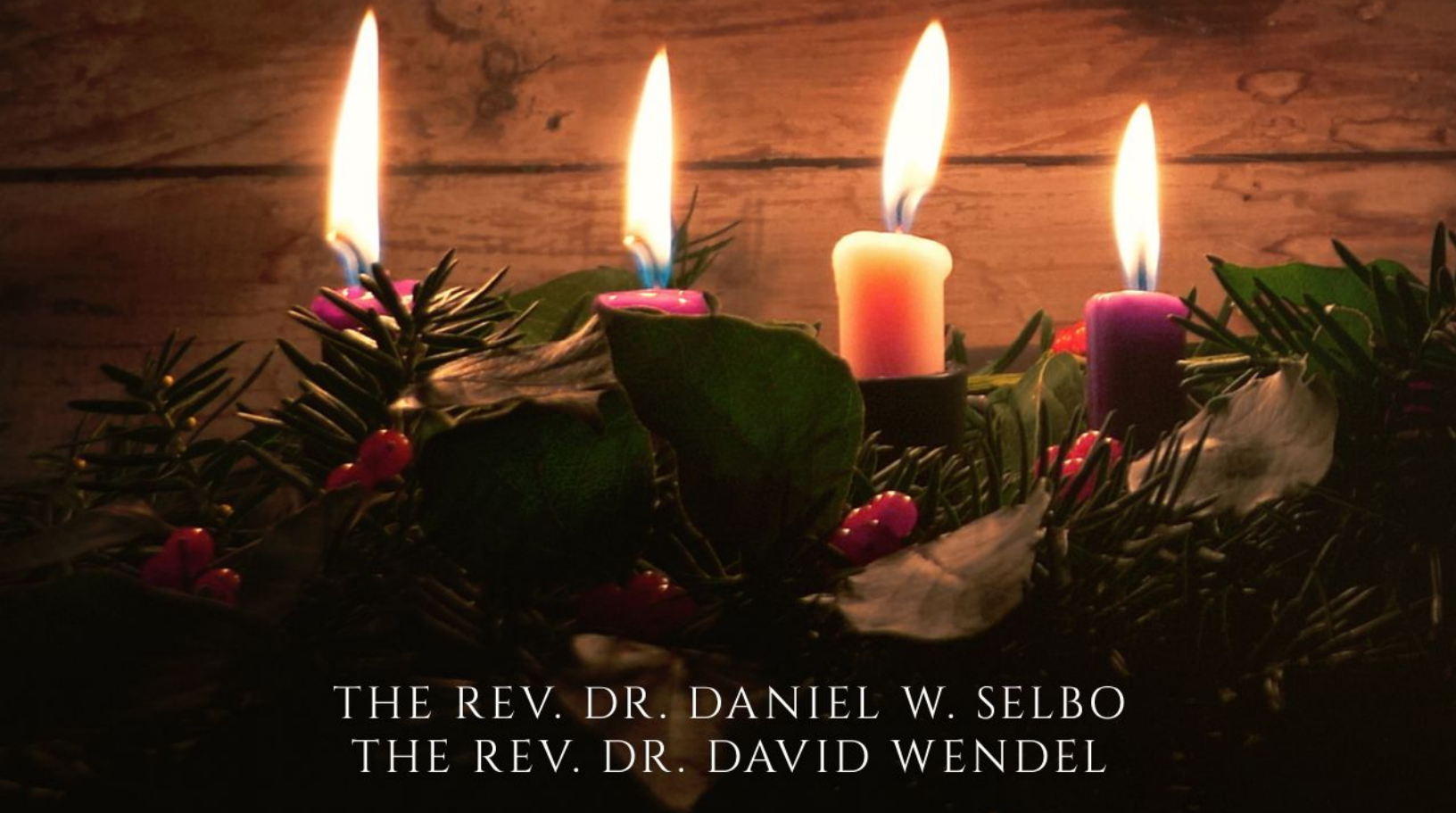


PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD

A N A D V E N T D E V O T I O N A L



THE REV. DR. DANIEL W. SELBO
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Introduction

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

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

This Advent daily devotional booklet, appropriately titled, *Prepare the Way of the Lord*, is based on the two-year daily lectionary provided in the Lutheran Book of Worship, Year I. This series of daily lessons is intended for Advent prior to odd-numbered years. The daily lectionary appoints three lessons for each day, and a seasonal psalm. For the purposes of this booklet, one reading has been chosen as the basis for each day’s reflection. The entire reading is usually provided, although there has been some verses left out due to space available. When the biblical text is longer, we have provided that entire text with a shorter devotion because the Word of God is more powerful than our humble reflections.

The Rev. Dr. Dan Selbo, bishop of the North American Lutheran Church (NALC), has prepared a bit longer devotion for each of the Sundays in Advent, along with a devotion for Christmas Day. The Rev. Dr. David Wendel, NALC assistant to the bishop for ministry and ecumenism, has prepared the brief weekday and Christmas Eve devotions.

The prayer following each devotion may be seen as a “prayer starter,” encouraging your thoughts to go deeper into prayer, or you may find them sufficient as printed. After each prayer is an Advent Action, encouraging an appropriate and thoughtful simple response to the reading and reflection.

For your information, these devotions are available in a variety of formats at thenalc.org/advent.

We would like to consider these devotions a conversation. Email the authors if you would like to comment or share a thought, dselbo@thenalc.org or dwendel@thenalc.org.

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THE FIRST WEEK OF
ADVENT



November 29, 2020 | The First Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 1:1-9; Psalm 24; 2 Peter 3:1-10; Matthew 25:1-13

^{25:1} “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³ For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, ⁴ but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵ As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. ⁶ But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ ⁷ Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹ But the wise answered, saying, ‘Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.’ ¹⁰ And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. ¹¹ Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ ¹² But he answered, ‘Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.’ ¹³ Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

—Matthew 25:1-13



There is an old story about how, in the days leading up to the Christmas holidays, the ticket counter at a certain airport had become unusually overcrowded by those who had waited until the last minute to purchase their tickets. One of those in the crowd happened to be a parish priest who, after a considerable amount of time, finally made it to the front of the line.

Apologizing to the priest, the clerk said, “Father, I am sorry this has taken so long. It is not usually like this. But it seems like everybody, these days, waits until the last minute, for a trip they all knew, a long time ago, they would be taking.” That’s when the priest, not wanting to overreact, and certainly not wanting to embarrass the clerk, simply replied, “I know exactly what you mean. I have the same trouble in my business.”

Today’s story is about preparation. It’s about planning ahead. It’s about getting one’s self ready. It’s about not waiting until it’s too late to take care of what’s too important to put off. And it’s a story about the end times, about what it will be like when Jesus returns to this earth, and about what that will mean for you and for me, and for all who are still alive.

It has always struck me, on this first Sunday in Advent, the beginning of a new year in the life of the Church, rather than looking back on where this all started, to the birth of Jesus, what we do instead is look forward to where this is all going and the day when He will return. There’s an element of warning in our text. There’s an element of urgency when it comes to the message of our Lord’s return.

I often find myself feeling a bit uncomfortable when I see one of those “street-corner preachers” standing with a sign that says Jesus is coming back, so we need to be ready. It always seems so out of place, disconnected from real life, making those of us, in the church, appear to be so strange. I also find myself wondering, despite how strange it might seem and appear, why we actually do not spend more time with that message than we do.

The reality is that day is coming. History is linear. There was a beginning and there will be an end. Jesus will return. And when He does, if we are not ready, it will be too late.

This passage from Matthew’s Gospel is set in the context of a series of stories about the end times. “Then,” Jesus says, “the kingdom of heaven will be like...” From there, He goes on to tell the story of the ten virgins

— five who were wise and five who were foolish. The wise were wise because they were prepared. The foolish were foolish because they put off what they knew they needed to do to be ready.

How easy it is in life to put off the things that matter and, as a result, find ourselves unprepared for what really matters when the time comes. Preparation for the essentials is essential. It is the reason we have fire drills in school. It is why we talk, ahead of time, about what to do when a disaster strikes. It is why we carry jumper cables, store up a supply of water, keep extra batteries or candles on hand. We do those things because, when the time arrives, if we are not ready, it will be too late.

There are many things in life that you can afford to put off. Many of us do. But there are some things in life where you cannot take the chance. Your relationship with Jesus is one of them. Your readiness for that day when He returns or when He calls you home needs to begin today.

John Wesley was once asked what he would do if he knew that Jesus was going to return at the same time the next day. He said, “I’d go to bed, fall asleep, get up in the morning, and then go to work, because I’d want the Lord to find me, when he returns, doing what I was created to do.”

Martin Luther said, “I’d plant a tree, because I’d want to be found using my life in ways that would matter and that would last.”

William Barclay said, “The best way to prepare for the coming of Christ is to live each day in the presence of Christ.”

All three are good directives for life, ways to prepare for Jesus’ return. Doing what you were created to do. Using your life in ways that matter and that will last. Preparing for the coming of your Lord by living each day in His presence. If that is how you are living, then you will be ready. If that is what you are doing to be prepared, then there is nothing to fear.

But if something needs to change in your life or in your habits, do not put it off. Time moves quickly, as does life. Between now and Christmas, make time for Jesus. Read your Bible. Spend time in prayer. Talk to the One who came into this world for you. There is no better day to start preparing than today.

A while back, there was a misprint in the weather forecast column of a small-town newspaper that read like this, “There is a 90% chance...of tomorrow.” Do you know what? I personally hope the odds are better than that. But who knows? Let’s not be foolish. Let’s be prepared. Jesus is coming, and He is coming soon. Now is the time to get ready. Amen.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, as we prepare to celebrate Your birth into this world, help us to not put off being prepared for that day when You will return, but to live each day in You. Amen.

Advent Action: Make a list of the things you need to do to be ready for Christmas, and then make another list of the preparations you need to make to be ready for the return of Christ.

November 30, 2020 | Monday of the Week of Advent I

ST. ANDREW, APOSTLE

Isaiah 1:10-20; Psalm 122; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Luke 20:1-8

^{20:1} One day, as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders came up ² and said to him, “**Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority.**”³ He answered them, “I also will ask you a question. Now tell me, ⁴ was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?”⁵ And they discussed it with one another, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say, ‘Why did you not believe him?’ ⁶ But if we say, ‘From man,’ all the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet.”⁷ So they answered that they did not know where it came from. ⁸ And Jesus said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

—Luke 20:1-8



One of the great challenges to Jesus and His ministry related to His authority — and whether His authority was from God or man. In our reading today, it was the chief priests, the scribes and the elders who came to Jesus, questioning Him. They hoped to catch Jesus and to prove that He had committed blasphemy, sacrilegiously claiming His authority came directly from the Lord God. But Jesus would have none of it. Instead, He turned the tables on the religious leaders, once again, asking them a question. And that left the leaders in a greater quandary with the people.

The question of Jesus and His authority is an appropriate, and welcome, question to ponder during Advent. As with the season of Lent, Advent is a time for preparation, yes, but this preparation for the coming of our Lord includes reflection, repentance and re-orienting our lives. We ask, “Jesus, who gave you authority over my life? Who gave you the power to guide and direct me, to influence my decisions, to call forth my obedience?” Because we all share in the same “original sin” of Adam and Eve, we all yearn to be our own gods and lords, thinking we would like to choose for ourselves what will please us, fulfill us, satisfy us. No wonder so many wander away from the one true God and His Son, Jesus, seeking a religion or a spirituality which allows them to be out from under His authority.

Today is the commemoration of St. Andrew, the first apostle to come, follow Jesus (John 1:35-42), responsible for bringing his brother, Simon Peter to the Messiah — the Anointed One. According to tradition, Andrew was martyred (crucified on an X shaped cross) for refusing to obey the Roman consul’s command to refrain from preaching about Jesus and to make a sacrifice to the pagan gods. Andrew was introduced to Jesus and, from that point on, became a disciple of Jesus — yielding and respecting His authority, even to the point of martyrdom. As with all the saints, Andrew is a faithful example of what it means to come, follow Jesus as Lord and God. Andrew exemplifies what it is to look for the coming Messiah and to see Him and acknowledge Him and His authority over our lives, as God’s Anointed One, He who came and still comes into our world!

Prayer: Almighty God, with Andrew, grant that we, called by your Holy Word, may acknowledge Your authority in our lives, now and throughout this Advent season. Amen.

Advent Action: Read about Andrew (and Simon Peter) in John 1:35-42.

Tuesday of the Week of Advent I | December 1, 2020

Isaiah 1:21-31; Psalm 33; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12; Luke 20:9-18

^{20:9} And (Jesus) began to tell the people this parable: "A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants and went into another country for a long while. ¹⁰ When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, so that they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. ¹¹ And he sent another servant. But they also beat and treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. ¹² And he sent yet a third. This one also they wounded and cast out. ¹³ Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.' ¹⁴ But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours.' ¹⁵ And they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? ¹⁶ He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others." When they heard this, they said, "Surely not!" ¹⁷ But he looked directly at them and said, "What then is this that is written: **"The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone?"** ¹⁸ Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him."

—Luke 20:9-18



While the world around us has been listening to sentimental songs about the Babe in the manger and white Christmases since the day after Halloween, we are trying to focus on the mystery and the meaning of God sending His only begotten Son into our world to be the Word made flesh to dwell among us. While I'm not rigid about Christmas music and love Santa as much as the next guy, the reason for the gift of Advent in the Church is to give us time to pause in the midst of the craziness to consider the width and breadth and depth of the incarnation. We want to ponder what it means that the one true God wants to be "God with us." We want to meditate on the fact that the Son of God came — and comes!

It seems somewhat out of place to have the above passage from Luke 20 as a reading during Advent, given the destruction and violence in the parable. Still, it is a powerful reminder that God sent His Son, the Heir to the tenants of His vineyard, and they rejected Him. And not only did they reject Him, but they killed the Heir, thinking they would now take His inheritance. And in this parable, we see the fullness of the Gospel narrative. God sent His Son to the rebellious, disobedient people. They (we) killed Him, thinking we could have the whole world as our own. God raised His Son, Jesus, from death, making Him the cornerstone of the Church — and our lives, forever.

As we think about, pray about, the mystery of God become flesh in His Son, Jesus, the parable Jesus tells is a proclamation of the Good News — calling forth in us a response. Because Jesus was raised and is with us — what does it mean that He is the cornerstone of our lives? How are we building upon that sure foundation — in the midst of a pandemic, political and social unrest, struggles and uncertainty in life?

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, be my solid rock and grounding, that I never waver. Amen.

Advent Action: Listen to or sing from a hymnal, "Built on a Rock."

December 2, 2020 | Wednesday of the Week of Advent I

Isaiah 2:1-4; Psalm 50; 1 Thessalonians 2:13-20; Luke 20:19-26

^{2:13} And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers. ¹⁴ For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, ¹⁵ who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind ¹⁶ by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved—so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them at last! ¹⁷ **But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face,** ¹⁸ because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us. ¹⁹ For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? ²⁰ For you are our glory and joy.

—1 Thessalonians 2:13-20

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A retired pastor once told me that as he was now toward the end of his ministry, he had taken to recycling sermons because, “Hey,” he asked, “how many times can you preach a different sermon on the same Sunday lessons?” I find the Word of God comes to us fresh day after day, year after year. And we hear it differently as our life situation changes.

While the words of St. Paul to the church in Thessalonica, above, are full of meaning, we can’t help but hear verses 17–20 without considering our current situation in life. Paul was torn away from his fellow believers, albeit for a short time, “in person, not in heart,” causing him to more eagerly yearn to see them “face to face” — but “Satan hindered (them).” Does this not sound like our current reality, as Satan, through this COVID-19 pandemic, has torn us away from each other? We remain connected “in heart,” but we have been forced to be socially distanced from one another in unnatural ways, contrary to how God has created us to be in relationship with one another, even as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are a community of persons. God did not create us to live solitary lives, apart from others, but interrelated and interconnected, as the Body of Christ — different parts, yet all intimately joined in a holy communion.

And yet, we were torn away from one another. Grandparents from their grandchildren, adult children from their parents in nursing homes, congregations dispersed and scattered, connected only by cell phone or internet. With Paul, this distance has caused us to even more eagerly desire to see each other face to face. Paul writes, “For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy.” Let us love and cherish one another — as our glory and joy, as we await the coming of our Lord Jesus this Christmas!

Prayer: Stir up your power, O Lord, and come! Deliver us from pandemic, separation and Satan. Amen!

Advent Action: Call or speak to one person each day during Advent, as God brings them to mind.

Thursday of the Week of Advent I | December 3, 2020

Francis Xavier, missionary to Asia, 1552

Isaiah 2:5-22; Psalm 18:1-20; 1 Thessalonians 3:1-13; Luke 20:27-40

^{3:1} Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, ² and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, ³ that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. ⁴ **For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know.** ⁵ For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain. ⁶ But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you— ⁷ for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. ⁸ For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. ⁹ For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, ¹⁰ as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith? ¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, ¹² and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, ¹³ so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

—1 Thessalonians 3:1-13



It's worth continuing in 1 Thessalonians for another day, as we hear Paul continuing to struggle with his forced separation from the new converts to Christianity in Thessalonica. Paul's concern was that "these afflictions" might move these young Christians to forsake their faith and doubt the Lord Jesus. If this is what happens to followers of Jesus, they might ask, who wants to be a Christian? So, Paul sent Timothy to check up on them, to exhort them in their faith, and to "learn about (their) faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted (them) and (their) labor would be in vain." As Timothy returned, he brought good news of the faith and love of the Thessalonians and Paul was reassured and comforted, for they were standing fast in the Lord.

In light of the months of forced distance and separation mentioned in yesterday's devotion, it is clear that many of us worry that, during the pandemic, "the tempter is tempting" the followers of Jesus, and there will be some whose faith will be challenged and weakened. When forced into isolation by a pandemic, when finally life returns to some sense of normalcy, will the faithful remain faithful and return to worship within the Body of Christ? Our prayer is that, in spite of trial and tribulation and the tempting of the tempter, you will stand fast in the Lord, remain firm in faith, increasing and abounding in love for one and for all, as we do for you.

Prayer: God our Father and our Lord Jesus, make us increase and abound in love for one another and for you! Amen.

Advent Action: Do a little research to learn about Francis Xavier, a missionary who served in India and Asia because of his love for all God's children.

December 4, 2020 | Friday of the Week of Advent I

Isaiah 3:1-4:1; Psalm 102; 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12; Luke 20:41-21:4

^{4:1} Finally, brethren, we beseech and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God, just as you are doing, you do so more and more. ² For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. ³ For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from unchastity; ⁴ that each one of you know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor, ⁵ not in the passion of lust like heathen who do not know God; ⁶ that no man transgress, and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we solemnly forewarned you. ⁷ For God has not called us for uncleanness, but in holiness. ⁸ Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you. ⁹ But concerning love of the brethren you have no need to have any one write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another; ¹⁰ and indeed you do love all the brethren throughout Macedonia. **But we exhort you, brethren, to do so more and more, ¹¹ to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we charged you; ¹² so that you may command the respect of outsiders, and be dependent on nobody.**

—1 Thessalonians 4:1-12



We'll spend one more day in Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonica before returning to the Gospel of Luke. Today's reading is helpful because the apostle is speaking directly and clearly about "how you ought to live and to please God, just as you are doing."

Because Lutherans (and other Christians) cling to the Good News that we are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus, apart from good works, we sometimes are accused (and are guilty) of neglecting to consider how we ought to live and to please God. Martin Luther's opponents challenged him, asking, "If you assure people that they are saved by grace apart from works, how will you convince them to love God and neighbor?" And indeed, twice Luther became so frustrated with the lack of response from his parishioners in Wittenberg that he went on preaching "strikes," refusing to preach to the people because of their weak response and lack of love.

Paul writes that the Thessalonians had no need of being told to love one another, for they seemed to have learned that lesson well, from God. Yet, he reminds them of how to live lives pleasing to God: abstain from unchastity, live in holiness and honor, live quietly, mind your own affairs, "work with your hands...and be dependent on nobody."

The call of Advent is to "prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" (Mark 1:3) to speed His coming. We prepare His way when we live lives that are pleasing to God, "worthy of the calling to which (we) have been called, with all lowliness and meekness...forbearing one another in love" (Ephesians 4:1-2 RSV). Paul writes, "love all the brethren...But we exhort (strongly encourage/urge) you...to do so more and more."

Prayer: Lord God, because we are saved by your grace through faith in Jesus, help us to live lives that are pleasing to You, holy and chaste, kind and loving. Amen.

Advent Action: Reach out with a loving word or gesture to someone who is hard to love.

Saturday of the Week of Advent I | December 5, 2020

Isaiah 4:2-6; Psalm 90; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Luke 21:5-19

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



If there is one verse which presents the main theme of these words of Jesus, it would surely be, "This will be your opportunity to bear witness." The NRSV has it, "This will give you an opportunity to testify." The NLT paraphrases, "But this will be your opportunity to tell them about me."

Many spend their whole lives trying to figure out the exact timing of Jesus' words. As in our reading, some want to know, "Lord, when will these things be?" Jesus warns us not to go after those who think they have it all figured out. There will be upheavals and natural disasters and pandemics — there will be terrors and signs from heaven, but first, persecutions and opposition to the truth, and trials before kings and governors, for my name's sake. What is important is not the timing — but the opportunity! What is important is not that we have figured out a specific timetable to these events, but that we seize the opportunities placed before us — to bear witness — to testify — to tell them about Jesus.

Bearing witness and testifying — is a little off-putting for most Lutherans, and maybe many Christians. "Telling others about Jesus" — that we can do. Humbly, genuinely, honestly, simply, most of us can tell others about Jesus, whether it's kings and governors or children and grandchildren, our next-door neighbor or someone we meet in the course of our day. It doesn't require memorizing the Bible or spouting theology — it means, as Luther said, "one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread" — the Bread of Life.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, give me the opportunity and the words to tell others about You! Amen.

Advent Action: You guessed it — tell someone about Jesus today!

THE SECOND WEEK OF
ADVENT



December 6, 2020 | The Second Sunday in Advent

Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, c. 342

Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 150; 2 Peter 3:11-18; Luke 7:28-35

^{7:28} “I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” ²⁹ (When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John, ³⁰ but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.) ³¹ “To what then shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? ³² They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not weep.’ ³³ For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon.’ ³⁴ The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ ³⁵ Yet wisdom is justified by all her children.”
–Luke 7:28-35

John the Baptist played a significant role in preparing the way for the coming of the Christ. He was the forerunner. He paved and prepared the way. He ushered in the beginning of what is often referred to as the Messianic Age. Functioning much like the Old Testament prophets, he pointed beyond himself to the promised One who was to come.

Of all people, it could easily be argued that no one who has ever lived has fulfilled their God-given role better than John. “Among those born of women,” Jesus says, “none is greater than John.” And yet, Jesus goes on to say that “the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than (John).” What is our Lord telling us?

What He is telling us is that there is a major difference between life lived prior to Jesus and life lived fully in Jesus and within His kingdom. Prior to Jesus’ appearance in this world, His life among us was a future promise. It had not yet happened. He had not yet appeared. The prophets spoke of Him. The Scriptures pointed to Him. But His appearance had not yet taken place. But once it happened and He appeared, all the promises found their fulfillment in Him. Not only was His life a fulfillment of the promises, but in His life, He was the promise. Jesus was the Christ. Jesus was the One promised of old, the fulfillment of all to which the Old Testament prophets had pointed.

The irony in this passage, as well as in the life of Jesus, was the fact that many of the common people, including those referred to as “the tax collectors and sinners,” recognized Jesus as the fulfillment that He was, while the religious leaders, the ones who knew the Scriptures well, were the very ones who were unwilling to believe and to trust. Their trust was in themselves. Their faith was in what they wanted for themselves to be right. Their “wisdom” was only able to see as far as their personal and self-justifying concerns.

No matter how it was presented, they consistently found fault. John the Baptist ate little and drank nothing alcoholic, and they claimed, “he had a demon.” Jesus was willing to eat and to drink and to celebrate with the rest, and they called Him “a drunkard and a friend of sinners.” No matter what happened, they would not accept it. No matter what was done and through whom it was done, it was never finally enough.

Little did they know that Jesus' very reason for being born was to become the fulfillment of everything God had promised. "Friend of sinners?" Thank God, He was. Willing to love the unlovable? We should be eternally grateful. All the way from heaven to this earth. All the way from the manger to the cross. Nothing could stop the love of God in Jesus. Nothing could stand in the way of God's saving plan made real and fulfilled in Christ.

The question for us today is one of where we place our trust and where, and in whom, we find our hope. If we find it in anything but God's saving plan and purpose in Christ, it is misguided. If we place it in anything other than what God has promised and fulfilled in Jesus, it will leave us empty and foolish. But if our hope is in Christ and our trust is in Him, then not only will we be wise, but we will eternally be numbered among those considered by Jesus to be "greater than John."

Today is the commemoration of Nicholas, bishop of Myra. Very little is known about his life, apart from his service as bishop and the fact that he suffered torture and imprisonment during the persecution under the Emperor Diocletian. Tradition holds that he was a defender of orthodoxy against Arianism. According to one legend, he was censured by the emperor Constantine after he had dealt Arius a blow to the head during the Council of Nicaea.

Nicholas was honored as a saint in Constantinople by the emperor Justinian, who in 580 dedicated a church to him in that city. In England, almost 400 churches have since been dedicated to Nicholas, and perhaps more dedicated to him throughout the world than to any other saint. In modern times, he is most noted as a protector and benefactor of children. As with all the saints, Nicholas was willing to stand up for his faith and for his Lord. In spite of the sacrifices he made during his life, he found meaning for his life only as it was connected to Christ. May the same be said of us. May the same be found to be true in the life we live each day.

Prayer: Almighty God, we thank you for your saving plan promised and fulfilled in Jesus. Help us to be wise and to trust, each day, in what You have done and accomplished for us in Him. Amen.

Advent Action: Spend ten minutes in prayer, thanking God for the wisdom given to us in Jesus and for the fulfilled promise that belongs to us eternally in Christ.

December 7, 2020 | Monday of the Week of Advent II

Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, 397

Isaiah 5:8-17; Psalm 145; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Luke 21:20-28

^{21:20} (And Jesus said,) "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. ²¹Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, ²²for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written. ²³Alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people. ²⁴They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. ²⁵"And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, ²⁶people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. ²⁸**Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.**"

—Luke 21:20-28



While our North American culture seems to celebrate Christmas more as a secular holiday, the Church values Advent as a time for spiritual reflection and meditation. We reserve most of the focus on prophecies about the Babe of Bethlehem for later in December, hearing about John the Baptist, Mary and Joseph the third and fourth Sundays in Advent. The first two weeks follow closely the themes laid out on the last Sunday of the Church year, Christ the King Sunday, when we hear of Jesus returning in power and glory. This is true also in the daily lectionary which we are following in these devotions.

This explains, then, the reading above about the destruction and desolation of Jerusalem, days of vengeance, great distress and wrath, signs in sun, moon and stars, people fainting with fear and foreboding of what is coming on the world. "For the powers of the heavens will be shaken," says the Lord Jesus. And what a prophecy! From the Lord, Himself! Who would want to be alive to witness such upheaval? And why does the Lord share this with His followers? We might be better off not knowing what is to come. And yet, the Lord wants us to be prepared, watching and waiting. The Lord wants us to be aware of the times and signs so that when that day comes, it will not catch us unaware. Rather, Jesus says, "Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." The Lord shares these things with us so that we will better understand the "birth pangs" of the coming of the new age (Matthew 24:8). Even more, He wants us to understand them so that we will attend to His coming — not cowering in fear, but standing straight, with heads up and looking for Him as He comes.

Prayer: Oh, come, oh come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear. Amen.

Advent Action: Learn something about Ambrose, bishop of Milan. His Advent hymn says, "All praise, eternal Son, to Thee, whose advent sets Thy people free." Here is a link to information on the bishop: oca.org/saints/lives/2020/12/07/103485-saint-ambrose-bishop-of-milan

Tuesday of the Week of Advent II | December 8, 2020

Isaiah 5:18-25; Psalm 146; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28; Luke 21:29-38

^{21:29} And he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. ³⁰ As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. ³¹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³² Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place. ³³ **Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.** ³⁴ "But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. ³⁵ For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶ But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man." ³⁷ And every day he was teaching in the temple, but at night he went out and lodged on the mount called Olivet. ³⁸ And early in the morning all the people came to him in the temple to hear him.

—Luke 21:29-38

We are often amazed at those, throughout history, who seem to know and understand the many signs spoken of by Jesus and other prophets throughout Holy Scripture. Yesterday we read of Jerusalem surrounded by armies, Judeans fleeing to the mountains, great distress on earth, signs in the sun, the moon and the stars. These prophecies immediately precede our reading for today, and then Jesus tells the parable of the fig tree and concludes, "when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near."

No matter how hard we might try, most of us find the signs confusing, to say the least. And the Lord tells us to beware of those who claim to have it all figured out (Luke 21:8). What I do know and understand is this: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." What I do know and understand are these words of warning: "But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap...But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength."

In this life of distraction, temptation and sin, it is all too easy to be weighed down, burdened by the worries and cares of everyday living so that we rarely look up, hardly ever give thought to spiritual things. The Lord knew well the realities of daily life and our human nature, warranting His call to us, again and again, to watch ourselves, to stay awake and alert, praying that we would have strength to endure and to prepare. For — the Good News is — the kingdom of God is near! The Lord will come — and we hope to stand, by God's grace and blessing, "before the Son of Man!"

Prayer: Lord our God, give us strength to escape all these things which will take place, and by Your grace and blessing, let us stand before the Son of Man when He comes. Amen.

Advent Action: Luke tells us, "And early in the morning all the people came to (Jesus) in the temple to hear him." Rise early tomorrow morning and read the daily lesson, John 7:53-8:11.

December 9, 2020 | Wednesday of the Week of Advent II

Isaiah 6:1-13; Psalm 147:1-12; 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12; John 7:53-8:11

^{8:1}They went each to his own house, but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ²Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. ³The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst ⁴they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. ⁵Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" ⁶This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. ⁷**And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her."** ⁸And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. ⁹But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. ¹⁰Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" ¹¹She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."

—John 7:53-8:11



Lutherans, in particular, believe that it is critical to rightly discern the Law and the Gospel of God. St. Paul writes to Timothy, his beloved child, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). In a sermon for New Year's Day 1532, preaching on Galatians 3:23-34, Martin Luther said, "This difference between the Law and the Gospel is the height of knowledge in Christendom. Every person and all persons who assume or glory in the name of Christian should know and be able to state this difference."

This difference or distinction is something every pastor tries to convey to Sunday school students, confirmands and lay members. It is especially challenging when reading a passage like the Gospel appointed for today, which is both Law and Gospel at the same time! How is this so?

Rightly handling the word of truth means rightly understanding how it may be both Law and Gospel, depending upon who is hearing this word. In our passage, those who are all too ready to condemn the woman caught in adultery believed they were righteous in their judgment, standing with stones in hand. However, Jesus calls them out, saying, "Fine, whoever is without sin, let him cast the first stone!" And here the Lord convicts every one of the self-righteous scribes and Pharisees, for as every sinner, in the eyes of God, deserves death, who would presume to throw the first stone? Because the wages of sin is death and all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, all are convicted by the Law. At the same time, the bad news that we are all sinners deserving death, is also good news, in that we have, with the woman in adultery, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. He is gracious and merciful, saving us, yet calling us to respond, saying, "Go and sin no more!"

Prayer: Lord our God, we thank You for the Law which convicts and the Gospel of Jesus Christ which saves. Empower us by Your grace to "go and sin no more!" Amen.

Advent Action: Do you know someone in need of a word of grace and mercy? Give it!

Thursday of the Week of Advent II | December 10, 2020

Isaiah 7:1-9; Psalm 147:13-21; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12; Luke 22:1-13

^{22:1} Now the Feast of Unleavened Bread drew near, which is called the Passover. ² And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to put him to death, for they feared the people. ³ Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was of the number of the twelve. ⁴ He went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers how he might betray him to them. ⁵ And they were glad and agreed to give him money. ⁶ So he consented and sought an opportunity to betray him to them in the absence of a crowd. ⁷ **Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed.** ⁸ So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and prepare the Passover for us, that we may eat it." ⁹ They said to him, "Where will you have us prepare it?" ¹⁰ He said to them, "Behold, when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him into the house that he enters ¹¹ and tell the master of the house, 'The Teacher says to you, Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?'" ¹² And he will show you a large upper room furnished; prepare it there." ¹³ And they went and found it just as he had told them, and they prepared the Passover.

—Luke 22:1-13



As you began to read the assigned passage for today, you might have checked to see you didn't pick up last year's Lenten devotional by mistake! The account of the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread in the midst of Advent may catch anyone off-guard. And yet, the shadow of the cross falls across every moment in Jesus' short life, from His birth in Bethlehem to the empty tomb.

What was once the "Upper Room" is now a "lower room" in the Syriac Orthodox Church of St. Mark in Jerusalem, according to one tradition. According to travel guides, other sites are claimed to be the Upper Room. However, when we visited the room during our trip in 2018, the Syriac monks assured us that the Church of St. Mark was built over the original upper room that was the location of the Lord's Supper, also known as the Cenacle. It is a moving experience to stand in the room, or a room similar to the one, where Peter and John arranged for the Passover meal, gathered with the Lord and the others of The Twelve, with Judas before his betrayal, on the night of Maundy Thursday.

As every Sunday is to be an observance, a reminder of Easter, wouldn't it be meaningful if every Thursday evening meal would bring to mind that meal in the Upper Room? And what if every Friday, from noon to three we would take a moment to consider the Lord's crucifixion, suffering and death on the cross for us and for our salvation? Such remembrance would sanctify each week, keeping us and our lives centered on the saving acts of our Lord Jesus Christ, making our faith more than a once a week observance. By the same token, such an observance might guard against us betraying our Lord by our sin and disobedience, again and again, turning away from Him by the prospect of a few pieces of silver or a bit of recognition or renown.

Prayer: Thank You, O God, for Your gifts of grace, Word and Sacrament, through which we receive Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Advent Action: Read John's account of the Maundy Thursday meal, chapters 13-17.

December 11, 2020 | Friday of the Week of Advent II

Lars Olsen Skrefsrud, missionary to India, 1910

Isaiah 7:10-25; Psalm 148; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5; Luke 22:14-30

^{22:14} And when the hour came, (Jesus) reclined at table, and the apostles with him. ¹⁵ And he said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. ¹⁶ For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." ¹⁷ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, "Take this, and divide it among yourselves. ¹⁸ For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." ¹⁹ And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁰ And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."
-Luke 22:14-30



Raised in a traditionally German home and congregation in Columbus, Indiana, we sang all the great Luther hymns, as well as those strong hymns by German composers and poets, with one or two of the beloved Swedish tunes such as "Children of the Heavenly Father." What we didn't sing, and so were not familiar with, were the wonderful Norwegian hymns such as "Who is this Host Arrayed in White" (*LBW* 314) and "In Heaven Above" (*LBW* 330). I was introduced, thankfully, to these beautiful hymns by an octogenarian Norwegian bachelor in my congregation in Hobbs, New Mexico, which then grew into my love and appreciation for our Norwegian Lutheran traditions, especially the great missionary fervor that continues today.

When you read the texts (or sing the words) of these two great hymns, you experience truly a glorious glimpse of heavenly communion where the Lord God has "transformed their strife to heav'nly life, And freed them from their fears. For now they have the best at last; They keep their sweet eternal feast."

Our lives have not yet been transformed to "heav'nly life," but we are invited each week to share in the sweet eternal feast, as we gather with our Lord and His followers for the Lord's Supper. How tragic that as soon as the meal was ended, Judas went to betray Jesus and the disciples began to dispute who among them was the greatest. This is the reality of life in the all-too-human Body of Christ on earth. We await the coming of the Lord Jesus, we pray for His advent here, anew, to heal our divisions, turn sin and betrayal into faith, and welcome us all to His sweet eternal feast, which is the Sacrament of His Body and Blood.

Today, we commemorate Lars Olsen Skrefsrud, born in Lysgaard, Norway in 1840. Troubled in early life, he began to read religious books in prison, studied to become a pastor and then traveled to be a missionary among the Santals in India. He learned their language and translated the Gospels and Luther's *Small Catechism* into Santali. He taught them agriculture, carpentry and other useful crafts. He died December 11, 1910.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, feed us with your very presence as we gather at your feast. Amen.

Advent Action: Find and read the words to "Behold a Host" on hymnary.org.

Saturday of the Week of Advent II | December 12, 2020

Isaiah 8:1-15; Psalm 149; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-18; Luke 22:31-38

^{3,6} Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. ⁷ For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, ⁸ nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. ⁹ It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. ¹⁰ For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. ¹¹ For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. ¹² Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. ¹³ **As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good.** ¹⁴ If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. ¹⁵ Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother. ¹⁶ Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all.

—2 Thessalonians 3:6-18



A word that has come into common usage these days is “entitlements.” Usually, it refers to programs administered by governments. Closely related to this is the word “entitled,” which sometimes reflects a negative attitude, as if one is inherently deserving of privileges or special treatment. It seems in the early Church there were those who believed themselves to be “entitled,” expecting others to provide for them, while they, themselves, refused to work or to contribute to the common good. We read in Acts 2:44-46 that in the first days of the Church, after Pentecost, “all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts.”

Interestingly, by the time the Church had been founded in Thessalonica, the believers were not all together with “glad and generous hearts!” Paul needs to speak to those who are idle busybodies, not working, not sharing the responsibilities, but believing themselves “entitled” to be taken care of by the community. “If any one is not willing to work,” says Paul, “let them not eat!”

As I write this brief devotion, I can't imagine you are idle and need encouragement to “get busy!” A few weeks before Christmas, most of us have anything but “idle hands.” But Paul's exhortation stands — we live in community with one another in the Body of Christ. We are each important to the well-being of the whole. Every local congregation needs willing workers, ready to respond to God's gift of grace by working quietly, not growing weary in doing good.

Prayer: Lord God, make me a willing worker, always ready to do good. Amen.

Advent Action: Do something good for someone — anyone, today!

THE THIRD WEEK OF
ADVENT



December 13, 2020 | The Third Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 13:1-13; Psalm 25; Hebrews 12:18-29; John 3:22-30

^{3:22} After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. ²³ John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized ²⁴ (for John had not yet been put in prison). ²⁵ Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification. ²⁶ And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him." ²⁷ John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' ²⁹ The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. ³⁰ He must increase, but I must decrease."

—John 3:22-30

Over this past year, there have been numerous events, experiences and circumstances that have served to raise anxiety levels and cause division within our society. Racial tension, political division and the reality of a worldwide pandemic are among the more obvious reasons for such being the case. Even in places where you might expect there to be a spirit of unity, a spirit of discord and disunity are often found.

Our world is in turmoil. What we had once considered to be "normal" has been turned upside down. The future is uncertain. The present is unpleasant. Even the past has a way of casting an unfavorable shadow on where this all might lead.

John the Baptist was no stranger to anxiety or discord. The religious leaders did not approve of his message. Those in power did not agree with his mannerisms and approach. Even among his followers, there were times when his purpose was not met with the welcome one might have expected. Nonetheless, John understood his role. He knew his calling. He knew the One in whom he had been called. And it was to that One and that One alone that he was faithful.

When confronted by his followers with what Jesus was doing and how his ministry was beginning to be overshadowed by that of the Lord, the Baptist was clear and to the point in how their apparently competing ministries were to play out. For John, there was no competition at all. John's role was to decrease, while Jesus' role was to increase. John was to take a supporting role in the saving drama that was taking place, while Jesus was to become the lead actor and find himself center stage.

The argument, in John's day, causing division and anxiety among his followers had to do with ceremonial washing. To us, 2000 years later, it's a matter of little, if any, concern. To them, as it was happening, it was of great concern. The anxiety levels were high. The division among John's followers was becoming great. But John would not get caught in the middle. He refused to play their short-sighted game. Rather, he kept the focus where it needed to be, on Jesus, and, in so doing, offered a much more farsighted and far-reaching response.

How easy it is to get caught in arguments and divisions that mean little when it comes to what finally counts. How often does it happen, even in the Church, that we find ourselves anxious and divided over things that do not ultimately matter?

The answer for us today is no different than it was, back then, for John. Stay focused on Jesus. Keep your eyes on Christ. If there's an agenda to be moved forward, it is not ours but His. If there is reason for anxiety and division, do not let that reason fall back on us. Our calling in Jesus is what gives us our reason for being. The life we have in Christ is the sole purpose for which we are to live.

It is a litmus test of the Christian faith that we need to always defer to Jesus, and never allow our own personal preferences or prejudices stand in the way of our witness for Him. It is one of the ultimate tests of the Christian life, that we never allow our own personal desire, or need for gain, stand in the way of the One who gained it all for us on the cross.

Jesus was born into this world to become our Savior. Jesus came into this world because of our sin and because of God's eternal love. As followers of His, our calling is not to stand in the way, but to get out of the way. It is not to call attention to ourselves, but to keep the attention finally, fully and forever on Him.

As we move closer to the celebration of our Lord's birth, ask yourself if you are willing to decrease in order that He might increase? Are you willing to step back and play that supporting role, so that Jesus, through your life and witness, might be given center stage?

We cannot change the fact that He alone is the One who can save, nor could we do so, even if we wanted. Therefore, let us learn from John when the world around us is anxious and when disunity seems to be winning the day. Point the world to Jesus. Fix your eyes on Christ. He is our unity. He has taken our anxiety and our troubles to the cross. As He increases, so does God's promise and our hope.

Prayer: Lord God, when we find ourselves surrounded by disunity, help us to find our unity in Jesus. When we are tempted to call attention to ourselves, empower us to keep our attention on Him. In His name we pray. Amen.

Advent Action: Look for ways this week to keep the attention of your Christmas preparations on Jesus. Find opportunities, as you prepare for celebrating our Lord's birth, to point others to Christ.

December 14, 2020 | Monday of the Week of Advent III

John of the Cross, renewer of the Church, 1591; Teresa of Avila, renewer of the Church, 1582

Isaiah 8:16-9:1; Psalm 40; 2 Peter 1:1-11; Luke 22:39-53

^{1:1} Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ: ²May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. ³His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, ⁴by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. ⁵For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, ⁶and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, ⁷and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. ⁸For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹¹For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

—2 Peter 1:1-11



Many Lutherans are not aware that we have a calendar of lesser festivals and commemorations which bring to mind saints and godly men and women who, throughout history, have struggled to live lives of commitment and faith. The *Augsburg Confession*, 1530, the chief confessional document of Lutheranism, states in Article XXI, “It is also taught among us that saints should be kept in remembrance so that our faith may be strengthened when we see what grace they received and how they were sustained by faith. Moreover, their good works are to be an example for us, each of us in his own calling.” Today we commemorate two such persons, remembered as “renewers of the Church.” John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila were contemporaries in Spain who both sought necessary reform and renewal of the Church, desiring a return to prayer, meditation and humble spirituality. John died during the night of December 13-14, 1591 and Teresa died October 4, 1582.

Our reading for today brings to mind that we have received a “faith of equal standing” with Peter and the saints, by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ. Peter writes, “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness.”

The apostle goes on to highlight this life and godliness, saying, “make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.” These are the marks of the disciple and follower of Jesus — as we live in joyful anticipation of the coming again of our Lord and Savior.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, give us faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, affection and love! Amen.

Advent Action: Send a note of thanks to a “saint” in your life who has strengthened you by the example of their faith, love and service!

Tuesday of the Week of Advent III | December 15, 2020

Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 85; 2 Peter 1:12-21; Luke 22:54-69

^{22:54} Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house, and Peter was following at a distance.⁵⁵ And when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat down among them.⁵⁶ Then a servant girl, seeing him as he sat in the light and looking closely at him, said, "This man also was with him."⁵⁷ But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him."⁵⁸ And a little later someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not."⁵⁹ And after an interval of about an hour still another insisted, saying, "Certainly this man also was with him, for he too is a Galilean."⁶⁰ But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about." And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed.⁶¹ And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times."⁶² And he went out and wept bitterly.⁶³ **Now the men who were holding Jesus in custody were mocking him as they beat him. ⁶⁴They also blindfolded him and kept asking him, "Prophesy! Who is it that struck you?"⁶⁵ And they said many other things against him, blaspheming him. ⁶⁶When day came, the assembly of the elders of the people gathered together, both chief priests and scribes. And they led him away to their council, and they said, ⁶⁷"If you are the Christ, tell us." But he said to them, "If I tell you, you will not believe, ⁶⁸and if I ask you, you will not answer. ⁶⁹But from now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God."**

—Luke 22:54-69

Once again, this lectionary reading from the week of our Lord's Passion sounds discordant as our focus is on Advent and preparation for Christmas. The account of Peter's betrayal/denial of Jesus, not once, but three times, together with the Lord's beating and mocking at the hands of His enemies, leaves a bitter taste as we are hungering for the Good News of the birth of the baby in Bethlehem.

And yet, isn't that the reality of our Christian faith? We are not people of Christmas, only. Our faith isn't only for times of joy and happiness, peace and light. As soon as Jesus came into the world, Herod and his soldiers sought Jesus to put Him to death and was willing to slaughter all the innocent young male children under the age of two, just to get to the Son of God. We know Jesus was born to be the Savior of the world, and that redemption was to be won for us by His crucifixion and death. We are people of Christmas **and** Good Friday **and** Easter! We journey through Advent knowing our destination is not finally Bethlehem and the stable and manger, but Golgotha, the cross and the tomb on Easter morning.

This is the Good News that God became human in Jesus, His Son, to be with us in joy and sorrow, pain and peace, times of challenge and struggle, as well as times of blessing and grace. This is the Good News that Jesus, our Savior, is with us in death and life.

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, be with me always, in all times in my life. Amen.

Advent Action: Read the rest of Luke's account of Holy Week, chapters 23-24.

December 16, 2020 | Wednesday of the Week of Advent III

Isaiah 9:8-17; Psalm 53; 2 Peter 2:1-10a, Mark 1:1-8

^{1:1}The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ²As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, “Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, ³the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’” ⁴John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey.⁷And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

—Mark 1:1-8

These next few days in Advent, we will hear from the Gospels the Good News of the coming of Jesus and the forerunner, John the Baptizer preparing the way. Today we hear the first verses of the Gospel of Mark and immediately one of the major themes of this Gospel is proclaimed, as the evangelist tells us, this is the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who is “the Son of God.” We are reminded throughout this book that Jesus, while Son of man—a human, is also and more importantly, Son of God. The Gospel book begins with that announcement and it is proclaimed again, at the end of Jesus’ life, when a Roman centurion standing at the foot of the cross confesses, “Truly this man was the Son of God” (Mark 15:39).

It’s no wonder that God provided a new prophet, John, to be a messenger sent to call people to “prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,” baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Mark tells us that “all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.” In a time when their country was occupied by pagan Romans and religious leaders who were self-serving, blind to God’s presence and deaf to His Word, the people realized they were living in a time of great sin and that all were in need of repentance, forgiveness and renewal. They yearned for a renewal of God’s presence among them, so they went to be baptized — hearing in John’s call to prepare the way of the Lord a much needed message that they hoped and prayed would open the door to the coming Messiah, the Anointed One of God. They were baptized by John for their own forgiveness and renewal, but they believed this would be a participation in the preparation necessary for the coming of the Christ — who would baptize, not with water only, but with water and the Holy Spirit.

During this season of Advent, we remember and return to the promise of our Baptism, knowing that daily we are born anew to that living hope which is ours in Christ Jesus, the Son of God — our Savior!

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, let me live in that hope daily, because I am baptized. Amen.

Advent Action: Say a prayer of thanksgiving for the gift of your Baptism!

Thursday of the Week of Advent III | December 17, 2020

“O Wisdom” Antiphon

Isaiah 9:18-10:4; Psalm 126; 2 Peter 2:10b-16; Matthew 3:1-12

^{3:1} In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ² “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” ³ For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’” ⁴ Now John wore a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, ⁶ and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ **Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.** ¹¹ “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

—Matthew 3:1-12



For all the talk about repentance during Advent (and Lent), it can be difficult to understand and even more difficult to live a life of repentance. We may say the words, but do we truly repent of our disobedient thoughts, words and deeds, of what we have done and left undone? John the Baptizer called the people to prepare the way of the Lord, to make His paths straight, making way for the incoming kingdom of heaven, primarily by repentance and being baptized. Most readers of this devotion are baptized, but what of the daily return to our Baptism, in true repentance, confession our sins? How are we living that out in this Advent season of preparation?

Dr. Martin Luther explains repentance: “This is the thunderbolt of God with which He strikes into a heap both manifest sinners and false saints and suffers no one to be in the right but drives them all together into terror and despair... This is not *activa contritio*, a manufactured remorse; it is *passiva contritio*, true sorrow of heart... To repent means to feel the wrath of God in earnest because of one’s sin, so that the sinner experiences the anguish of heart and is filled with a painful longing for the salvation and the mercy of God. Repentance is not penitence alone but also faith, which apprehends the promise of forgiveness, lest the penitent sinners perish” (*What Luther Says*, Plass, CPH, 1959, p. 1210).

These are helpful words — repentance is not a manufactured remorse but true sorrow of heart; repentance is penitence but also faith, which apprehends the promise of forgiveness.

Prayer: Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Amen.

Advent Action: Splash water on your face and make the sign of the cross on your forehead today as a reminder of your Baptism.

December 18, 2020 | Friday of the Week of Advent III

“O Adonai” Antiphon

Isaiah 10:5-19; Psalm 130; 2 Peter 2:17-22; Matthew 11:2-15

^{11:2}Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples ³and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” ⁴And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. ⁶And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” ⁷As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses. ⁹What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is he of whom it is written, “Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.” ¹¹Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹²From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. ¹³For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, ¹⁴and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. ¹⁵He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

—Matthew 11:2-15



“From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.”

Matthew reminds us that violence has afflicted God’s kingdom and people, at least since John the Baptist. And, if you remember your Old Testament history, violence was present since just after God spoke and man was created. These words bring to mind the violence we have seen recently in the U.S. as protests became violent, attacks have taken place in France and Canada and news reports bring violence into our homes. Often, these acts are claimed to have been done in the name of justice in the rioting in America, but also in the name of religion. Is this what Jesus was about? While Jesus speaks of His presence bringing, at times, division — does He intend violence?

In our reading today, John and his disciples are wrestling with who Jesus is — are you he who is to come, the Messiah, or should we look for another? Jesus wants to be known by His deeds — “Tell John what you hear and see, the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.” These are the works of Jesus, Son of God. This is why Jesus came — not for violence or destruction, but to bring sight to the blind, to heal the lame, to raise up the dead and to preach Good News to the poor. This is who Jesus is — the Prince of Peace and Lord of Love, come down from heaven “because God so loved the world,” not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through Him. If only those who have ears to hear would listen and hear — the Good News of Jesus Christ!

Prayer: Lord God, open every ear to hear Jesus’ message of healing and love. Amen.

Advent Action: Light a candle today as a reminder that we wait for the Prince of Peace.

Saturday of the Week of Advent III | December 19, 2020

“O Root of Jesse” Antiphon

Isaiah 10:20-27; Psalm 80; Jude 17-25; Luke 3:1-9

¹⁷ But you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ They said to you, “In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions.” ¹⁹ It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit. ²⁰ But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, ²¹ keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. ²² And have mercy on those who doubt; ²³ save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh. ²⁴ **Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy,** ²⁵ to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

–Jude 17-25



What a wonderful passage for this season of Advent! Although the Epistle of Jude is only 25 verses long, it is not one included in the Sunday lectionaries of the western Church. We can be thankful this reading is included in the daily rotation, as it is worth hearing, as we live in this in-between time awaiting Jesus’ second coming. Why is it worth hearing?

First, Jude recalls the words of the apostles, specifically Peter, in his second epistle, 3:3, where he writes, “First of all you must understand this, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own passions” (RSV). The apostles cautioned disciples who would come after them to be aware of those who would doubt and twist the truth, questioning God’s Word, manipulating it to fit their own ungodly passions. This we are seeing in our own day, as false teachers, bishops and pastors deny the truth of Holy Scripture and mold it, as Martin Luther warned, like a wax nose. These people, writes Jude, cause division because they are worldly, without the Holy Spirit.

Second, to counteract and guard against such false teachers, “(build) yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keeping yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.”

Third, Jude calls upon us to have mercy on those who doubt, save others by snatching them out of the fire, showing mercy, but with caution, that their sin won’t rub off on us!

Finally, Jude proclaims to us that it is only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who can keep us from stumbling and present us blameless before the presence of His glory with great joy. We are reminded of Luther’s *Small Catechism*, the explanation to the Third Article of the Creed: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him, but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel...and keeps me in the one true faith.” Remember, it is only God who can protect us and save us, as we wait for the mercy of Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life!

Prayer: Lord, keep me steadfast in Your Word every day of my life. Amen.

Advent Action: Offer a prayer of intercession for those who have lost their way.

THE FOURTH WEEK OF
ADVENT



December 20, 2020 | The Fourth Sunday in Advent

“O Key of David” Antiphon

Isaiah 11:1-9; Psalm 110; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 3:16-21

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

–John 3:16-21



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

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

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

Paul says, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel...For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith” (Romans 1:16-17). The apostle writes, “He made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). The Bible says the Gospel is the “the righteousness of God.”

And so, what does it mean to be righteous? If the Gospel is the righteousness of God, what does that mean for us? The word righteous means to “be morally justifiable, to be right and without fault.” In the Bible, when that word is used, it means “to be holy, to be found without sin, to be perfect in action, word and thought.”

The Good News is that in Jesus you and I become righteous. We become holy, without sin, we attain perfection in the sight of God because of Christ. The Gospel is that the righteousness that belongs only to God is given to us through our faith in Jesus.

In seminary, they talked about it as the doctrine of imputation. To impute means “to attribute” or to “ascribe to someone else,” something that was not originally theirs. That’s exactly what happens for us in Jesus. In

the cross, we become what Christ is, and on the cross, He became what we are. His righteousness is attributed to us, ascribed to us, given to us and our sin is attributed, ascribed, given to Him.

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

Paul says, "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). Peter says, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness" (1 Peter 2:24).

It is quite the teaching, this thing we call the Gospel. It is quite the truth, this Good News that belongs to us in Christ. We become what Christ is, and He became what we are...so that "in Him, we might become the righteousness of God."

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

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

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

As we draw closer to Christmas, to the celebration of our Lord's birth, we need to be asking ourselves that question. You know your life. You know how far and how often you have missed the mark. The Bible says, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). It says, "None is righteous, no, not one" (Romans 3:10).

In fact, all religion, in one column, is the word "Do." All our human effort is what we are, in ourselves, able to accomplish. The Christian faith, in contrast, the Gospel says, "It has all been done."

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

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

We are only a few short days away from Christmas. Let us not forget why Jesus had to be born and how eternally grateful we must be. Amen.

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

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

December 21, 2020 | Monday of the Week of Advent IV

St. THOMAS, APOSTLE; "O Dayspring" Antiphon

Isaiah 11:10-16; Psalm 67; Revelation 20:1-10; John 5:30-47

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

—John 5:30-47



The Lord had just been speaking about death and resurrection and the fact that those who would hear the voice of the Son of man would be resurrected, come out of their tombs and have life, while those who would not, those who had done evil, would face resurrection to judgment (John 5:24-29). Immediately after, in our reading above, Jesus speaks about believing in Him, having life in Him, and bearing witness to Him, as did John the Baptizer. The Lord is presenting the difference between believing in Him and doubting; between bearing witness to Him and not bearing witness.

Interesting, then, that today is the commemoration of St. Thomas, Apostle — often remembered as “Doubting Thomas.” After Jesus’ resurrection, it was Thomas who would only believe if he could see the nail marks in Jesus’ hands and feet and place his fingers in the wound in the Lord’s side. This experience of Thomas, needing physical proof, is in stark contrast to all who would come after the apostles, not able to touch Jesus as did Thomas, but having to “believe my words.” John, the forerunner, bore witness to the truth and was a “burning and shining lamp.” As we hear the words of the Lord and believe, we, too, are called to “let (our) light so shine before others, so that they may see our good works and glorify (our) Father” (Matthew 5:16). These dark days of Advent, on this, the day of the winter solstice, let us believe Jesus and His words, and let us be burning and shining lamps.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, let Your light shine in and through me, to bring hope to others. Amen.

Advent Action: Speak a word of hope and light to someone today.

Tuesday of the Week of Advent IV | December 22, 2020

“O King of Nations” Antiphon

Isaiah 28:9-22; Psalm 94; Revelation 20:11-21:8; Luke 1:5-25

^{1:5}In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. ⁷But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. ⁸Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, ⁹according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. ¹¹And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. ¹³But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. ¹⁶And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God,¹⁷ and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.” ¹⁸And Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” ¹⁹And the angel answered him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.” ²¹And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. ²²And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. ²³And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

—Luke 1:5-25



As we are now in the week of Christmas, it is good for us to have this extended reading about the promise made to Zechariah and Elizabeth and the fulfillment of that promise. It is a vivid and reassuring reminder to us that God had a plan for the salvation of the world and here we see it unfolding in the life of the parents of John.

This reading is also a reminder to you and to me, that God has a plan for us, as well. We sometimes doubt and question because we have no angelic visitation laying out God’s plan for us. If only Gabriel would come to us, just once when we are struggling, to bring us good news of God’s strategy and intention. And yet, isn’t it clear? God’s plan for you — is to know Jesus Christ as your Savior, Shepherd and Friend, to know that He is with you always, and that He wants you, in whatever way possible, to be a burning and shining lamp in darkness.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, be light for my path and guide my way. Amen.

Advent Action: Looking back on the year now drawing to a close, consider three ways God has acted in your life, and share that with someone else.

December 23, 2020 | Wednesday of the Week of Advent IV

“O Emmanuel” Antiphon

Isaiah 29:9-24; Psalm 17; Revelation 21:9-21; Luke 1:26-38

^{1:26}In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin’s name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” ²⁹But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. ³²**He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, ³³and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”** ³⁴And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” ³⁵And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. ³⁶And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.”³⁸And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

—Luke 1:26-38



In the Apostle’s Creed, we confess, “I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.”

For all the trappings of Christmas, literally, the “Christ-mass,” it is finally all about God become flesh in Jesus, God the Father’s only Son. And this Jesus became flesh being conceived by the Holy Spirit in the young maid, Mary, so that He would be Son of God and man! As inconceivable as this is to modern, rational, reasonable minds, the angel answers, “For nothing will be impossible with God.”

Had Jesus not been God, in the flesh, He would’ve been only a useful spiritual guide, a worthy teacher, a guru deserving of our attention. Jesus offers helpful advice on loving your neighbor, caring for the poor and needy, doing good for the sake of others — as do so many other religious figures in the history of the world. To be Savior of the world? This Jesus, born of Mary, must be “Son of the Most High God!” This is the meaning of the message sent through Gabriel — that this child would be God and man, two natures in one being, to be one with us, yet Son of God, come down from heaven to suffer under Pontius Pilate, be crucified, die and be buried. This Son of the Most High would descend into hell, yet on the third day rise again, ascend into heaven and sit at the right hand of His Father. The Son would come again to judge the living and the dead. This is why we confirm our faith, saying, “I believe that this Jesus, true God and true man, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, delivered me from all sins from death and from the power of the devil...that I may be His own...and serve Him.” (Luther’s *Small Catechism*, Explanation of the Second Article.)

Prayer: Lord, I am Your servant. Let my life be according to Your word. Amen.

Advent Action: Read the *Small Catechism* on the Creed, bookofconcord.org

The Nativity of Our Lord | December 24, 2020

CHRISTMAS EVE

Isaiah 31:1-9, 33:17-22; Psalm 132, 114; Revelation 21:22-22:11, 18-20; Luke 1:39-66

^{2:1} In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ And all went to be registered, each to his own town. ⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. ⁸ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰ And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" 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.

—Luke 2:1-20



We depart from the assigned daily lectionary reading today, to hear the Good News of Jesus' birth proclaimed in Luke. The assigned reading is Luke 1:39-66, the Visitation, Magnificat and birth of John. Surely, John, who was always pointing to Christ, would prefer we focus on Jesus, this Christmas Eve.

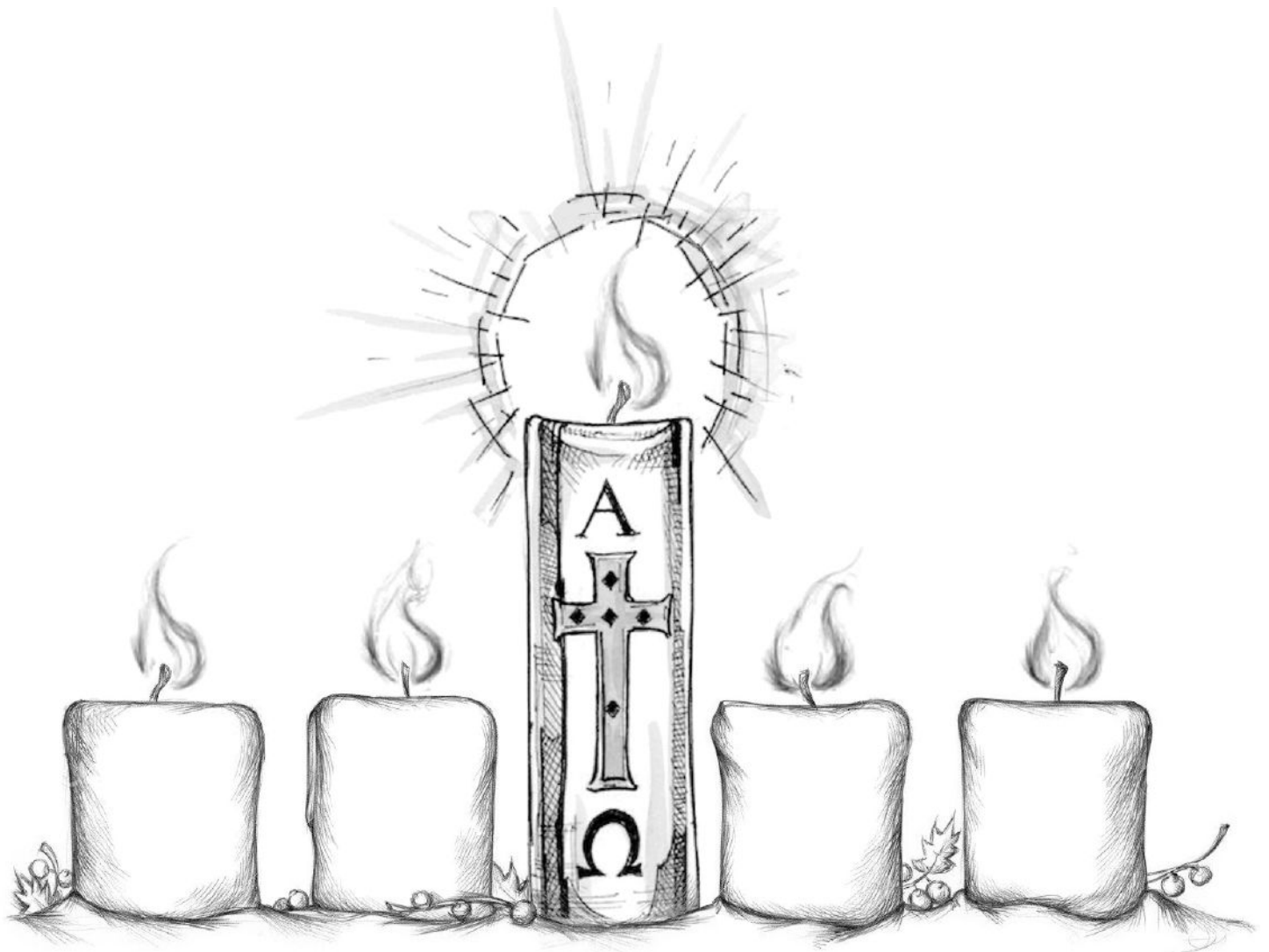
And, well, we should have all our attention on Jesus! This most holy night, when, hopefully, the preparations are complete, it is time to pause for the Word of God, for meditation on this great mystery, and for worship and prayer. Whether you are able to gather with your congregation in church, must observe Christmas at home with family or alone, the message is the same. The angel of the Lord appears and proclaims, in the words of Martin Luther's beloved hymn, "From heav'n above to earth I come, To bring good news to ev'ryone! Glad tidings of great joy I bring, To all the world, and gladly sing!"

The message is: "To you is born, this day...a Savior, who is Christ the Lord!" Let us dance for joy! Let us gladly sing! Let us go, tell it on the mountain — and shout it in the streets! Let's tell our children and neighbors, the sick and the lonely, Christ, the Savior, is born!

Prayer: Almighty God, You made this night shine with the brightness of the true Light. Grant that we may walk in the light of Jesus' presence, day by day. In His name. Amen.

Christmas Eve Action: If you are able, celebrate the birth of the Christ child in person, with your congregation. If not, find a Christmas service online or on TV. One way or the other, join in worshipping Christ, the newborn King!

THE SEASON OF
CHRISTMAS



December 25, 2020 | The Nativity of Our Lord

CHRISTMAS DAY

Zechariah 2:10-13; Psalm 2, 98; 1 John 4:7-16; John 3:31-36

^{1:18} Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ²³ “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). ²⁴ When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, ²⁵ but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

—Matthew 1:18-25

Christmas is, without question, the single-most important event in history. When Jesus came into this world, it changed the course of history forever. In fact, much of what is happening throughout the world today is a direct result of what happened on that first Christmas. Families will be gathering in their homes. People will be traveling to different places. Almost everybody is doing something to celebrate. But what is it, finally, that makes this day so different? A lot of things have happened since the world began. Why is this day so unique? And why is it, out of all the things that have happened since the time the world began, that this one event continues to stand out above the rest? There are countless ways in which that question could be answered. Today, I would like us to consider just one. Jesus came into this world for you. He came into this world for you.

Let's start with a question. How many people went out this year and found a Christmas tree? The answer is, a lot. A lot of people did, including me. I went out with my wife and we found the perfect tree. We cut it down in the Home Depot parking lot, threw it on our car, drove it home and we were all set! Let me ask another question. Do you know where the first Christmas tree was found? Not the first one this year, the first one planted, but the first one ever. Do you know where it was found? It was not at Home Depot. It was not cut down and put into someone's living room and decorated with lights. It was found in the Bible, and it is still there. Matthew, chapter one, right before the story of the angel appearing to Joseph in a dream and telling him that Mary, his betrothed, was carrying a child that was the Son of God, there is a genealogy. It is a family tree that links Jesus Christ with King David, and David with Abraham, the father of the nation of Israel.

Most people, when they come to those places in the Bible, the genealogies, they skip over them and move onto whatever it is that follows. But when reading this particular chapter in Matthew's Gospel, chapter one, do not do it, because it is important. It is the first Christmas tree. It is the first family tree that points to Christ. And what's so fascinating about this first Christmas tree is that it not only tells us where Jesus came from, His family line, but also, and more importantly, who He came for. We do not have time to go through the whole list. But if you go through the list, it does not take long to figure out that there were quite a few broken ornaments on that first Christmas tree.

Look at some of the names. Manasseh — do you know who Manasseh was? He was an evil man. Read his story, you will find out he threw his firstborn son in a fire as a sacrifice to a pagan god. And then there is Judah. There are a lot of good things about Judah; a lot of bad things as well. He was one of the worst kind of adulterers that ever lived (read Genesis 38) and he was a hypocrite. And then there is Rahab. She was a

foreigner and she made her living as a prostitute. And then you come to King David. It says, “David was the father of Solomon, by the wife of Uriah.” If you know his story, he was an adulterer and a murderer, and all for self-gain. You do not have to read too far between the lines to figure out what Matthew is telling us. What he is telling us is not only where Jesus came from, his family line, but who He came for. He came for sinners. He came for those who were left out. He came for anyone in this world who has ever tried to keep things together in their life but could not.

I don’t know if you know the name of Bill Veeck. Bill Veeck was one of the most colorful personalities in major league baseball. At various times, he owned franchises in Cleveland, St. Louis and Chicago. More than anything, he was best known for his publicity stunts: like hiring Eddie Gaedel, a little person, to serve as a pinch hitter. Like when he installed an exploding scoreboard with sound effects and fireworks. Like the time, to his credit, when he signed Larry Doby, the first African American to play in the American League. When all but three of the team members shook Doby’s hand, Bill Veeck got rid of those three. Veeck tells the story of one Christmas when he bought a rocking horse for his granddaughter. It came in a box that contained 189 parts, with instructions that guaranteed it could be put together in an hour. Veeck said, “Sure it could, if you just graduated from MIT and had a machine shop in your basement.” He said it took him almost all night to put it together. He was so frustrated, so tired on Christmas Day, that when he wrote the check to pay for the rocking horse, he tore it into 189 pieces. He then sent the check with a note that said, “If you like putting things together so much, then work on this!” He concluded, by saying, “There’s one sad note to my story. They did.”

Now, you tell me, and be honest. Have you ever had trouble putting your life together? Have you ever had times in your life when you could not get all of the pieces to fit? There is an answer, and His name is Jesus. There is an answer, and His name is Christ. I cannot recall anywhere in the Bible where Jesus told His followers, “Believe the following things and your life is going to be OK. Do the following things and everything in your life will fall into place.” People believe that, but it’s not true. Jesus never said that. What He said was, “Follow Me.” What He said was, “Learn in your life what it means to trust.” Jesus said, “I did not come into this world to call the righteous, but sinners.” He said, “It is not the well who need a physician, but those who are sick.” Maybe you are thinking, “You don’t know my life. You have no idea what I have done.” You’re right. I don’t. (You don’t know what I’ve done, either.) But Jesus does. He knows my life and yours.

Do you want to know the truth about Christmas? Most people don’t want to know the truth. The truth about Christmas is that Jesus is the only person who has ever lived who was born into this world to die. And He was born to die, because you need a Savior, and so do I. And so, He did. He died, on a tree. And not one you will find at Home Depot, and not even in that first Christmas “family tree” from Matthew chapter one. But on a cross, on a hill called Calvary, for your sins and for mine. And so, what is it that makes this day so different? Why is this day so unique? And why are people, throughout the world, celebrating an event that happened so long ago? They are celebrating for many reasons, but one reason stands out above the rest. Jesus was God. He came into this world to save you. And He died, on a tree, so that you and I might live forever with Him. Believe it. Trust in it. Build your life upon it. God loves you more than you will ever know. Merry Christmas! Amen.

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

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



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