



ADVENT DEVOTIONAL
BY THE
MEMBERS AND FRIENDS
OF

**ST. JAMES
LUTHERAN
CHURCH**

2229 Starling Street
Brunswick, Georgia 31520

(912) 265-6814

www.stjameslutheranbrunswick.org



Advent 2022

Introduction

Welcome to the second edition of the St. James Lutheran Church Advent Devotional Booklet. Our first effort to provide an in-house Advent devotional resource was in 2020 following a difficult year with closings because of the pandemic. It was a wonderful way to reconnect with one another and share a few of our thoughts.

With this second edition of a St. James Advent devotional, we have a new opportunity to hear from one another and be inspired as we approach Christmas. With the start of the 2022 Advent Season, we begin a new liturgical year. May our hearts be open to receive the gift of a Savior.

Thank you to all of the members and friends of this congregation who have contributed.

Many blessings to all as we await the coming of the Christ child.

1st Sunday of Advent, Nov. 27

Isaiah 2:1-5
Romans 13:11-14
Matthew 24:36-44

Monday, Week 1, Nov. 28

Psalm 124
Genesis 8:1-19
Romans 6:1-11

Tuesday, Week 1, Nov. 29

Psalm 124
Genesis 9:1-17
Hebrews 11:32-40

Wednesday, Week 1, Nov. 30

Psalm 124
Isaiah 54:1-10
Matthew 24:23-35

Thursday, Week 1, Dec. 1

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19
Isaiah 4:2-6
Acts 1:12-17, 21-26

Friday, Week 1, Dec. 2

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19
Isaiah 30:19-26
Acts 13:16-25

Saturday, Week 1, Dec. 3

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19
Isaiah 40:1-11
John 1:19-28

2nd Sunday of Advent, Dec. 4

Isaiah 11:1-10
Romans 15:4-13
Matthew 3:1-12

Monday, Week 2, Dec. 5

Psalm 21
Isaiah 24:1-16a
1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Tuesday, Week 2, Dec. 6

Psalm 21
Isaiah 41:14-20
Romans 15:14-21

Wednesday, Week 2, Dec. 7

Psalm 21
Genesis 15:1-18
Matthew 12:33-37

Thursday, Week 2, Dec. 8

Psalm 146:5-10
Ruth 1:6-18
2 Peter 3:1-10

Friday, Week 2, Dec. 9

Psalm 146:5-10
Ruth 4:13-17
2 Peter 3:11-18

Saturday, Week 2, Dec. 10

Psalm 146:5-10
1 Samuel 2:1-8
Luke 3:1-18

3rd Sunday of Advent, Dec. 11

Isaiah 35: 1-10
James 5:7-10
Matthew 11:2-11

Monday, Week 3, Dec. 12

Psalm 42
Isaiah 29:17-24
Acts 5:12-16

Tuesday, Week 3, Dec. 13

Psalm 42
Ezekiel 47:1-12
Jude 17-25

Wednesday, Week 3, Dec. 14

Psalm 42
Zechariah 8:1-17
Matthew 8:14-17, 28-34

Thursday, Week 3, Dec. 15

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19
2 Samuel 7:1-17
Galatians 3:23-29

Friday, Week 3, Dec. 16

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19
2 Samuel 7:18-22
Galatians 4:1-7

Saturday, Week 3, Dec. 17

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19
2 Samuel 7:23-29
John 3:31-36

4th Sunday of Advent, Dec. 18

Isaiah 7:10-16
Romans 1:1-7
Matthew 1:18-25

Monday, Week 4, Dec. 19

1 Samuel 2:1-10
Genesis 17:15-22
Galatians 4:8-20

Tuesday, Week 4, Dec. 20

1 Samuel 2:1-10
Genesis 21:1-21
Galatians 4:21-5:1

Wednesday, Week 4, Dec. 21

1 Samuel 2:1-10
Genesis 37:2-11
Mathew 1:1-17

Thursday, Week 4, Dec. 22

Luke 1:46b-55
Isaiah 33:17-22
Revelation 22:6-7, 18-20

Friday, Week 4, Dec. 23

Luke 1:46b-55
2 Samuel 7:18, 23-29
Galatians 3:6-14

Sat, Christmas Eve, Dec. 24

Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14

Sun, Christmas Day, Dec. 25

Isaiah 62:6-12
Psalm 97
Titus 3:4-7
Luke 2:1-20

November 27, 2022

First Sunday of Advent

“For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away.” **Matthew 24:36-44**

As Jesus speaks in this scripture we are told that we would not know the time or day when He will come back. Not even He knows but only the Father knows. We must stay awake and vigilant. Prepare to be ready when He comes back. But what about helping others to be prepared for when Jesus comes back? Noah in the flood follows instructions and no one else was vigilant to what was happening around them. The signs are there, but no one saw them. Just as when there is a stop sign at an intersection, but most of us ignore it and don't fully stop, we do a rolling stop and keep going. The sign is there, but unless there is someone there to bring full attention to it, we won't fully stop. Sometimes we, including clergy, need someone else to help us fully stop for us to see the signs and be aware of what is happening around us.

As the Advent season is here, the signs of God made flesh are everywhere, but yet most miss it because of work, relationships, life, or just trying to survive in a world that is unfair with racism, homophobia, and neglect of those most vulnerable in our communities. We are awake, waiting and preparing for the coming of He who has given us the most beautiful gift that anyone could ever give. His life for yours. Why would you or anyone keep it to themselves? Why would YOU not share this amazing news with everyone? If you take the time to share a good sale at a department store, why not share Jesus crucified and risen for EVERYONE to EVERYONE in the world? Don't keep this amazing news all to yourself. Go and share it as if it was the best sale you have ever seen in a department store. You might be the one person bringing attention to others that need the good news of Christ in their life.

Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come. By your merciful protection save us from the threatening dangers of our sins, and enlighten our walk in the way of your salvation, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

~ Pastor Marie Kane

November 28, 2022

Monday, 1st Week of Advent

This text from Romans is a familiar one. We have heard it read at funeral services and memorial services of those we have loved. It brings hope. It brings assurances. It also brings a mandate of a sorts.

Paul writes “We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.” What a way to begin this season of hope. Death has no dominion. Jesus died to sin, once for all. There is hope in this for us – for while Paul tells us at the beginning of this passage, questioning, almost rhetorically “How can we who died to sin go on living in it?” We do, don’t we?

If sin is those things that separate us from God – we sin. We forget to love our neighbors like ourselves, let alone to love our neighbors the way God loves us – we sin. We forget to live our lives as being blessed by God, who loves us, in spite of ourselves – we sin. We can’t even get through the 1st Commandment without putting other things before God – our own wants, our own selfishness, our own pride, you insert what “gods” you put before God here _____ - we sin. We, as we say in our confession, fall short of the glory of God a whole lot – hence the importance of grace.

The hope that is found in this lesson from Paul’s letter to the Romans is that we, sinful as we are, have been united to Christ. Maybe better words might be “bonded” “attached” “permanently grafted” – for Paul later goes on to tell us that “nothing will ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus”. Nothing.

So, we are freed – freed to live as forgiven ones; freed to hope and trust in this God that believes in us, even when we question our belief in God; freed to live as God’s children in the world – broken, sinners that we are. The hope in this text isn’t that we need to be perfect for God but rather we are called through Christ’s death and resurrection, to live our lives to God.

We journey to Bethlehem knowing that the gift that comes in the form of a baby isn’t so much about the birth of a baby but rather a rebirth of each of our lives through the gift of Immanuel – God with us. With us. For us. Thanks be to God.

Pastor Jill Henning, Assistant to the Bishop for Leadership and Administration

November 29, 2022

Tuesday, 1st Week of Advent

This week of Advent focuses our attention on the Hope offered to us by God. Today's scripture is couched within this theme. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews tells us of the prophets of the past; how they endured torments and obstacles because they were gifted the hope of the Incarnation. God would soon be among them, forgiving their sin and ushering all of humankind into the family of God. This is indeed something hopeful, but it is not what I wish to discuss with you now. Take a moment to reread verse thirty-two. Let's examine the lives of these biblical heroes: Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, and Samuel.

Gideon was a military leader, judge, and prophet whose story is recounted in Judges chapters six through eight. As a leader of the Israelites, he won a decisive victory over the Midianite army leading a troop of 300 "valiant" men. The story I wish to focus on now is Gideon's requesting proof of God's will: first, a sign from the Angel of the Lord (Judges 6:11-22), and then two signs involving a fleece (Judges 6:36-40). Why does a hero of faith require signs? Because he is human first. Don't believe that hope is a given. Sometimes it requires a sign—or three—to flourish.

Barak was the ruler and military commander of ancient Israel. Along with the prophetess Deborah, he defeated the Canaanite armies of Sisera. Barak agreed to fight the Canaanites only if Deborah would accompany him to the battlefield. The scriptures don't elaborate on Barak's reasons, but they state that the honor of victory would not go to him but to a woman. (Judges 4:9) Yet Barak's name is recorded as a hero of faith in our scripture reading today. Sometimes the path of faith means allowing others to be glorified in the present, knowing our hope lies in the future.

Samson is recorded as a hero of faith. Why? He was a man who, despite his parent's faith and obedience to the covenant, married a Philistine and took a Philistine lover, Delilah. He is also recorded as a man controlled by his anger, "I have done to them what they did to me." (Judges 15:11). Why is someone as this a hero of faith? It is not because of his repentance. It is not because of his obedience—for it is recorded that he never cursed or drank wine following his Nazarite vow. It is because of his sacrifice, "Let me die with the Philistines...[t]hus he killed many more when he died than while he lived."

Sometimes we need to sacrifice our hopes and dreams for the benefit of others—that hope of sacrifice results in our eternal crediting.

Jephthah led the Israelites against Ammon and, in exchange for defeating the Ammonites, made a vow to sacrifice whatever would come out of the door of his house first. When his daughter came out of the house, he immediately regretted the vow that bound him to sacrifice his daughter to God. Jephthah carried out his vow. Sometimes, amid great blessings, we lose sight of what's truly important. We also become obsessed with how we appear to others. Jephthah could have had the High Priest, Phinehas, annul his vow. However, doing so would have exposed him to public shame. Phinehas is recorded as saying, "...shall I debase myself and go to Jephthah, who is a boor?" So why is Jephthah's faith credited in our scripture reading? Because he hoped he would see his daughter again, he trusted God would permit him to see her despite his impulsiveness and heinous actions. In our lives, all of us can recount times we did or said something deeply shameful—perhaps evil. The red heat of shame burns deeply whenever we recount these deeds. Our scripture shows that even the most dreadful acts born from impetuous actions can be credited to our Hope.

Finally, David and Samuel. Each of these figures is a paragon. David would become the father of the Word Incarnate. Samuel is the first of the great prophets of scripture, credited with recognizing and guiding Israel's first two kings—Saul and David. Yet each of them is human. David would take multiple wives and concubines and yet murder to acquire the wife of his most loyal soldier. Despite being a prophet, a kingmaker, and a seer, Samuel failed as a parent. His sons would prove unworthy of their appointments, and the Israelites would reject them. Both are recorded in our scripture because of the hope they shared: their actions would prepare the foundations for those following in their footsteps.

Each of these figures is flawed. Yet God credited their hope within the divine economy. With so great a cloud of witnesses, of whom or what should we fear? Our God is able and willing to commune with us despite our imperfections. All that is required is hope that what we do will be credited for Good by the One we place our trust in.

Johnathen Evans

November 30, 2022

Wednesday, 1st Week of Advent

Isaiah 54:1-10

Full disclosure: I am not a woman, and I am certainly not a woman living in the Old Testament era, so perhaps I have no business writing a devotion whose text begins, “Sing, O barren one who did not bear; burst into song and shout, you who have not been in labor! (Isaiah 54:1)” I cannot truly imagine what it feels like to have my entire identity riding on whether or not I could give birth to a child, and I certainly know nothing of a biblical woman’s fear of being penniless in her old age if she does not have a son to provide for her. But I do know something about not being able to have kids when you want to. My wife and I waited a while before trying for children, and when we did, we struggled to get pregnant. My wife went through a series of painful fertility shots that didn’t work. We had given up completely. The adoption papers were on the kitchen table waiting to be filled out when the nurse from the fertility clinic called. My wife did not believe her when she told her that we were pregnant. I know a little of the hope and joy (the names of our kids!) of which the author speaks.

This reading comes from what biblical scholars call Second Isaiah, which encompasses chapters 40-55. We believe that these chapters were written during the two generations when God’s people were held as slaves in Babylon (586-516, BCE). It was a time when people of faith lost their homes, their traditions, and nearly their identity. Their captivity in a foreign land went on so long that many did not believe that things would ever be good again.

Into this dismal circumstance, the prophet Isaiah makes the stunning announcement, “the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called....I will have compassion on you (Isaiah 54:5, 8).” As bad as things look now, says God, there is hope. I still love you. I will save you.

Nice words, but what do they have to do with us and preparing for Christmas? For some of us, the season of Christmas, itself, is the hope. We love the lights, the cookies, and the chance to be with family, but this is not everyone’s Christmas. For some, all the cultural hoopla just underscores what they don’t have—money for presents, a healthy family, or nearby friends with whom to share a glass of Christmas cheer. Many in our culture feel like they are stuck in Babylon this time of year.

This is when passages like Isaiah 54:1-10 are needed most. The hope for our lives is not found in the decorations or the fruit cake but in the God that we can trust and in another baby coming, not into a picturesque life, but to the manger. On our worst days, the prophet Isaiah promises you and me that our story is not over. God—Emanuel—is with us, and New Life is just around the corner.

God Loves You and So Do I!

~ *The Rev. Dr. Devin Strong*
Pastor, Spirit of Peace Lutheran Church,
Richmond Hill, GA

December 1, 2022

Thursday, 1st Week of Advent

Acts 1:12-17, 21-26 In this reading from Acts, previous verses describe that the time was just after Jesus' resurrection when He had shown himself to his disciples and given them many convincing proofs that he was alive. They were on the Mt. of Olives with him for 40 days. Jesus also revealed to them that they needed to stay in Jerusalem and that in the coming days they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit. He was then taken up into heaven in a cloud before their eyes. He fully prepared them for continuing his ministry and spreading the Good News.

The group returned to Jerusalem and gathered in an upstairs room to pray, along with other believers (120) who joined them. Peter addressed the crowd, reminding them of their need to replace Judas as an Apostle. He told them it was necessary to choose one who had served steadfastly in their ministry to take a place of leadership and join them as a witness to Christ's resurrection. The group proposed two—Barsabbas and Matthias. Then they prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen" Then they cast lots, the lots fell to Matthias and he was added to the 11 Apostles. The Apostles trusted that the Holy Spirit would choose the right man. It is the last time that casting lots occurred in the New Testament.

The Apostles were moving forward...in today's terms, they were pressing the *RESET* button. In many ways, the Advent season is also a time of *RESET* for us. In the Lutheran Church, the first Sunday of Advent is the first day of the liturgical church year. It's the perfect time for us individually and as a congregation to review and reflect on our ministries, spiritual lives, and opportunities for growth. A great time to give thanks, make plans, review commitments, and consider new opportunities...always with prayer and careful discernment. Let us all enjoy this time for *RESET* and trusting in the truth and promise of God's ultimate *RESET*—the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Respectfully submitted,

Vicki Coolidge

December 2, 2022

Friday, 1st Week of Advent

“From out of David’s descendants God produced a Savior for Israel, Jesus, exactly as he promised” (Acts 13:23, The Message)

In the book of Acts, we read about the establishment of the early church as it spreads to areas far from Jerusalem and to people beyond the Jews to Gentiles, to non-believers. In today’s reading, we learn about Paul’s very first missionary journey, which occurred around A.D. 46 – 49 and is recounted in chapters 13 through 15.

If I were a reporter given the assignment to cover Paul’s first missionary journey, my editor would expect me to give the reader the who, what, where, and when of the story in my first sentence. So I might have started my story on the day after the Sabbath in this way:

Barnabas and Saul, now called Paul, arrived in Antioch just recently and yesterday offered words of encouragement to those at the Jewish meeting place.

The rest of my article would go on to answer how and why. So I would cover Paul’s brief history of God’s fulfillment of His promises to the Israelites, beginning with their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land and culminating in the promise fulfilled in Jesus. That history would be important to the recent converts and the god-fearing non-believers in Paul’s audience and in mine. That history reveals God’s unfailing grace. He has always fulfilled His promises and will continue to do so. In that, we can rest assured.

Rest. Assurance. As we come to the end of the first week of Advent in 2022, I know I need to hear anew Paul’s life-saving, life-shattering message of hope and encouragement. We have a God who always fulfills promises.

Dear Heavenly Father, your son has saved us. Open our hearts to experience the joy of His birth and the peace from His resurrection. Amen.

As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.

~ Sharon Bartkovich

December 3, 2022

Saturday, 1st Week of Advent

John 1:19-28 CEV

John the Baptist tells about Jesus

19-20 The religious authorities in Jerusalem sent priests and temple helpers to ask John who he was. He told them plainly, "I am not the Messiah."

21 Then when they asked him if he were Elijah, he said, "No, I am not!" And when they asked if he were the Prophet,[a] he also said "No!"

22 Finally, they said, "Who are you then? We have to give an answer to the ones who sent us. Tell us who you are!"

23 John answered in the words of the prophet Isaiah, "I am only someone shouting in the desert, 'Get the road ready for the Lord!' "

24 Some Pharisees had also been sent to John. 25 They asked him, "Why are you baptizing people, if you are not the Messiah or Elijah or the Prophet?"

26 John told them, "I use water to baptize people. But here with you is someone you don't know. 27 Even though I came first, I am not good enough to untie his sandals."

28 John said this as he was baptizing east of the Jordan River in Bethany. When the religious leaders say to John "Tell us who you are?!" John responds, "I am only someone shouting in the desert, 'Get the road ready for the Lord!'"

In getting the road ready during busy a Christmas season, we tend to think about things we have to check off on our list of things to do to prepare for Christmas Day. Such as...

Cookies made? Check! Presents bought and wrapped? Check! Christmas tree up? Check! And so on.

The question of "Tell us who you are?!" helps me, and I hope you as well, stay on track to what the true meaning of Christmas is. The meaning of Christmas should point us to not focus on the checklist but rather on waiting, watching, and wondering about how we can truly get the road ready for the Lord. That's the heart of the matter.

With all that has happened the past few years with a global pandemic, gun violence, political divisiveness, etc. More than ever, we need to be getting the road ready for the Lord. How do we do that? Through our actions by focusing on relationships. Unity. Reconciling. And learning to agree to disagree all in the name of getting the road ready for the Lord. The holiday season is a great reason for us to reach out to those around us and extend a hand, show them the grace and love that the baby Jesus brought and still brings into our world. Will you join me? Amen.

~ Pr. Lori Fuller

December 4, 2022

Second Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 11:1-10

When I first started reading this scripture, I thought of Ancestry.com. However, the Gospel of Matthew falls in that category not Isaiah.

Isaiah, the prophet is prophesying the coming of the Savior, Jesus.

. Jesse was the father of David, Israel's greatest king. And Jesus is descended from the line of David. He is the branch God promised that would grow from Jesse's family tree and would bear fruit.

Isaiah, the prophet, is predicting more what this “shoot from the stump of Jesse” (Jesus) will bring. It will bring life emerging from death, forgiveness, hope and peace to the world.

We live in a time now where we do not see where the “wolf will live with the lamb” or “the leopard lie down with the goat.” But we have witnessed where a little child shall lead them.

Jesus, the little child that shall lead us, born in Bethlehem and crucified on the cross for our sins. His ministry on earth was powerful, filled with forgiveness, ministry to the weak and poor. His death on the cross, our salvation.

His birth gives us hope.

In a world full of bad news God is always offering us the good news of Jesus. We long for a promised destiny where peace, justice and grace have the final word.

Just remember John 3:16. “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son that who so ever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life.” The greatest gift of all is everlasting life.

~ Sonja Kinard

December 5, 2022

Monday, 2nd Week of Advent

Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing) you should do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. 1 Thessalonians 4:1-2 NRSV

The Season of Advent, a time of waiting and preparation for celebrating the birth of Jesus, brings to mind some questions. What do we do in the meantime? What do we do with this time – during this time? What is the goal?

Paul, in this part of his letter to the Church at Thessalonica, is encouraging them (and us) to “WALK A DISTINCTIVE LIFE – LIVE A LIFE PLEASING TO GOD.” Further on, Paul gives us to understand that God wants you to live a pure life, giving dignity to your body and not abusing it. “Don’t run roughshod over the concerns of your brothers and sisters. Their concerns are God’s concerns and God will take care of them.” [The Message, E. Peterson]

We are to love one another within our community of faith and extend the limits of that love to all. Live quietly; do not be selfish or shortsighted. Christians are called to be different from the larger society, but our calling is not to isolate ourselves but to live as children of God, earning the respect of others.

May we use this season to set aside time to listen more closely to the words of Jesus and to incorporate the example of his life into our daily lives.

Gracious God, thank you for all who will journey through Advent with us. Give us eyes to see, words to speak and hearts to love those you call to join us. Amen.

~ Pastor Kay Yates

December 6, 2022

Tuesday, 2nd Week of Advent

Paul the Minister to the Gentiles:

¹⁴ I myself feel confident about you, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and complete to instruct one another. ¹⁵ Nevertheless, on some points I have written to you rather boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God ¹⁶ to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

¹⁷ Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. ¹⁸ I will not be so bold as to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, ¹⁹ by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit, ^[a] so that from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ. ²⁰ Thus I make it my ambition to proclaim the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, so that I do not build on someone else's foundation, ²¹ but as it is written, "Those who have never been told of him shall see, and those who have never heard of him shall understand."

Now is the time for me to move on... In the first part of this reading, Paul expresses his confidence that the church in Rome is filled with believers who were able to instruct, confront and counsel each other. That the congregation was able to do the work of ministry on their own. Paul then mentions in the second part that as much as he would like to stay, he believes it is time for him to go and preach the gospel to others. To people who have not heard of the Good News.

Paul aimed to preach the Gospel where Christ has not been named. How many of us have that same confidence about God's call on our lives?

Like many Lutherans, I am comfortable with the first part of this reading. I do my best to care for our church members, study the bible, and quietly do outreach to our local and global communities. At St James, our unofficial motto is, "We are a church with a big heart and a bright future" or another way of saying it is, "They will know we are Christians by our love. I do admit that I feel more comfortable sharing God's love by being of service to others than I do by sharing God's word directly with others.

There is a quote that has been attributed to St Francis of Assisi- that describes my spiritual mission: **"Preach the gospel at all times, and if necessary, use words."**

Upon further research into this quote, I was able to confirm that St. Francis himself was indeed insistent on the need for a life of love and caring for the poor. I also discovered that he was also a fervent preacher, often preaching the gospel up to five times a day. St Francis believed that the gospel should also be proclaimed verbally with words – along with living it out with our actions.

St Paul and St Francis believed that as a church, we are responsible for caring for each other, and as we mature, as individuals and as a church, we are then entrusted with the message that is to be shared with others.

I think now is time for me get out of my comfort zone, to grow in my commitment as an Evangelical Lutheran and to start verbally share the Good News with others. Would you like to join me?

~ Donna Opalinski

December 7, 2022

Wednesday, 2nd Week of Advent

Matthew 12:33-37

Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers! How can you speak good things, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure. I tell you, on the Day of Judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.

The verse immediately preceding today's reading addresses the Pharisees who had hardened their hearts as they had blasphemed against the Holy Spirit, an unpardonable sin. Following that verse, Matthew admonishes his followers to examine what is in their hearts and to understand how their words and actions reflect that truth. What we say does truly reveal what is in our heart.

When I first read this passage, it struck me as rather straight forward, a do or die kind of approach to living out our Christian life. If your heart is good (embracing God's love and mercy), then good and true words will flow freely. If your heart is bad (rejecting God's love and mercy), then harmful and bad speech will come forth. Sounds simplistic, right? But how does a person's heart become good, or conversely, bad? What influences, choices, relationships shape an individual's most inner being, for this inner being is where the true essence of the heart lies?

The good heart/bad heart dilemma directly relates to the presence or absence of the Holy Spirit's presence in our life. We either allow the Holy Spirit entrance by asking and receiving, or we deny the Holy Spirit through rejecting that presence. The Holy Spirit fills our hearts with goodness and mercy and from that overflow, good words and actions spill forth. Rejection of the Holy Spirit results in a hard heart with words that bring pain and cause harm.

Holy Spirit, we pray that you continually refresh our inner being so our hearts may be full of Christian love and mercy and our words and actions be a true reflection of that love. In Jesus's name we pray, Amen.

~ Robin Olsen

December 8, 2022

Thursday, 2nd Week of Advent

Patience

The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.

2 Peter 3:9

For humans, patience is in short supply. At Christmas time little kids find it hard to wait patiently for Christmas to come so they can open their presents. For adults, we want everything right now. Traffic lights drive us nuts and slow people in front of us in the checkout line are a pain. There is no waiting for others to change their ways to match our views. We have no patience with promises given to us when we see no immediate results.

However, that is not the way of the Lord. Isaiah 55:8 tells us, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord.” His love is above all. God wants to give us every chance to repent and try to get it right. His patience surpasses our comprehension. Knowing that we are incapable of living perfectly, God sent his Son to save us. Christ’s birth and crucifixion are marks of the way of the Lord. In his time, not our time, Christ will come again.

Heavenly Father, thank you for your patience with us. Please send your Holy Spirit to guide us today. Let Christ’s love flow into us, calm our impatience with others, and give us peace. Amen.

~ Mark Rueber

December 9, 2022

Friday, 2nd Week of Advent

Praise the Lord – A Child is Born

Then the women said to Naomi, “He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law (Ruth) who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons has borne him.” They named him Obed; he was the father of Jesse, the father of David. *Ruth 4: 14, 15, & 17*

What a joy a birth can be! New life. A new hope. A new beginning in the world. The women around Naomi and Ruth were clearly happy at Obed’s birth. They proclaimed Obed would uplift Naomi’s spirit and sustain her. God works in many ways to answer prayers. The birth of a child is how God answered Naomi’s prayers. Stories like Ruth’s are reflected in today’s Psalm passage. “Happy is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God...who gives food to the hungry. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous.” (Psalm 146: 5, 7 & 8)

Ruth giving birth to Obed is not a simple story. It was only because of Ruth’s love of Naomi, and staying with Naomi through many trying times, that Ruth met Boaz and conceived Obed. Again, the story is seen in the Psalm. “The LORD watches over the sojourners, he upholds the widow and the fatherless.” (v. 9)

But the whole story is not over yet. Interestingly, the same words that the women spoke about Obed’s care of Naomi can be applied to Christ’s gift to mankind. Did these women have some intuition that Obed’s descendant, Christ, God in the flesh, would restore eternal life to all believers and nourish us with His body and blood? Thank you God for the birth of Christ! Which brings me back to the Psalm. “The LORD will reign forever, thy God, O Zion, to all generations. Praise the LORD!” (v. 10)

Prayer concern: Newborn babies and their parents living in refugee camps.

~ Mark Rueber

December 10, 2022

Saturday, 2nd Week of Advent

In this chapter, Luke describes with vivid detail and intentional language, lacking in subtleties, and plain for all to read. We were to prepare. Get ready. Jesus is coming and we must prepare. John the Baptist is crying out to the people, *'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'* This was not a plea to ensure that the logistics of his arrival be arranged. Christ was coming whether we were ready or not. He would come precisely as the Prophets foretold.

When a king would come to view the lands of his kingdom, he would send word by way of his messengers that he was coming and that the roads were to be prepared for his arrival. John is portrayed to be that messenger. To warn of the impending judgement for all; and that all were to be subject to this judgement- not just the Gentiles, but the Jew as well. John urged all to prepare their hearts and their life with a warning that every tree not bearing good fruit would be cut down.

We were to examine ourselves and hear the Gospel of the Christ. John the Baptist urged all to repentance first, then a command to those who had plenty to ensure that those who did not have clothing and food had enough. John commanded the tax collectors and soldiers to collect what was prescribed and no more and not to extort money from anyone and to be satisfied with their wages. John later says that someone more powerful than he is coming and that He would baptize us with the Spirit and fire.

So today, look inward in this season of Advent. Make the necessary repairs in your heart. Then look outward at your community. Look at the need in your community and fill that need. Donate food to the hungry and put clothes on those who have none. Care for the people around you. Be the one that brings the Gospel to those who have never heard the Gospel. Go to those in need and show them Jesus, by what we do and how we love. Then, let the Holy Spirit work in that moment.

Heavenly Father, let us prepare our hearts this Advent season. Let our hearts and minds be corrected by the Gospel and may the Spirit work in us. We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

~ Luke Orser-Schwalm

December 11, 2022

Third Sunday of Advent

An Advent Puzzle

“Go and tell John what you hear and see...”

– Matthew 11:4

My mother-in-law is one of those people who always keeps a puzzle out on her living room table. When people come to visit, they are encouraged to pick up a piece or two and try to place them in their right places. It becomes a fun social event as we stand around trying to match shapes with patches of color and texture, watching as parts of a larger picture slowly take form. For some pieces, it's easy to see where they fit in. Others are...well...puzzling.

John the Baptist was puzzled by the way events were turning out. After faithfully executing his mission to baptize and proclaim the coming kingdom of God, he had wound up in prison. Now he expected God would act. Surely the ax was about to fall, the fire about to burn. But as the days passed in his prison cell, nothing changed. Wasn't Jesus going to get the ball rolling and bring in the kingdom? Where was his fire and his winnowing fork? It was all very puzzling.

Advent can be a puzzling time. We may be expecting a holy time of spiritual preparation and prayerful contemplation but find ourselves surrounded by noise and commercialism. We may seek quality time with family and church friends, but find a world caught up in holiday hustle and bustle. We may look up at the sky in search of a star to guide us, but instead feel empty and alone.

Maybe Jesus can help put the pieces together – for John and for us. He turns our attention towards the lights in the darkness. Here and there, lives are changed. Now and then, healing happens. In an instant, hope appears and brings a heart to life. And at every point of transformation, Jesus was there.

Pieces fitting together, flashes of peace, healing, and justice filtering in through the darkness, fostering human wholeness, permeating reality with the presence of God. The picture may not be clear yet, but we have reason to believe that the hopes and fears of all our years will meet together in a humble place with a tiny child who holds the solution to the puzzle.

How can your holiday celebrations reflect the healing and justice of God?

- Scott Lindner, Wesley Chapel, Florida

December 12, 2022

Monday, 3rd Week of Advent

The scripture readings for today have common themes, faith and hope in times of need and despair. The people saw that the signs and wonders done among them through Peter and the apostles, had healed the sick and those tormented by unclean spirits. The people had faith and hope that if they brought their sick to Solomon's Portico and Peter's shadow fell over them as he passed by, that some of them would be healed. All that were brought by the people were cured.

Psalm 42 was written at a time when the writer was in deep desolation and sadness. He was being oppressed by his enemies. In faith, he poured out to the Lord that he was dying to come into his presence and rejoice with His people. He asks God to renew his strength and hope through times of worship. I will put my hope in God and will praise Him again.

In the third scripture reading, Isaiah the prophet gives the people messages from God, warning that he would pour out His wrath upon those who persistently flout his laws. Judgement and exile would come to Israel and Judah, but Isaiah tells of God's promise of restoration and ultimately a new creation without sin, giving the people hope for the future.

The Advent message in the scripture readings is that God never leaves the faithful without hope for the future, for those who have faith in His promises. When Walt was told that they had found spots on his lungs and pancreas, we immediately thought the worst possible diagnosis, cancer. In "awfulizing" the outcome, we forgot that we were children of God, that He sent His son to redeem us from our sins. We remembered that no matter what the diagnosis was, God would bring us through it. There were many prayers warriors on his behalf and strong supportive family and friends that sustained us. Isn't it a blessing to know that God keeps His promises?

~ Jan Bevan

December 13, 2022

Tuesday, 3rd Week of Advent

The Epistle of Jude is one of the shortest scriptures, consisting of only one chapter and twenty-five verses. Its origins were attributed originally to the brother of James, thus, establishing a familial connection between the author and Jesus. However, recent scholarship has brought this tradition into doubt. Regardless of its authorship, the text is earnest in its scope: we are to “contend for the faith” against “certain intruders [who] have stolen in among [us].” How do we discern false teachings from true? What tools are available to ensure we are not led astray by these “worldly people?” More pressing, if we believe we have fallen victim to these false teachings, how can we course-correct?

First, *Prima Scriptura*. We should always check what is said with what is written in scripture. Our kindred at Berea set an excellent example: “...and they welcomed the word most enthusiastically; every day they studied the scriptures to check whether these things were true.” (Acts 17:11; The Revised New Jerusalem Bible) Without going into too much depth, scripture will supply the answer to about 85% of your questions. What tools are available to us for the remaining fifteen percent?

Examine what is said within the greater context of our Tradition. What did Martin Luther say about the subject? What does the Catechism say about it? Of course, there are some topics where scripture and Tradition are mute. In those cases, it is always best to consult the writings of the saints. What did Saint Augustine say regarding the Trinity? How did Saint Athanasius support the idea of the Incarnation? Leverage internet tools, e.g., Google, to dig deeper into the writings of those who have gone before us into the Heavenly Veil. Other sources available to us are the writings of your Synod. Frequently, these writings translate past archaic texts into understandable instructions for modern times.

Finally, what if we discover we have fallen victim to false teachings? How do we course-correct? The first step is admitting the truth and renouncing the lie. You can do this any number of ways, but I have found the most effective method is to use physical proxies, like a piece of paper divided into two columns: Truth and lie. Next, write out each lie and the Truth(s) that prove the lie is a lie. Then, speak the Truth(s) out loud. Finally, tear off the lie(s) and dispose of them. This and similar acts will cement the Truth in your being and provide a physical release from the lies.

Once you have removed the lies from your life, the next part is difficult: you must remove yourself from those persons, places, and things that reinforce the lies. This part is the most difficult because the temptation will always be to try and “save” the people you care about. This is admirable but ill-advised currently. First, these revelations have occurred to you and are specific to your circumstances. It is not guaranteed that other people are at the same place in their faith journey. Second, no one likes being told they have been deceived. It creates a defensive posture in the recipient, likely resulting in their continued avoidance of the Truth. Remember, God is in control. God will ensure that God’s sheep hear God’s voice.

In closing, use the scriptures and the works of Tradition to reinforce your newfound Truth. Continue to grow in faith. As the Epistle says, “...build yourselves up on your most holy faith...keep yourselves in the love of God...have mercy on some who are wavering; save others by snatching them out of the fire...” To God be all glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen. Johnathen Evans

December 14, 2022

Wednesday, 3rd Week of Advent

Psalm 42:1-2a

*As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.*

This visual image of a deer standing in a field, nose high, sniffing the air for a sign of running water to refresh itself is one that gives me great hope in our God who is not far off. The psalmist bemoans the fact that the enemies gather round and taunt him – “Where is your God,” they say. The Psalmist can take comfort in the sure knowledge that God is as close as his breath but not visible to those who do not know what to look for.

Our God is not an idol of bronze or gold, a pole with a human head or anything else that can be touched and bowed down to. Our God is the Creator of all we can see when we look out over the landscape, like the deer looking for water. Our God is close as our breath that steams in the cool morning air and the mountain that looms over the landscape in power and majesty. Our God is nearby in our distress, and we can feel the comfort of her wings when we need shelter. Yet, how do we describe these things when others ask?

Our God is the living water that flows from the hearts of believers. Our God is the Baptismal water that reminds us of new life and new seasons and eternal life with God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God, and I know that I will find God when I am in need or in joy, God is in my heart and surrounds my day with love and grace and strength.

*God of thirsty deer and people, we give thanks for your constant, faithful presence in our lives. Even when our enemies mock us, we know you are present, always, and forever. We await your coming with joy and anticipation!
Amen.*

~ Pastor Patti Axel – Outgoing DEM and Assistant to the Bishop

December 15, 2022

Thursday, 3rd Week of Advent

Galatians 3:23-29

²³ Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. ²⁴ Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷ As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring,^[a] heirs according to the promise.

In his message Paul is reminding us that society creates divisions by assigning people into distinct categories and that we are no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, or male and female, but we are all one with God because Christ died for all of us so that we could all share in God's promises.

Do you see similarities with the problems we face today? It seems individuals, organizations, groups and even religious organizations forget Paul's message. We divide ourselves by ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation, ideology, political affiliations, and any number of factors that do not align with what Jesus Christ gave us in his death on the cross. God gave his promise to all peoples regardless of the divisions that we or society have imposed. God would have us share equally in his promise and throw out our differences to truly live in our faith.

Dear Lord, we thank you for bringing Jesus into our lives. Help us to open our hearts to all regardless of their ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation, ideology, or political affiliations. Help us to recognize our own prejudices and understand that our differences do not divide us because we all inherit God's promises and are God's children. Amen.

Barbara & David Brunjes

December 16, 2022

Friday, 3rd Week of Advent

You are no longer slaves. You are God's children, and you will be given what he has promised.

Galatians 4:7

God doesn't send us alone to do his work as a slave assigned to a task. Instead God goes with us on our journey through life. God holds us close when we need to be held. He holds us back when we need to pause. He guides us when we are lost. He grows and nourishes us through life experiences.

I was kayaking in the Okefenokee Swamp, paddling on the sunny side of the canal. Three other kayakers were heading the opposite direction, so I moved closer to the grassy edges to give them space. Suddenly a large alligator lunged into the water just a few feet ahead of me. I had forward momentum, but in spite of the surprise, was able to back paddle to keep from running into it. I watched as in pause mode, his tail slowly slid into the water and he swam away. It was an amazing experience to watch God's creation safely and to know God was present with me.

God's promise is to be present with each of us on our journey through this life and beyond. In each moment, each step, each paddle stroke, or in rest, God is faithful, God is present, and God is always good.

~ Susan Ashburn

December 17, 2022

Saturday, 3rd Week of Advent

John 3:31 – 36

³¹ The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all. ³² He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony. ³³ Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified this, that God is true. ³⁴ He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. ³⁵ The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands. ³⁶ Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath.

Reading this reminds one of Jesus' conversations and teachings to the Pharisee Nicodemus. Earlier, in the book of John, Jesus says (3:11-13): "Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man." John is reminding us that Jesus Christ is above everything earthly. That his words are the words we should live by.

This moves us to the second point of the verse. Jesus has a heavenly message. (3: 32 – 34): "What He has seen and heard, of that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony. He who has received His testimony has set his seal to this, that God is true. For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God; for He gives the Spirit without measure." Jesus is the ultimate eyewitness. He experienced it all. He gives us the testimony of faith and our reason to believe in God.

Next, we see in this verse that Jesus has been given heavenly authority. (3:35) "The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands." This is repeated several times in the book of Matthew. An amazing thing indeed. Through the gospel, we ask Jesus to give people vision to see the truth and find their way.

Lastly, let us profess our faith in trusting in Jesus' authority and message. Our belief in the Son leads to eternal life. (14:6): "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." The final line of the verse above reminds us that our belief in Christ's authority and living his testimony shall lead to eternal life. Those who choose to disobey this risk God's wrath.

~ Sam Morgan

December 18, 2022

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 7:14

“Therefore the LORD himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.”

How long is time to the Lord? Isaiah is believed to have lived 200-500 BCE. This prophecy is about the birth of Jesus. His birth is at least 200 years later than the time when these words were spoken. People were waiting for their king for a very long time. The Lord has been waiting for thousands of years for his people to act as he would like. How long will it be before he gives up and ends the world as we know it? Continue to thank the Lord for each hour of our time on earth and for the miraculous birth of Jesus so that we will have life in Christ.

Heavenly Father, thank you for sending our Savior, Jesus, in your time and let us live our lives in service to you. Amen.

~ Preston Kirkendall

December 19, 2022

Monday, 4th Week of Advent

Galatians 4:8-20 In Paul's letter to the Galatians, we see that he was clearly frustrated and disappointed in the believers in Galatia. While the Galatians well knew the Gospel, Paul learned that they were falling back into old patterns and listening to false truths. They were returning to their old ways...following the old Jewish laws and putting their faith in them rather than following Christ's teachings. It seemed to Paul that they had forgotten that they were baptized in Christ, clothed in Christ, and heirs to God's kingdom.

In our own faith journeys, aren't we often just like them? We forget that we cannot please God, earn salvation, or have a blessed life by our human efforts. We get distracted and drawn into the hectic and competitive ways of the secular world...it's an easy path. We often put our faith and trust into money, worldly success, good deeds, admiration of friends, and our own desires. Our own efforts, even well intentioned, can distract us from Christ and his Gospel.

During Advent, as we await the celebration of the birth of God's son, it is a time for self-examination and preparation. We can use this time to get back on the right path in our faith journey, remembering that through Christ Jesus, we are saved by GRACE and GRACE ALONE. Embrace and trust in the hope, faith and joy given to us by the Holy Spirit. Remember that God put the Spirit of his Son in our hearts...we are baptized and clothed in Christ and heirs to His Kingdom!

Respectfully submitted,

~ Vicki Coolidge

December 20, 2022

Tuesday, 4th Week of Advent

My heart rejoices in the Lord. 1 Samuel 2:1

The scripture readings today speak of great joy, thankfulness, and praise for the Lord. Both Sarah (in the Genesis reading) and Hannah (in the reading from Samuel) were childless for a long time. They prayed and waited. But it didn't seem like such a blessing would come. We know Sarah was over 90 when her son was born. She had given up hope as she grew older and God's promise had not come to pass. Hannah kept returning to the temple to pray and finally received good news from Eli the priest that she had found favor with the Lord. And yes, she is blessed with a son, Samuel. Both these women remind us of Mary, the mother of our Lord. She, too, finds favor with the Lord and rejoices with the Magnificat (Mary's wonderful song of praise to the Lord found in Luke). Today's words of praise from Hannah are so similar to Mary's that they are sometimes referred to as the Magnificat of the Old Testament. Sarah praises God for Isaac. Hannah freely gives her son Samuel into the Lord's service and Mary knows in her heart what will be required of Jesus. But they rejoice in the Lord and praise him above all others.

During this time of Advent, we, too, are waiting. We have heard the promise of a Messiah who is coming. Our hearts may be weary. Our lives may experience trials and sorrow. Our strength may be failing. But we have been given a Messiah who makes all things new and restores us as children of God. This Advent, may we experience the same joy these women felt and never cease rejoicing in the Lord.

When we receive news of great joy, may we respond as Hannah and Mary with humility and overflowing joy. Let us be ever thankful for the wonderful gift of a Savior born among us. Amen.

~ Janice Kirkendall

December 21, 2022

Wednesday, 4th Week of Advent

Genealogies are bridges to our past that anchor us in the present. Much can be discerned in one's family tree. Each new branch represents an untold story: intrigue, pedigree, scandal, shame, pride, and hope. The emotions conjured by such simple words are many. The Gospel writer of Matthew knows this fact. Equally important, they are aware of how their audience will react to the claim contained in this genealogy. The writer wants to shock their readers: the Messiah has come! The shoot of David, long promised by the Prophets, has appeared.

Pope Benedict XVI writes, "the genealogy [of Matthew] serves as a kind of heading to the entire Gospel."¹ It is constructed in three sets of fourteen generations. First, from Abraham to David. Next, from Solomon to the Babylonian captivity. Finally, the promise is fulfilled in Jesus. Intriguingly, Matthew also employs numerical symbolism: the Hebrew letters of David's name add up to fourteen. In short, the "path from Abraham to Jesus bears the clear imprint of David, his name [sic] and his promise."²

Matthew's genealogy traces the male lineage of Jesus; however, four women are mentioned by name: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah. Some have claimed these figures were considered "sinners" and, thus, indicate Jesus' mission to take upon himself the sins of the world: to justify sinners. However, this is not the criterion for why they were included, mainly because it does not apply to all four women. What is more important is that none of these women were Jewish. Jesus' mission to Jews *and* Gentiles is written in his blood.

Another observation: Matthew's genealogy ends with another woman, Mary. Throughout the entire genealogy, we find the formula: "X was the father of Y...." But, in Jesus' case, there is no reference to a father. Instead, we read: "Jacob [was] the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ" (1:16). Following this, we find in the account of Jesus' birth that Joseph was not Jesus' father and he wanted to dismiss Mary on account of her supposed adultery. However, Joseph receives a visitation telling him: "That which is conceived in Mary is of the Holy Spirit" (1:20). The genealogy of Jesus serves to bridge his origins to the times of the Gospel writer, to anchor Jesus within the prophetic legacy of David, both legally and biologically. Yet Jesus comes from elsewhere, "from above" —from God. Jesus' origin can be identified and, nevertheless, is mysterious. Only God is truly his "father."

In closing, the Gospel writer is trying to convey the importance of Jesus prophetically and biologically. One of the tenants of Christianity is that Jesus is both "fully God" and "fully human."³ The Gospel writer emphasizes both points by tracing Jesus' origins through David by way of Mary. You cannot waiver from this tenant. Otherwise, Jesus becomes less than Who He is: the Son of Man and Son of God.

~ Johnathen Evans

¹ Pope Benedict XVI. *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives*. The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

² *Ibid.*

³ See the Athanasian Creed. "He is God from the essence of the Father, begotten before time; and he is human from the essence of his mother, born in time; completely God, completely human...."

December 22, 2022

Thursday, 4th Week of Advent

The Revelation of John

As a former Southern Baptist, a graduate of Baylor University and The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, who served on staff of Southern Baptist Churches for nine years, I was surprised to see the Book of Revelation appear in an Advent reading. I was accustomed to the use of passages from Revelation at a Revival, Big Meetin' time to scare sinners to repent, join the church, be baptized, and be saved. So, why Revelation at Advent? This is supposed to be time to celebrate the coming of birth of Jesus, not time to be frightened.

A revelation is defined as a "surprising and previously unknown fact, especially one that is made known in a dramatic way". You can certainly say this fits the Revelation of John. He depicts God as the most powerful being of all who is in charge of everything, not a kindly old gent with silver hair and beard. John prophesied coming trials and tribulations, pestilence and war and the fact that Jesus is coming soon. War and disease are always happening and we seem not to care unless they are knocking at the door.

Have you experienced trials and tribulations? I have. And you have too. I had prostate cancer 17 years ago. I am now 87 and the cancer recently returned. The docs tell me that's a long time to be in remission and they marvel. But this time the progress of the cancer can only be suppressed. Am I being punished? What should I do other than take the offered treatment?

Where is Jesus in all of this? The Apostles Creed reminds us to

Believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord.

He was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell. On the third day he rose again and is seated at the right hand of the Father. **He will come again** to judge the living and the dead.

Jesus will never forsake us. He frees us to love and be loved.

Amen. Come Lord Jesus.

~ James M. Hansen
Holy Cross Lutheran Church
Athens, GA

December 23, 2022

Friday, 4th Week of Advent

Luke 1:46b-55

“My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.”

Mary visits Elizabeth and can't help but to express her joy and gratefulness for what God has done for her. Mary, a humble servant, has been given such a beautiful gift of carrying the Savior in her womb. A gift that it is not only given to Mary, but to all of us. God is entering the world through Mary's womb, to be birthed as a child, to understand humanity, and be the ultimate sign of love, grace, mercy, and salvation.

As the birth of Jesus is approaching and we gather around with family, friends, colleagues, neighbors, and even strangers, take a moment to give thanks to God for all the blessings in your life. Even for the small ones. But also remember those who are alone, hungry, and suffering in the world who need to feel God's love, grace, mercy, and salvation that is brought to everyone through Jesus.

The Christ child is born, and salvation entered the world through the womb of a humble servant. What a joyous day for all!

Joyous God, I thank you for all the blessings you have given me, my family, and friends through this year and our lives. As this season of the birth of your son approaches, grant comfort for those who are hurting and suffering. May they feel your love, grace, and mercy throughout this season and beyond. We ask this in the name of our Savior and Redeemer, your son Jesus Christ. Amen.

-Pastor Marie Kane

December 24, 2022

Saturday, Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9: 2-7

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light...”

Our time of waiting and anticipation is almost over. The endless rush of the holiday season is coming to an end leading to the arrival of our Savior; not with great pomp and circumstance, but with quiet and awed reverence.

The newborn baby is almost here! We approach with joy, celebration, and excitement! Just as the angels heralded the news two-thousand years ago with shouts of “Gloria in Excelsis Deo!” so do we. A flood of all the old familiar songs and the intimate worship rituals bind us together linking us with the great cloud of witnesses, both before us and those that will follow us.

So Christmas comes but once a year, but we know that Christ lives in our hearts 365 days a year. As the great African-American theologian, Howard Thurman, once wrote, “Now the work of Christmas begins...to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among the people, to make music in the heart.”

Lord, help us not to get lost in all the turmoil of the season, but to keep our focus on you and our fellow travelers along the path. Help us to follow your example and remember that you truly are the reason for the season. As always, we ask this in Your Holy Name. Amen

—Jim Orser-Schwalm (with his feline writing companion, Sweetie Pie)

December 25, 2022

Nativity of Our Lord – Christmas Day

“So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told to them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.” (Luke 2:16-18)

The Christ-Child, God’s very own, chooses to dwell not only among us but with us. God has moved into the neighborhoods of our lives and brings light to the darkest of places, moments, people, and time. It is a manger scene that literally welcomes in the flesh of the whole world and offers room in its inn always.

God literally did and does take time, makes home, creates room, embodies us, so that we may embody God. Advent is often a time associated with what it means to dwell on themes of hope, love, light, and witness. Those are themes that don’t live only in the time of Advent, they are made even more visible and evermore needed in Christmas. God literally has moved into our neighborhoods and dwells/lives among us, so that we may embody hope to the hopeless, light in darkness, love when hate seems to shout louder refrains.

When those shepherds saw God in the flesh, laying in a barn, in the form of a sweet child; there in that innocence, was grace. This news was too good to keep silent and all who heard it were amazed. The same is still true for us today.

“This is the good news that greets us on Christmas Day. The Word, dwelling among us, is poured out all over our daily lives. Just as households can’t sustain Christmas morning celebrations every day, our minds cannot wake up each day and behold the farthest reaches of space, the tiniest cell, the depths of the ocean. Christ reigns over the mysteries of the cosmos nonetheless, yet Christ also comes into the chinks and shadows and dusty corners of life. Christ comes to piles of laundry, sinks full of dishes, and exhausted hosts. Christ also comes into neighborhoods where no one is feasting today, where no one awoke to gifts, where peace is rarely spoken.”⁴

Merry Christmas dear church!

+Bishop Kevin L. Strickland

⁴ (Liv Larson Andrews/2019 Sundays and Seasons Preaching)