a matter of belief, for example, *that* God exists. Faith involves our minds and hearts in trusting what we cannot see or prove. When it comes to what matters most, such trust is necessary for human knowing and loving; we believe so that we may know and love.

Trust is difficult in a world filled with distractions, objects and narratives competing for our attention, trust, and affections. The plots of these alternative stories, the good things disproportionately enjoyed, and destructive or disordered relationships draw us in, shape the rhythms of our lives, and reveal what we believe to be real, meaningful, and true.

As with the Jews of first-century Palestine, then, our lives and our loves are confronted by the divine Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us (John 1:14). Even as we attempt to fix our eyes on Emmanuel, God with us, like Jesus’ disciples in Gethsemane or amidst the crowds, we become sleepy and our attention diverted. Out of the slumber of life in this world, Christ’s Advent, then and now, calls us to return to the glorious Christ child, remembering God promise to be *for us* sealed in Christ.

The bridegroom for whom we wait is none other than the Christ child, Jesus, “the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David” (Revelation 5:5). The One who is alone worthy of corporate human and angelic praise is our Lord Jesus Christ in whom we put our faith. As with Thomas, Jesus’ doubting apostle, we are all susceptible to doubt. In receiving Jesus as the lion and the lamb who alone has the power to open the scroll and who alone is worthy of our worship, we trust God’s promise to be for us, to be worthy above all of our fear, love, and trust.

Prayer: Gracious God, our heavenly Father, in Your tender love towards us sinners, You have given us your Son that, believing in Him, we might have everlasting life. Strengthen us by Your Holy Spirit, that our faith in Christ may increase daily, and that we may remain steadfast in this faith to the end and come to life everlasting. Through Christ our Lord, Amen.



December 22, 2023 | Friday of the Third Week in Advent

O Rex Gentium/O King of Nations

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

^{5:8} And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹ And they sang a new song, saying,

“Worthy are you to take the scroll
and to open its seals,

for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation,

¹⁰ and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth.”

¹¹ Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, ¹² saying with a loud voice,

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!”

– Revelation 5:8–12 ESV

^{25:14} “For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property.”

¹⁹ “Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them.”

²² “And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me two talents; here, I have made two talents more.’”

– Matthew 25:14, 19, 22 ESV



Nearing the end of Advent, we expect choirs of angels singing in exultation—though usually “bending near the earth” over Bethlehem rather than gathered around the heavenly throne. But here they are! “Myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands” of voices echoing the apostolic strains, praising the Lamb whose blood ransomed, or *purchased*, “people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.”

In keeping with the parable of the talents, this is the great investment: that “God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to *redeem* those who were under the law” (Galatians 4:4–5) by “his holy and precious blood, his innocent sufferings and death” (Small Catechism 2:4). In Baptism, the Holy Spirit has placed all the fullness of Christ Himself into the mangers of our hearts. And whenever we receive Him in Word and Sacrament, the holy Child of Bethlehem, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, is “born in us today.”

Christ invests Himself with His Word, and *it does not return empty*. It builds faith and provokes further investment—the joy of His victory and the wonder of His love—to accrue interest through our engagement with others. We’re not predisposed to this “holy financing.” As sinners, we’d rather cover this treasure up with other things that, in the end, are worth about as much as the dirt the third servant in the parable used to bury his master’s money. But Christ Himself is *with us*: calling us to repent, and forgiving and sending us out in joy—the same joy the shepherds knew when the multitude of the heavenly host filled the night with praise for God’s great investment, born in a stable: the Risen Lord who will return to settle accounts and make all things right. Glory to God in the highest!

Prayer: Come, Lord Jesus. Turn us from fearful laziness to holy industry and confidence in Your mission. You've invested everything in us; make us faithful in investing Your Gospel, and its fruit of mercy and kindness, in the lives of others. As we prepare now for the joy of Your birth, so prepare us in Your righteousness for Your return: when with the redeemed of every nation and ringed by hosts of angels, we celebrate the joy that will have no end. Amen.



December 23, 2023 | Saturday of the Third Week in Advent

O Emmanuel/O Come, Emmanuel; Thorlak, Bishop of Skalholt, 1193

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

^{8:9} This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Now hear these words, ‘Let your hands be strong so that the temple may be built.’ This is also what the prophets said who were present when the foundation was laid for the house of the LORD Almighty. ¹⁰ Before that time there were no wages for people or hire for animals. No one could go about their business safely because of their enemies, since I had turned everyone against their neighbor. ¹¹ But now I will not deal with the remnant of this people as I did in the past,” declares the LORD Almighty.

¹² “The seed will grow well, the vine will yield its fruit, the ground will produce its crops, and the heavens will drop their dew. I will give all these things as an inheritance to the remnant of this people. ¹³ Just as you, Judah and Israel, have been a curse among the nations, so I will save you, and you will be a blessing. Do not be afraid, but let your hands be strong.”

¹⁴ This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Just as I had determined to bring disaster on you and showed no pity when your ancestors angered me,” says the LORD Almighty, ¹⁵ “so now I have determined to do good again to Jerusalem and Judah. Do not be afraid. ¹⁶ These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts; ¹⁷ do not plot evil against each other, and do not love to swear falsely. I hate all this,” declares the LORD.

– Zechariah 8:9–17 NIV2011



Dear friends, greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus. We’re only one day away from the celebration of Christmas. Only one day away from remembering, on Christmas Eve, the incarnation of God in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. Christmas is a time to remember, to celebrate, and to give thanks. It’s also a time to recall, reclaim, and recommit ourselves to living as followers of Christ.

I find it fascinating, if not revealing, that the Good News of our Lord’s coming, and the promised salvation offered to us in Jesus, is often couched in words of admonition—if not direct words that challenge us to live each day in faith, and to never lose sight of the calling we have in Him.

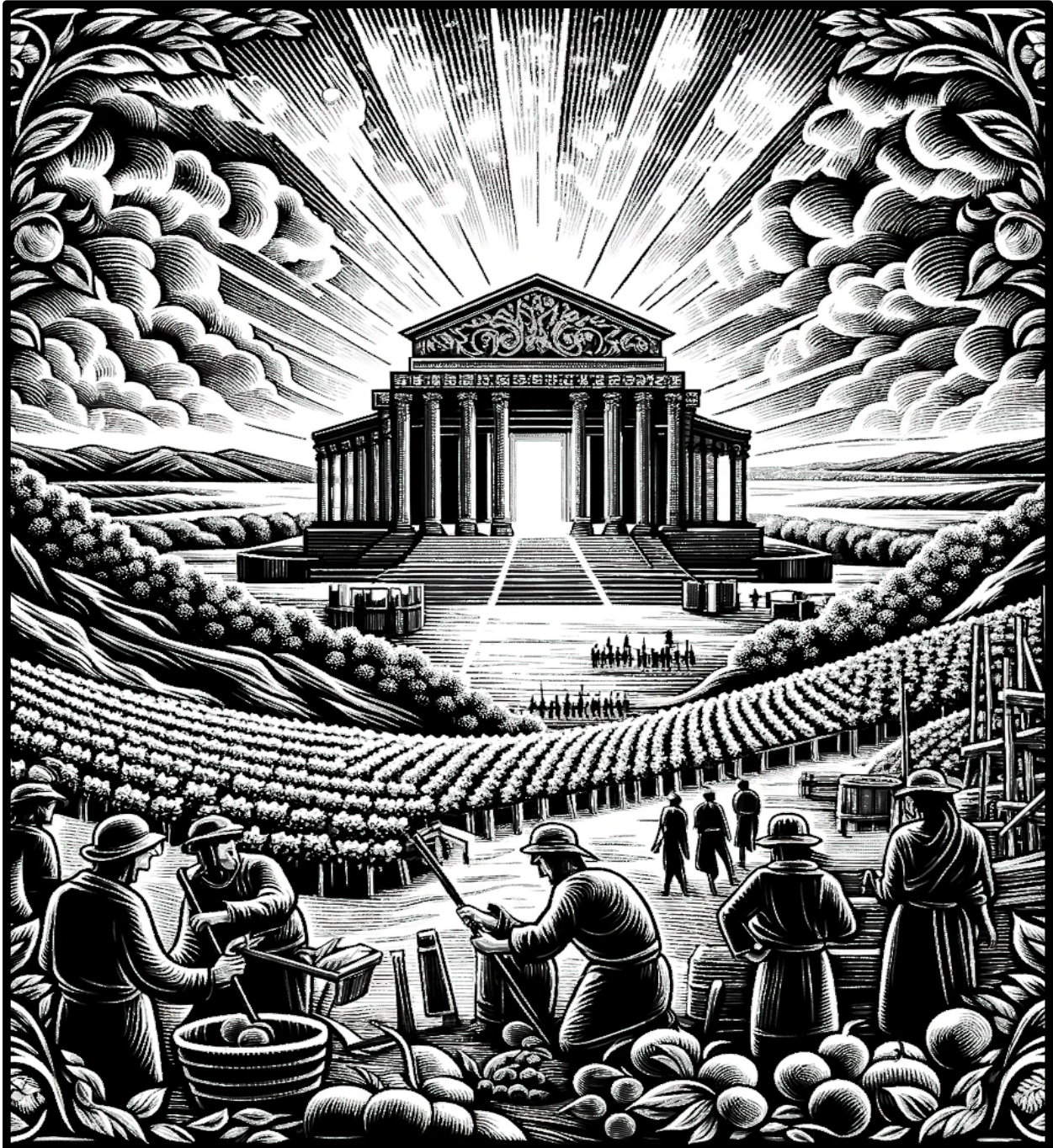
The prophet Jeremiah was bold in his proclamation of God’s saving grace, as well as of God’s judgment. The people of Israel had strayed. Their faithfulness to God was far from His faithful promises to them. God had every reason, and right, to deal with them based upon how they had lived. And He did, and He still does. To pretend that it’s any different for us is discounting, if not ignoring, the truth. What we do in this life matters. How we live in this life is directly related to where we will live eternally.

At the same time, God’s final word of judgment was placed upon His Son. God’s condemnation of sin was judged and punished and put to death in Christ. That’s the message of the Bible. That’s the reason, ultimately, Jesus was born. He came into this world to die. He came into this world to pay the price for our sin.

The apostle John says it clearly, “God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world in Him” (John 3:17). Believe it. Trust it. Our salvation is secure in Jesus. Our eternal life is a gift that comes to us by God’s grace through faith. It’s the reason our Lord Jesus was born.

Now it's time to live for Him. Now it's our opportunity to respond to the calling and the commission we have been given in Jesus. Don't let this Christmas pass by without hearing clearly what God has done for you, and given to you, in Christ. Jesus is the greatest gift this world has ever been given. And don't simply hear about what He's done, but respond to it. Give thanks for it. Commit your life to living each day for Him.

Prayer: Gracious God, as we draw closer to the celebration of Christmas and to hearing, once again, how much we are loved in Christ, so open our hearts and our minds to hearing and remembering the calling we have been given in Jesus, that we might respond in lives of faith. All this we pray in His holy name. Amen.



The Fourth Week of Advent

Stir up your power, O Lord, and come.

*Take away the hindrance of our sins and make us ready for the celebration of your birth,
that we may receive you in joy and serve you always;
for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.*

The Nativity of Our Lord

Almighty God, you made this holy night shine with the brightness of the true Light.

*Grant that here on earth we may walk in the light of Jesus' presence and
in the last day wake to the brightness of his glory;
through your only Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one
God, now and forever. Amen.*

December 24, 2023 | Fourth Sunday in Advent / The Nativity of Our Lord: Christmas Eve

Genesis 3:8–15; Revelation 12:1–10; John 3:16–21; Psalms 24 & 150 (AM); Psalms 132 & 114 (PM)

^{24:1} The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof,
the world and those who dwell therein,
² for he has founded it upon the seas
and established it upon the rivers.
³ Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?
And who shall stand in his holy place?
⁴ He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not lift up his soul to what is false
and does not swear deceitfully.
⁵ He will receive blessing from the LORD
and righteousness from the God of his salvation.
⁶ Such is the generation of those who seek him,
who seek the face of the God of Jacob.
⁷ Lift up your heads, O gates!
And be lifted up, O ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
⁸ Who is this King of glory?
The LORD, strong and mighty,
the LORD, mighty in battle!
⁹ Lift up your heads, O gates!
And lift them up, O ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
¹⁰ Who is this King of glory?
The LORD of hosts,
he is the King of glory!

– Psalm 24:1–10 ESV



A blessed Christmas Eve to you all! This night has always been one of my favorite nights in church. As the sun sets and the air cools, we put on our winter coats and head to church in the dark. We might even be treated to some gentle snowflakes by the time worship has ended. It's rather magical in a Norman Rockwell sort of way. The luminaries on the sidewalk invite everyone in to worship the newborn King.

In Jesus' day, there were requirements to enter the temple for worship. The psalmist spells them out by beginning with a serious question, "Who shall ascend the holy mountain? Who shall stand in His holy place?" In other words, "Who may enter God's holy temple?" Just anybody, as in mantra we often say, "All are welcome"?

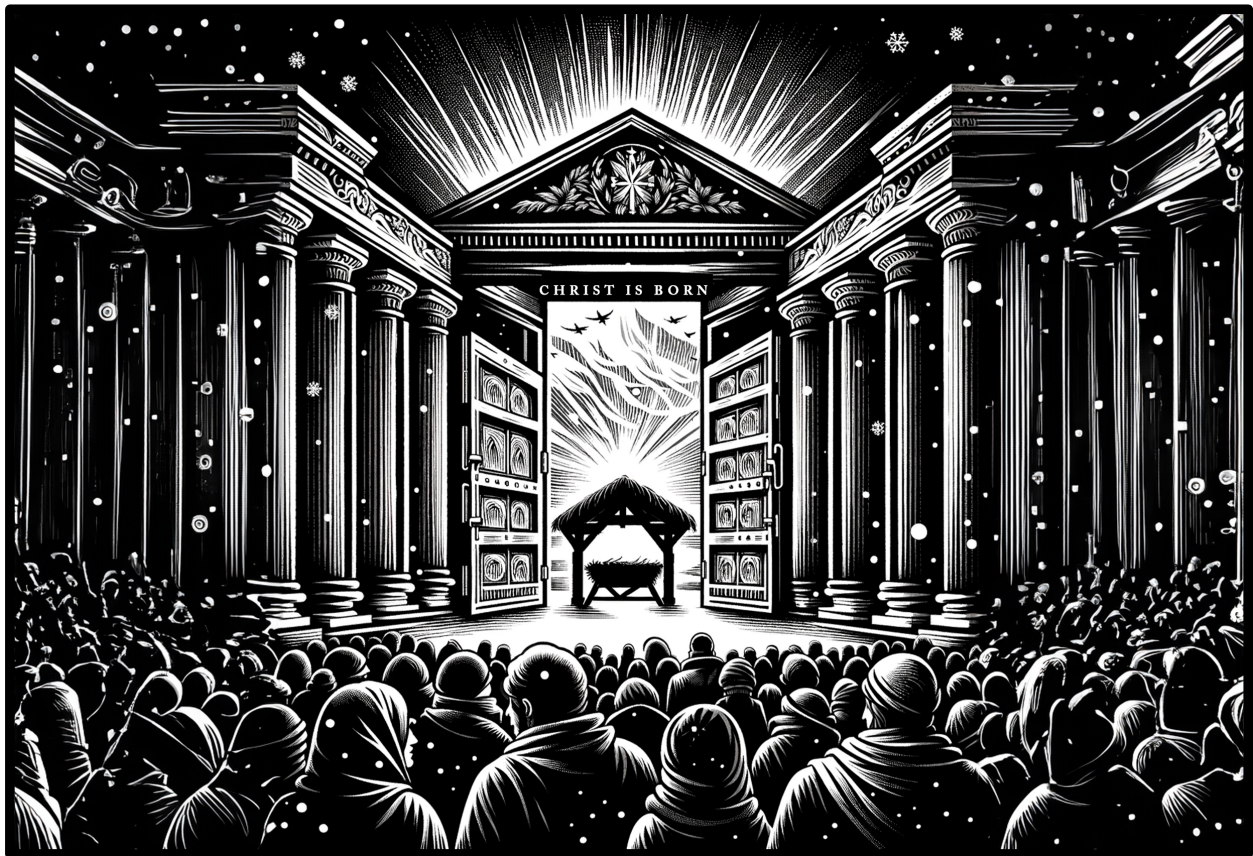
Not exactly.

The prerequisites were that worshippers had to be in a state of purity, cleanliness, righteousness even, to enter the sacred temple. The psalmist wrote, "Those who have clean hands and a pure heart, who have not pledged themselves to falsehood, nor sworn by what is a fraud. They shall receive a blessing from the Lord and a just reward from the God of their salvation" (Psalm 24:4–5).

The remainder of Psalm 24 is a hymn that cries out to the doors and gates of the temple as the King of glory approaches. We know who this King of glory is, it is God's one and only Son, who as St. John reminds us, is the one who was sent into the world so that all who believe will not perish but will have eternal life (John 3:16). Not only that, but Christ was sent to humanity not to condemn sinners like you and me, but to save us from our sin. Even though our hands may not be clean, and our hearts need purifying, the Christ child beckons us in to receive the greatest treasure imaginable—communion with Him and right relationship with God. God's people could not fulfill the law, and so our Heavenly Father sent His Son to fulfill it for us. He does this for us so that on that great day of the Lord we will receive God's promised blessing.

And so we can hear the words of the psalmist as if we are at the gates and doors of the temple, waiting for our Lord to arrive in all of His splendor, "Lift up your heads, lift them high for the King of glory is coming in!" He is the Lord of Hosts, the one we find in the manger in Bethlehem, and He is the one calls us His own.

Prayer: "Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, establish and confirm us in Your truth by Your Holy Spirit. Reveal to us what we do not know; perfect in us what is lacking; strengthen us in what we know; and keep us faultless in Your service; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen" (St. Clement of Rome).²



² Thomas C. Oden and Cindy Crosby, eds., *Ancient Christian Devotional: A Year of Weekly Readings: Lectionary Cycle B* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2011), 26. Clement is listed as an early bishop of Rome and is considered the first of the Apostolic Fathers of the Church. He is also possibly mentioned in Paul's epistles (Philippians 4:3).

December 25, 2023 | The Nativity of Our Lord: Christmas Day

Micah 4:1–5; 5:2–4; 1 John 4:7–16; John 3:31–36; Psalms 2 & 145 (AM); Psalms 98 & 96 (PM)

^{5:2} But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. ³ Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. ⁴ And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth.

– Micah 5:2–4 NRSV

On this radiant Christmas morn, as we celebrate the birth of our Savior, we are carried through the echoes of ancient prophecies into the bright epiphany of God’s Love Incarnate. The words of Micah, once shrouded in mystery, now shimmer with clarity as we behold the baby in Bethlehem, the promised ruler over Israel. The quaintness of Bethlehem is a contrast to the magnitude of its promise—a small town cradling the boundless hope of the world.

Micah’s prophecy about Bethlehem’s significant role and the peace to reign finds its fulfillment in the heartbeats of the infant Jesus. The scene is a vivid manifestation of God’s profound love and faithfulness, transcending centuries to honor His promises.

The apostle John takes us further into the heart of this love in his epistle, describing Jesus as the living testimony of God’s love towards us. And then in his Gospel, John amplifies the supremacy of Jesus, painting a divine picture of His authority and eternal existence.

As we juxtapose Micah’s ancient prophetic words with John’s profound insights, we witness the grand narrative of salvation knitting together, with Jesus as its brilliant focal point. This convergence invites a deep reflection: How does the reality of Jesus’ birth, God’s Love Incarnate, shape our understanding of God’s consistent character from ancient prophecies to New Testament revelations?

The quaint manger scene with the omnipotent God nestled in straw is a brilliant illustration of divine love meeting human vulnerability. Our Savior’s humble entrance into our world shatters earthly grandeur, teaching us the essence of divine love—humble, self-giving, and boundless.

Today, we are beckoned to kneel at the cradle of salvation, to soak in the resonances of God’s love echoing from Micah’s time, to the apostle John’s testimony, and down through the ages to us today. The birth of Jesus is not just an event of historical significance; it’s the epitome of God’s love narrative, each verse from Micah to John, singing the hymn of God’s unwavering love. He has come!

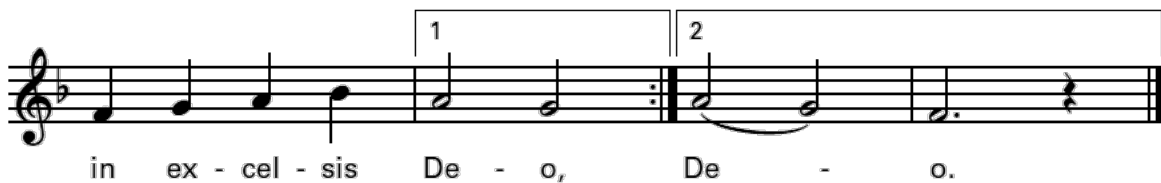
As we enter into this Christmas season of celebration and joy, may we sing the song of the angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim, the Great Doxology and Hymn of Praise.³

³ Other versions can be found in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, pages 58, 79, and 100.

A CHRISTMAS GLORIA

GLORIA

1. Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to people of good will.
We praise you, we bless you, we adore you,
we glorify you, we give you thanks for your great glory,
Lord God, heavenly King, O God, almighty Father.



2. Lord Jesus Christ, Only Begotten Son,
Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father,
you take away the sins of the world,
have mercy on us;
you take away the sins of the world,
receive our prayer;
you are seated at the right hand of the Father,
have mercy on us.

3. For you alone are the Holy One,
you alone are the Lord,
you alone are the Most High,
Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit,
in the glory of God the Father. Amen.

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Prayer: Gracious Lord, on this joyous day, we are humbled by Your love made flesh among us. As the ancient prophecies resonate through the birth of Your Son, help us to live in the profound reality of Your love. With hearts aglow with the Christmas message, may we echo this divine love in our lives, today and always. In the name of the newborn King, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.



December 26, 2023 | Second Day of Christmas

St. Stephen, Deacon and Martyr

Jeremiah 26:1–9, 12–15, 2 Chronicles 24:17–22; Acts 6:1–7; Acts 7:59—8:8; Psalms 116 & 146 (AM); Psalms 119:1–24 & 27 (PM)

^{7:59} And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

^{8:1} And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

² Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. ³ But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

⁴ Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. ⁵ Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. ⁶ And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. ⁷ For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. ⁸ So there was much joy in that city.

– Acts 7:59—8:8 ESV



A blessed St. Stephen’s Day to all of you. I’m so glad that our devotions this year continue through the Christmas season. Far too often we have let the world determine how we keep time. Celebrating Christmas as a season is one small way to let sacred time outweigh secular time.

I had a New Testament professor, Dr. Ralph Martin, who taught at Fuller Theological Seminary. He would sometimes ask the class a provocative question: “What would you go to the stake for?” As we delved into the depths of New Testament study examining it using the tools of historical-critical methodology, we tried to sift through layers of information in order to uncover (as best as we could) the truth. Then we were to ask ourselves, “What truths would we be willing to die for?” That’s a good question for us to reflect upon today when we commemorate the first martyr of the Christian Church, St. Stephen.

Most of us hope that if the need arose, we would have the courage to die for those we love or the country we love. However, what about our enemies? It is amazing that when Stephen was martyred, he prayed, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60). That is, against his enemies. Why did his enemies hate him? What was it about his preaching that stirred up such rage?

Stephen died preaching the biblical story culminating in the coming of Christ. But, he added an indictment—when the Son arrived “you” crucified Him. Here we need to be very careful. Who is the “you” that crucified Christ? The biblical answer is that “you” means...well...you. That’s right, “you” who happen to be reading or hearing this—*crucified Christ*. And, I don’t get off the hook either. I am included in the *you*. So when we hear Stephen preach, “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit.” The “you” is us. As Pogo famously said, “We have met the enemy and the enemy is us.” It is a gross misreading and misunderstanding of the Gospel when we scapegoat others and make “them” culpable, but exclude ourselves from the culpability.

The Gospel truth is that “we” and yes “I” Eric Riesen—have been stiff-necked and have resisted the Holy Spirit. But let the chips fall where they may, the truth is that when the Son of God came to earth *we* murdered Him.

Of course, this is *exactly* the message we need to hear! It is a message that will either cause us to repent or to resist. It is an either/or situation. We either take responsibility and change or refuse responsibility and seek to silence the messenger. It is a decision.

The good news is that the Holy Spirit is always at work helping stiff-necked people to hear and repent. Our Lord does not chastise us, but changes us. I am not the same man I would be had I not heard the Gospel, experienced remorse, and repented.

All Jesus wants from us is to repent and live in peace with Him and our neighbor. Of course, that’s a message that can get a person killed. As I worked on this devotion, something new occurred to me. When Stephen prayed, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” He was praying for me—and for you too.

Prayer: “Grant us grace, O Lord, that like Stephen we may learn to love even our enemies and seek forgiveness for those who desire our hurt; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen” (*Lutheran Book of Worship*).



December 27, 2023 | Third Day of Christmas

St. John, Apostle and Evangelist

Genesis 1:1–5, 26–31; 1 John 5:1–12; John 13:20–35; Psalms 34 & 147:1–12 (AM); Psalms 19 & 121 (PM)

^{1:1} In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. ² The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

³ And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

^{1:26} Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

– Genesis 1:1–5, 26–27 ESV



During the season of Christmas, we stop and reflect on the Son of God, and His participation throughout all of creation. Sometimes we are tempted to see Him as first beginning to interact with this world at His incarnation—birth in that manger in Bethlehem. However, we see from our reading today that He was here at the very creation of the world.

As St. John puts it, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God” (John 1:1). He has created all there is by His creative power. “All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made” (John 1:3). He continues to create and order all there is. Then, by God’s good pleasure alone, He chose to create a special being. The land and sea are good; the plants and animals are also good. But God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, created humanity. As His special creation, we can experience the special bond God has for us. We receive the grace of Jesus the Son, the love of God the Father, and the communion or fellowship of the Holy Spirit that binds the Holy Trinity together. We are created to share in this holy union.

As His image bearers, we too create. We see that the Word not only created, but that He did it beautifully. We express worship to our Lord, and we create beautiful liturgy to voice it. Hearing from the times in Holy Scripture when the heavens are opened and the angels sing to the Lord, we also create music to praise God. We use our God-given creativity in service to the Lord. We are also compassionate, merciful, and patient as our Creator is. No other creature has these qualities.

As the world around us tries to recreate and redefine the divine order of God’s design, we only have to look back to our passage today to see the true author of creation and our special place in it.

Prayer: Gracious Lord, Heavenly Father, I give You thanks for all creation. I thank You as well for Your Word who created it all, and became incarnate as our Lord Jesus Christ. Help me to see the beauty You have put all around me and the special image of Yourself that allows me to perceive that beauty. As the world tries to lay claim to determining creation’s design and purpose, may I be compassionate yet strong in proclaiming Your eternal will for all creation. In Jesus name. Amen.

December 28, 2023 | Fourth Day of Christmas

The Holy Innocents, Martyrs

Jeremiah 31:15–17; Isaiah 54:1–13; Matthew 18:1–14; Psalms 2 & 147:13–21 (AM); Psalms 110 & 111 (PM)

^{18:1} At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” ² He called a child, whom he put among them, ³ and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵ Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.”

– Matthew 18:1–5 NRSV



When reading today’s Scripture text, I have to imagine that Jesus saw the same types of things in children as we do in children today. Of the many attributes of children, there are two we should think about in terms of our own discipleship. Each of them I can imagine Jesus pointing to as attributes to keep, rather than pitch, when we grow up.

The first attribute is that children love to engage. Have you ever been in a store, shopping, and as you walked past a little one in a cart they made eye contact with you, smiled and said hi? In fact, when I’ve observed it, the child is doing it with everyone he/she sees nearby. Imagine that, engaging with total strangers! My reaction has always been to be drawn in, and to smile and wave back. And, in the moment of being drawn in, if you ask them a question, the child will burst forth with the greatest thing happening in life, like, “My mommy’s going to have a baby!”

In telling the disciples to be like little children, I think Jesus is saying, “Be engaging, and share your good news!”

The second lesson we can take from children is to never omit play from our lives. We know there must have been times when children just ran up to Jesus, probably to hug him around the leg, or pull on his robe—and the disciples tried to shoo them away. If you think about it, play is long-engagement, and it builds relationships. Those who play together stay together. Whether its marriage, a congregation, or the work place, when play leaves a relationship, emotional distancing and brokenness are not far behind. Plus, play seems to rejuvenate us, and we need that to be strong workers. However, there must be balance; after all, one can’t play all the time.

Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3). So, if you know any little ones, sit down with them and play with those new toys they just got at Christmas. And after playing, rise up and engage others for the kingdom of heaven this week.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help us to enter into Your complete joy today. Soften our hearts to the way we were when we were little kids, so we can be free to engage others for Your kingdom. Amen.

December 29, 2023 | Fifth Day of Christmas

Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, Martyr, 1170

2 Samuel 23:13–17b; 2 John 1–13; John 2:1–11; Psalms 96 & 148 (AM); Psalms 132 & 97 (PM)

⁵ And now I ask you, dear lady—not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but the one we have had from the beginning—that we love one another. ⁶ And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, so that you should walk in it. ⁷ For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist. ⁸ Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. ⁹ Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.

– 2 John 5–9 ESV



By this point in the season, many of our friends and neighbors have taken down their Christmas decorations. What were once beautifully decorated Christmas trees are already put out on the street, ready to be picked up by the yard waste trucks. The holiday displays are long gone from many stores. But as Christians, we continue to celebrate the Christmas season. For us, Christmas is a full twelve days of joy leading us to the Epiphany of our Lord on January 6.

Hopefully, we are continuing to enjoy our Christmas gifts. After all, it was only five days ago. I've been thinking back to my childhood Christmases, the gifts I received from my parents, and which were my favorites. Like the question the teacher asked our class every year after Christmas break, "What was the best thing you got for Christmas?" Well, what was the best thing I got?

In the earliest years, I recall a really cool erector set with a crane. Other favorites included a traditional electric train, toy soldiers and my own G. I. Joe army uniform, an electric race car set, and one year the famous Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Robots! As I got older, there came strong competition from the miniature pool table and an in-home pinball machine. My parents really worked hard to provide my sisters and I great Christmas presents—but which present was really the very best?

Looking back on it now, it's an easy question to answer. All during that time, my parents were very intentional about rearing us in the faith. They made sure we were baptized and confirmed. They made sure as a family we went to worship every Sunday and participated in Sunday school, vacation Bible school, youth group, etc. If the doors of our congregation were open, we were there. And it was there that the almighty God used my parents to make sure I received the greatest Christmas present of all: faith in Jesus Christ. It was there Jesus first became real to me. It was there, as I abided in the Word made flesh and He abided in me, that the Holy Spirit gave and grew God's free gift of faith in Jesus Christ. And this was not a gift that lasted only 12 days, or until I broke it or got tired of it. I have never outgrown it. This was and is a gift that is for all eternity! And it is offered to everyone!

Do you want to know this baby born in Bethlehem as your Wonderful Counselor, your Mighty God, your everlasting Father, your Prince of Peace, your Savior? Do you want Jesus to reveal Himself to you? Then live and remain in His teaching and follow His commandments. In his gospel, John puts it this way, "Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and *manifest myself to him*" (John 14:21 ESV, emphasis added).

God's Word is true. When we are intentional about spending time abiding in God's Word, Jesus does reveal Himself to us.

We experience the literal truthfulness of today's Scripture passage. Take time to read it again. What a gift—the *greatest* gift! Isn't it exciting? For parents and grandparents, in fact, for all of us, we have the opportunity to be God's instrument to give, to share, to remind others of the best Christmas gift of all!

Prayer: Almighty God, You have made yourself known in Your Son, Jesus the Messiah. We humbly ask You to remind us and inspire us every day to spend time abiding in Your Word and to share the greatest Christmas gift with others. In the name of our Savior, and for the sake of His Gospel. Amen.



December 30, 2023 | Sixth Day of Christmas

1 Kings 17:17–24; 3 John 1–15; John 4:46–54; Psalms 93 & 149 (AM); Psalms 89:1–18 & 89:19–52 (PM)

⁴⁴So he came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine. And at Capernaum there was an official whose son was ill. ⁴⁷When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to him and asked him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. ⁴⁸So Jesus said to him, “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.” ⁴⁹The official said to him, “Sir, come down before my child dies.” ⁵⁰Jesus said to him, “Go; your son will live.” The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way. ⁵¹As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his son was recovering. ⁵²So he asked them the hour when he began to get better, and they said to him, “Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him.” ⁵³The father knew that was the hour when Jesus had said to him, “Your son will live.” And he himself believed, and all his household. ⁵⁴This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee.

– John 4:46–54 ESV

How sweet the Incarnate Word in the believer’s ear! I am thinking not only of the sweet Christ Child, wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger, but also of the word on the lips of the Word himself to a troubled official come to plead with Jesus in today’s text.

The official came to plead with Jesus in one of the greatest heartbreaks any father can think to bear—His Son is dying. We might assume that since Jesus has returned to Cana in Galilee, where He turned the water into wine, that this man has heard about Jesus. I hear two progressions in our text.

The first is regarding the humanity of the man: first John refers to him as an “official,” then as “this man,” then as “the father,” and finally as a witness to his whole household.

The second progression comes with the depth of belief that arises in this encounter with the Jesus. The official comes to seek out Jesus for help, likely based upon stories he has heard around Cana and Capernaum. He asks Jesus to come down to Capernaum, hopeful that by His attendance He can help the boy. Instead Jesus speaks a word; a word not limited to his physical presence: “Your son will live.” There is mighty agency in this phrase on the lips of Jesus, which brings this man into a deeper belief in who this Jesus is—for him, and for his son. A deeper trust in Jesus’ word that, simply by His word, there will be life for his son. Finally, this promise is then confirmed by others, who bring news that his son has indeed recovered—and at the very same hour as Jesus spoke the word. The power of this Word continues to deepen the belief of this father and those around him. John calls this a sign, that is, more than a mere miracle of healing.

How will our faith be strengthened in these glorious twelve days after the sweetest Word becomes flesh in our midst? How will it deepen in the twelve months of the coming year? Can our belief and trust in Jesus deepen more than that, based upon the stories we hear? Will we not only observe this sweet Word, leaving our gifts at His manger bed, but hear Him speak to our deepest anxieties and fears? Will we let that Word expand our notion of what Jesus’ presence means for us now? And how shall we share the immeasurable power of this Word with our households?

How sweet the Incarnate Word in a believer's ear. How sweet the bread and wine that assures us of His physical presence, yet ascended to sit at the right hand of the Father. Lord we believe, help us in our unbelief and move us to trust more deeply in Your Word, the sweetest gift of all.

Prayer: Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Thank You for Your sweet condescension into our very flesh and for Your word of life that You still speak to us. Lead us to be those who know and listen for your voice that “soothes our sorrows, heals our wounds, and drives away all fear.”⁴

Speak Lord, for Your servant is listening. In Your name we pray. Amen.



⁴ Excerpt from “How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds” (*Lutheran Book of Worship* #345), text by John Newton, 1725–1807, alt.

The First Sunday after Christmas

*Almighty God, you wonderfully created
and yet more wonderfully restored
the dignity of human nature.*

*In your mercy, let us share the divine life of Jesus Christ
who came to share our humanity,
and who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen.*

December 31, 2023 | First Sunday after Christmas

Jonah 2:2–9; Ephesians 6:10–20; John 11:17–27, 38–44; Psalms 98 & 150 (AM); Psalms 45 & 96 (PM)

^{11:17} Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. ²⁰ So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.” ²³ Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” ²⁴ Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” ²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” ²⁷ She said to him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.”

– John 11:17–27 ESV



There is much to do on this day, the first Sunday of the Christmas season; it is a day to continue the Christmas celebration. Christmas is not to be a one day affair. We have a whole season of the church year to celebrate the birth and coming of Jesus. Today is a day to continue to sing and proclaim “Joy to the World, the Lord has Come!”

Today is also New Year’s Eve—2023 is slipping away, and we prepare to welcome 2024. This is a day to reflect on the old year; even more, we set our sights on the new.

What do we say on a day with all these themes? I can’t think of better words than Jesus’ in today’s Gospel. “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (John 11:25–26). It doesn’t get any better than that!

How do we continue the Christmas celebration? By looking to why Jesus has come. He has come to bear a cross, to die for us, and to smash the power of the grave once and for all. He is the resurrection and the life for us!

How do we welcome in the New Year? By looking to this Lord who is the resurrection and the life. There is no firmer foundation, no firmer hope, than looking to Jesus. Let’s build 2024 on the resurrected Lord.

While there may be a lot going on today let us remember—in all that we do, let’s root ourselves in Jesus!

Prayer: Holy Lord, we continue to celebrate Christmas. Let us proclaim loudly and clearly that You are Emmanuel, God with us! Lead us into the New Year in faith and hope, with eyes firmly set on You! To Jesus be all glory and honor! Amen.

January 1, 2024 | Eighth Day of Christmas

The Circumcision and Holy Name of Jesus

Numbers 6:22–27; Exodus 34:1–8; Galatians 4:4–7; Philippians 2:9–13; Luke 2:15–21; Psalms 8 & 145 (AM); Psalms 99 & 8 (PM)

^{2:15} When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

²¹ And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

– Luke 2:15–21 ESV



One of the joys of being a pastor is to visit new born babies in the hospital, and getting to celebrate with their families. When you walk into the room, you receive this sense of new life and hope for the future. And on this New Years Day, are we ready to encounter the new life and hope that comes through the baby Savior, Jesus Christ of Nazareth?

After the angel’s pronouncement of Christ’s birth, the shepherds, some of the poorest of citizens, decide to go and see the new born King for themselves. They find the baby in a cave, lying in an animal feeding trough, with His amazed parents looking on. After the shepherds experienced God’s Son, they praised and thanked the Lord. Their lives would be forever changed. Mary and Joseph’s lives would be forever changed. And our own lives will be forever changed by the Word made flesh.

Today, as we celebrate the beginning of a new year, maybe you’re wondering why we’re still focusing on Christmas. “Wasn’t that a few days ago? Are we still talking about the gifts and lights? Isn’t it time to take down the Christmas Tree?” Those might be our thoughts, but Christmas is far from over.

The recognition of Jesus coming is more than a one-day event. Christ’s appearance on the scene gave meaning and purpose to all creation. All of a sudden, there was a constant light shining in the darkness—and the darkness will never overcome the light.

A new year is providing us with the opportunity to begin anew—and there is no better way than to cling to the One who promises us new life and forgiveness in His name.

May Jesus become the center of our daily living, as we spend the coming year praising Him, worshiping Him, serving Him, and sharing Him with our friends, relatives, associates and neighbors. Let the name of Jesus be lifted high each day to come!

Prayer: Father, we thank You for the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. As the shepherds and Jesus’ own parents were changed by this child, may our own lives be changed by Christ’s arrival. As we begin a new year, may Jesus be the center of our very existence. As we serve You by serving others, help us always

to cling to Your only Son, the way, the truth, and the life. We pray all these things in the Name that is above all names, Jesus of Nazareth. Amen.



January 2, 2024 | Ninth Day of Christmas

Johann Konrad Wilhelm Löhe, Pastor, 1872

Isaiah 62:1–5, 10–12; Revelation 19:11–16; Matthew 1:18–25; Psalms 48 & 146 (AM); Psalms 9 & 29 (PM)

^{19:11} Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. ¹² His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. ¹³ He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. ¹⁴ And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. ¹⁵ From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. ¹⁶ On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.

– Revelation 19:11–16 ESV



“King of kings and Lord of lords”—what kind of King is this?

Having just celebrated Christmas, we know that this King was born in a stable, to a teenage unmarried mother, and slept in a feeding trough for animals. He would grow up to work as a carpenter, to then teach in villages and on the beach. He walked humbly and sought to serve others. He even chose to ride a donkey. This is the King who had a crown of thorns placed on His head and who died nailed to a cross.

When we reflect on this King, it certainly does not ring true of an earthly king. Yet, in today’s text, Christ appears on a white horse as the Victor, as the triumphant King, with diadems (or royal crowns) on His head, and wearing a robe dipped in blood. “From His mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations” (Revelation 9:15). He has armies arrayed in fine white linen following Him. And the once derided Christ reveals Himself as the King of kings and the Lord of lords, having divine power and glory for all of eternity. This is a sharp contrast, isn’t it?

In theology, we often say that Christianity is comprised of a series of “both/and” concepts, most notably that Jesus Christ is both fully human and fully divine. I believe that the *both/and* also applies to the embodiment of who Jesus Christ is. He is the loving King who humbles Himself to love you and me—and He is conquering Victor who has won eternal life for us all.

He is the “King of kings and Lord of lords”—thanks be to God!

Prayer: Christ Jesus, You are the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Thank You for being that humble servant and caring for us. Thank You also for being that conquering King who has freed us from sin, death and the devil so that we may have everlasting life and live with You for all eternity. Amen.

January 3, 2024 | Tenth Day of Christmas

Charles Porterfield Krauth, Teacher, 1883

1 Kings 19:1–8; Ephesians 4:1–16; John 6:1–14; Psalms 111 & 147:1–12 (AM); Psalms 107 & 15 (PM)

^{6:1} After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. ² And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick. ³ Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. ⁴ Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand. ⁵ Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?” ⁶ He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do. ⁷ Philip answered him, “Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little.” ⁸ One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, ⁹ “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?” ¹⁰ Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number. ¹¹ Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹² And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, “Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost.” ¹³ So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten. ¹⁴ When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!”

– John 6:1–14 ESV



The feeding of the 5000 is the only miracle, aside from the resurrection, that is recorded in all four gospels. The stories are similar, but John gives us an extra twist. We are told that Jesus asked Philip where they will purchase enough bread to feed all those people. Then the text says, “He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.” Why would Jesus give a test before feeding the 5000, and why Philip in particular? John gives us some clues in prior verses. Philip was one of the first disciples called by Jesus. In John 1:45-46 we are told that Jesus called Philip to follow him and Philip immediately goes to his friend Nathanael and tells him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” Upon seeing Jesus, Nathanael declares that Jesus is indeed the Son of God and the King of Israel.

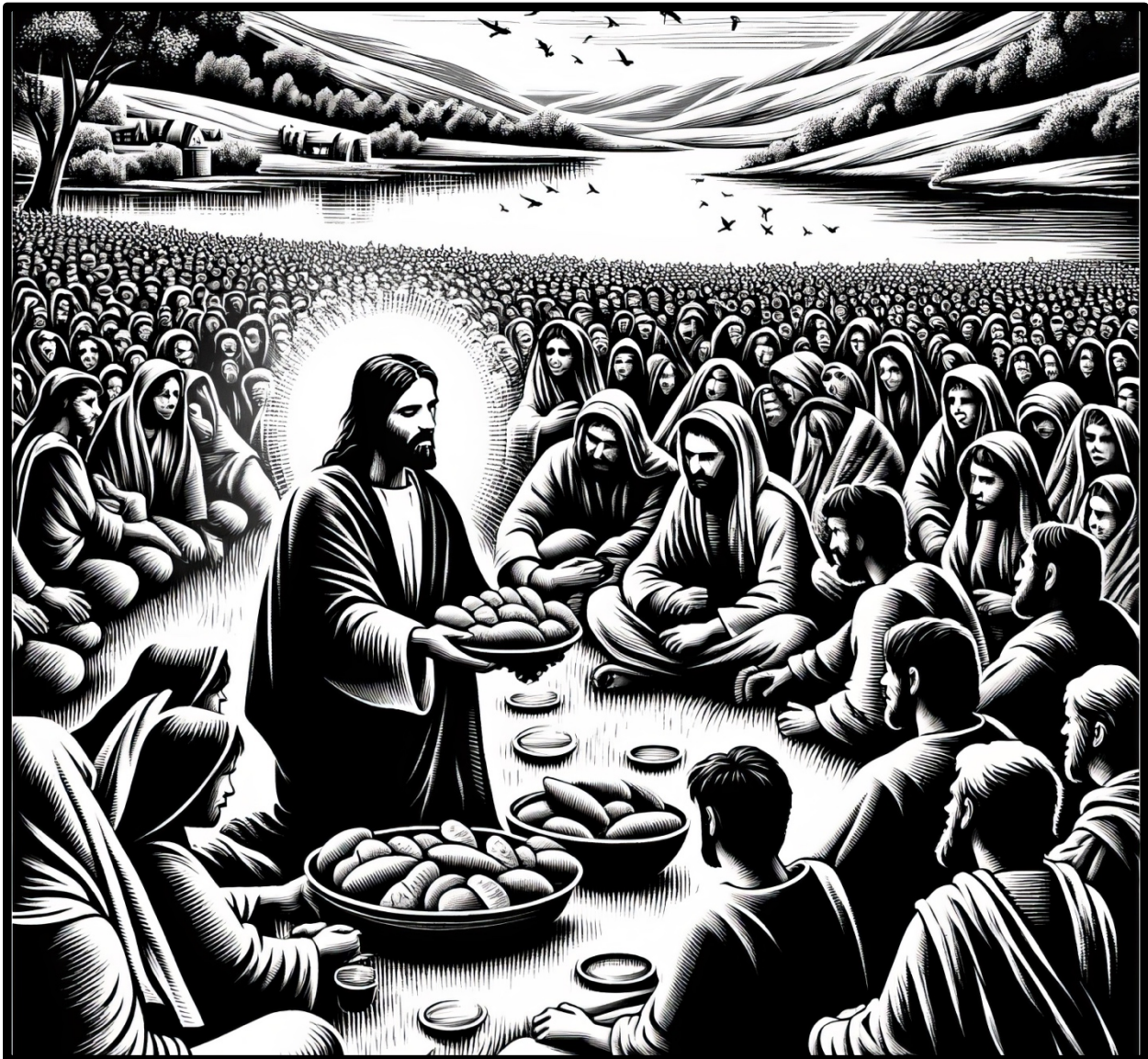
This encounter is immediately followed by the story of the wedding in Cana where Jesus performs His first miracle by turning 180 gallons of water into fine wine. The story ends with this verse, “What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.”

In John chapter five, Jesus encounters a group of Jewish leaders who are offended that He performed a miracle on the Sabbath, and question His authority to do so. Jesus tells them that His authority comes from God the Father and ends by saying, “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?” Immediately after this we have the story about the feeding of the 5000 where Jesus tests Philip. So, why Philip? Perhaps because he is the one who first declared that Jesus was the one about whom Moses wrote. Perhaps it was because he was one of the disciples who witnessed the first food miracle when Jesus turned water into wine. Perhaps it was because Jesus wanted to see if Philip truly believed his friend’s declaration that Jesus is the Son of God and the promised King of Israel.

The test was not just meant for Philip, but for every one of us who proclaims Jesus to be God Incarnate. Do we truly embrace the words we confess in our creeds, proclaim from our pulpits, sing in our hymns and speak in our liturgies, or do we put limits on what we believe our Lord Jesus can do?

At the last supper Philip asked Jesus, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.” Jesus replied, “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:8–9). Jesus is the Son of God, the Promised Messiah, the Risen Lord, God Incarnate. He and the Father are one. There are no limits to what He can or is willing to do in order to save His people. Jesus’ test of Philip was not intended to trap him but rather encourage him toward a faith that is deeper than words, a faith that truly believes that all things are possible for God.

Prayer: Gracious God, give us faith to live our lives secure in the knowledge that You are a God of unlimited power, providence and grace. Help us to face seemingly impossible tasks secure in the knowledge that nothing is impossible for You. We pray this in the name of the one who fed the hungry, healed the sick, and promised eternal life to those who put their faith in Him, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



January 4, 2024 | Eleventh Day of Christmas

1 Kings 19:9–18; Ephesians 4:17–32; John 6:15–27; Psalms 20 & 147:13–21 (AM); Psalms 93 & 97 (PM)

^{4:17} Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. ¹⁹ They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. ²⁰ But that is not the way you learned Christ!— ²¹ assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, ²² to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, ²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

²⁵ Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. ²⁶ Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and give no opportunity to the devil. ²⁸ Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. ²⁹ Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹ Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³² Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

– Ephesians 4:17–32 ESV



C. S. Lewis in his book, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, illustrates the encounter we each have in Christ as He makes us new. Eustace, the dragon, relates his encounter with Aslan, the Lion.

“Then the lion said—but I don’t know if it spoke—‘You will have to let me undress you.’ I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So, I just lay flat down on my back to let him do it. The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I’ve ever felt.

The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off. You know—if you’ve ever picked the scab off a sore place. It hurts like billy-oh, but it is such fun to see it coming away.”

“Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off—just as I thought I’d done it myself the other three times, only they hadn’t hurt—and there it was lying on the grass: only ever so much thicker, and darker, and more knobbly-looking than the others had been. And there was I as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been. Then he caught hold of me—I didn’t like that much for I was very tender underneath now that I’d no skin on—and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious and as soon as I started swimming and splashing, I found that all the pain had gone from my arm. And then I saw why. I’d turned into a boy again.”⁵

The apostle Paul recounts all the things we are no longer because we have been baptized into Christ. He makes us new. We have a new and refreshed life as the Holy Spirit works in us each day. Martin Luther,

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 113–116.

in his small catechism, reminds us that every day we die to our sin, confessing it before our Father, so that we arise to live in the new life Christ has for us this day.

Jesus peels back your layers of sin, and the old Adam, so that He can refresh you in His grace day this day—and day after day after day. With whom have you shared your story of descaling and transformation by Jesus?

Prayer:

Breathe on Me, Breath of God
(Lutheran Book of Worship #488)

*Breathe on me, breath of God;
Fill me with life anew,
That I may love all that You love
And do what You would do.*

*Breathe on me, breath of God,
Until my heart is pure,
Until with You I will one will—
To do, and to endure.*

In Christ Jesus' name, Amen.



January 5, 2024 | Twelfth Day of Christmas

Kaj (pronounced KYE like “sky”) Munk, Martyr, 1944

Joshua 3:14—4:7; Ephesians 5:1–20; John 9:1–12, 35–38; Psalms 99 & 148 (AM); Psalms 96 & 110 (PM)

^{5,6} Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. ⁷ Therefore do not become partners with them; ⁸ for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light ⁹ (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), ¹⁰ and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. ¹¹ Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.

– Ephesians 5:6–11 ESV



Having lived in Ohio my entire life, and in Columbus for the past 13 years, I’m a Buckeye through and through. On fall Saturdays, we cheer for Ohio State—period. Imagine my dismay then when my youngest daughter, at age 10, informed us that she was going to cheer for both the Buckeyes and our archrivals, the Michigan Wolverines. Oh no, not on my watch! I patiently tried to explain to her why this was impossible, but to no avail.

Similarly, in today’s Scripture text, the Apostle Paul explains the impossibility of living in both darkness and light. These are not simply ways of living, nor are they metaphors for bad and good behavior. Darkness and light are two different kingdoms engaged in spiritual warfare; Christ’s kingdom and the Devil’s kingdom.

From the moment of conception, we were in darkness because of original sin. But Paul emphasizes that the Lord “has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:13–14). He goes on to explain in today’s reading how that transition has changed our very nature, and how that change ought to be evident in the way that we live our daily lives. In a dark world, where we are told that up is down and truth is relative to each person’s experience and feelings, the church does well to repeat the childlike plea of Kathleen Thomerson’s 1999 hymn, “I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light.”

*I want to walk as a child of the light.
I want to follow Jesus.
God set the stars to give light to the world.
The star of my life is Jesus.
In him there is no darkness at all.
The night and the day are both alike.
The Lamb is the light of the city of God.
Shine in my heart Lord Jesus.*

Prayer: Lord God, when the darkness of this world closes in, draw our hearts and minds to You. Guide our thoughts and actions. Fill our imaginations with the light of Your truth and love, so that our lives may bear fruit for Your kingdom and bring glory to Your name; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Epiphany of Our Lord

*Lord God, on this day you revealed your Son
to the nations by the leading of a star.*

*Lead us now by faith to know your presence in our lives,
and bring us at last to the full vision of your glory,
through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen.*

January 6, 2024 | The Epiphany of Our Lord

The Epiphany of Our Lord: The Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles

Isaiah 49:1–7; Revelation 21:22–27; Matthew 12:14–21; Psalms 72 & 149 (AM); Psalms 100 & 67 (PM)

^{21:22} And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. ²³ And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁴ By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, ²⁵ and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. ²⁶ They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. ²⁷ But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

– Revelation 21:22–27 ESV

The tradition in the Church holds that the wise men who sought the King of the Jews, more than likely, arrived to see the infant Lord up to two years after His birth and not immediately in an outbuilding in the City of David. However, the important thing here is that God revealed the Christ child to the wise men—and He continues to reveal Christ to people every day. That's what the season of Epiphany is all about: God revealing the truth of the Messiah, God in the flesh, to the world.

In my previous devotion on Christmas Eve, I wrote about entering the temple and how it required worshippers to be pure and blameless in the sight of God. When Jesus came among us to live with us, it showed us that, as St. John said, “he pitched his tent and lived among us” (John 1:14). In the original language, “He tabernacled with us.” This phrase hearkens back to the Exodus journey where God had His own special tent, the tabernacle, that the Israelites set up at each stop along the way. This was sacred space and God dwelt among His people for forty years in this manner.

We often think of the church as the place where Jesus resides, the place where we can find Him when we need Him. But according to St. John in Revelation, the temple in the coming kingdom *is* the Lord Jesus. In the vision God gave to John, he noticed that there was no temple to go to—not in the whole city of the New Jerusalem! Rather, it is Christ Himself who is the temple.

Why would this be? If you think about it, if we are fully in the presence of God, then we have no need for a physical place to go and worship Him. The promise is that God will live among his people, He will be accessible in a way that we have never fully known. No more, “It's time to go to church.” Instead, the object of our devotion will be physically present, within reach, walking beside us, communicating with us, loving us. God won't have to offer any further revelations or epiphanies to His children, it will be obvious to all who love Him that we are in the presence of the divine Creator of all that is. God will fully reveal Himself to His people, and we will dwell with Him in His eternal glory. What happened long ago was a foretaste of eternity.

Prayer: “We beseech You, O Lord, let our hearts be graciously enlightened by Your holy radiance, that we may serve You without fear in holiness and righteousness all the days of our lives; that so we may survive the storms of this world, and with You for our pilot attain the haven of eternal brightness; through Your mercy, O blessed Lord, who lives and governs all things, world without end. Amen” (*The Leonine Sacramentary*).⁶

⁶ Thomas C. Oden and Cindy Crosby, eds., *Ancient Christian Devotional: A Year of Weekly Readings: Lectionary Cycle B* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2011), 40.

The Baptism of Our Lord

*Father in heaven, at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan
you proclaimed him your beloved Son
and anointed him with the Holy Spirit.
Make all who are baptized into Christ
faithful in their calling to be your children
and inheritors with him of everlasting life;
through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen.*

January 7, 2024 | The Baptism of Our Lord

Genesis 1:1—2:3; Ephesians 1:3–14; John 1:29–34; Psalms 19 & 150 (AM); Psalms 81 & 113 (PM)

^{1:29} The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰ This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’ ³¹ I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.”

³² Then John gave this testimony: “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him.

³³ And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ ³⁴ I have seen and I testify that this is God’s Chosen One.”

– John 1:29–34 NIV2011



Dear friends, greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus. Today marks the first Sunday after the Epiphany, a time in the life of the Church when we focus on and celebrate the revelation of God offered to us in Jesus. It also marks the final day of our devotional series that has led us from the beginning of the season of Advent to this time when we begin to look more closely at the life and ministry of Christ.

The theme we’ve been following, “Echoes and Epiphanies,” is one that speaks of how all of Scripture offers reminders and insights into who God is and how much we are loved in Jesus. From the opening chapters of the Bible, the stories of how this world was created and by whom, until the closing words of Scripture that point to the “new heavens and the new earth” that will one day be the home where we will live eternally with God, those echoes are heard and those epiphanies are given, all centered and secured and offered to us in Christ.

Today’s story of the Baptism of our Lord, and the words of John the Baptist, serve as a clear reminder of how God has been working out His saving plan in Jesus from the beginning of time. “Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before’” (John 1:29–30).

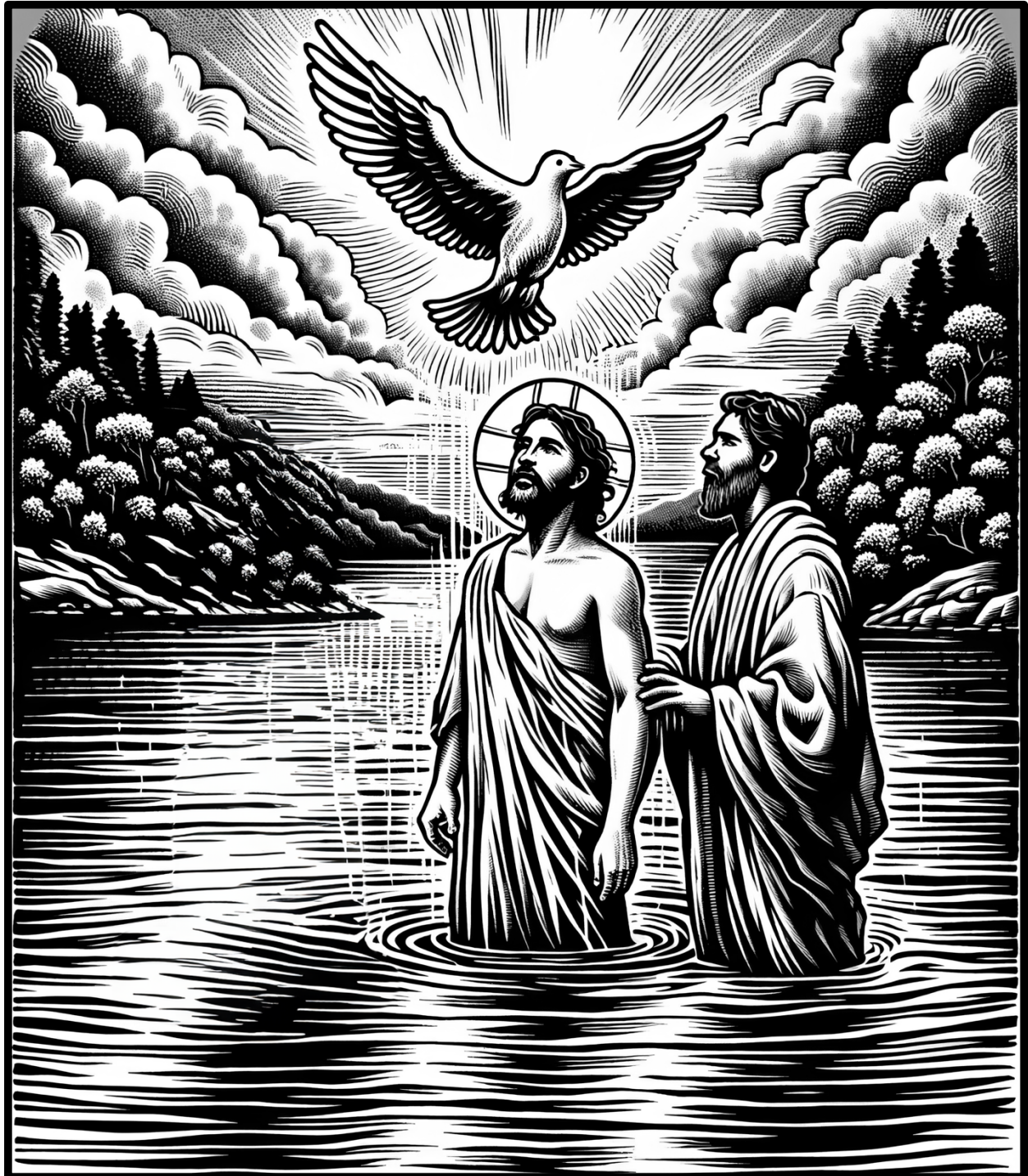
Looking back in history, it all points to God’s Son. Looking forward to where it’s going, all roads lead us to Christ. All of human history revolves around Jesus. All of salvation history is built and secured in Him. History is marked by BC and AD—before the coming of Christ, and during and after Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Even the Scriptures themselves, the Old and New Testaments, they are all connected to Jesus. They all find their focal point in Christ.

If ever you wonder about the purpose of life and where this world is heading, you need look no further than to what God has done and is doing in Jesus. If ever you worry about what’s happening in your own life and what will happen when your years on this earth come to an end, you need look no further than to what God has planned and purposed and promised for you in His Son.

And so it is, as we bring this devotional series to a close, that our theme helps us to understand how this all works, and where and in whom we find our hope. “Echoes and Epiphanies”—God’s saving voice resounding throughout all of history. God’s purpose and plan and promise revealed most clearly in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

May God's voice and revelation lead you in life. As you continue to build your life, make Jesus the focal point of it, until that great day when He calls us all home.

Prayer: Lord God, we give You thanks and praise for all You have done for us in Jesus, and for the security and assurance and comfort we find in Him. Help us, each day, to listen to Your voice, given to us in the Bible and revealed to us in Christ. May those echoes lead us to new epiphanies, as we build our lives on what You have promised and purposed and planned in Him, in whose name we pray. Amen.



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