



**INTER-CONGREGATIONAL
ADVENT
DEVOTIONAL**



A collaborative collection of scriptural
reflections, inviting all to prepare again
and anew for the gift of Jesus.





A Word of Welcome

But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. (2 Peter 3:13)

I have anticipated this Advent season from mid-Summer when I decided to invite voices from the congregations of Peace Lutheran Church and St. John's Lutheran Church to join together to consider this time of anticipation. If you've heard any of my Advent reflections before, you know I peer deeply into the early and long evenings with you. We are waiting for the moment of commemoration of the birth of our Lord. We are waiting for the promised redemption of Creation. We are waiting for Jesus to come and be the light, as we cling to his truth. As we faltering people endeavor to walk in his ways.

This Devotional is intended to be an accompaniment for your Advent traditions, not a redefinition. I urge you to daily consider these collected scripture passages and each contributor's faithful reflections as your partners this season.

A whole world full of people take a deep breath
to sigh plaintively into the air
that also holds prayers, hopes, uncertainties.

The year grows darker and seems to draw closer around us.

We move into the upper room,
gather around a lighted candle,
and contemplate a promise.

Yours in faith,
Deacon Joe



Sunday, November 30
First Sunday of Advent
Prophecy Candle

Isaiah 64:1-9

¹O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence— ²as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! ³When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. ⁴From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. ⁵You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.

⁶We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. ⁷There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. ⁸Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. ⁹Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

We hear again and again that Advent is a season of waiting and preparation. So when I read and reflect on this passage I can't help but think that is why this text was chosen for us today.

This moment in Isaiah we see a community in exile is crying out in lament. We feel the waves of emotion in each verse, we feel the pain and frustration of a people who have been waiting a very very long time. You hear the shame and loneliness, but ultimately you hear the hope in the promise that, “Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.” Isaiah 64:8

In this season of waiting, may we know that God is strong enough to hear our cries of hurt and our anger for all that is wrong with this world. In this season of preparation, may we confess our pain, frustration, loneliness, and shame. May we remember at the end of the day we are still clay and the work of God's hand. May we have the audacity to work to bring God's kin-dom on earth each day as we are a beautifully imperfect community awaiting the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ.

Heather B.P. Wallace, St. John's Lutheran Church



Monday, December 1

Isaiah 11:1-9

¹A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. ²The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. ³His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; ⁴but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. ⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. ⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. ⁷The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. ⁹They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Isaiah is speaking to a people in exile. They have been taken from their homeland and everything that made life meaningful has been ripped from them. In the midst of that, Isaiah speaks of a new king whom God will raise up to bring in a new and restored kingdom. It will be one of peace and justice, a world where all of God's Creation, even those creatures who are natural, instinctual adversaries will live together in peace. But it is a world that does not exist now, it requires hope and waiting.

This Advent, we find ourselves living in a contentious, divided and anxious country and world. Isaiah's vision seems far from our reality, a reality filled with skepticism and distrust. Richard Pryor, the late comedian, once reflected on Isaiah's words: "The wolf will live with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the goat, but the lamb and the goat won't get much sleep!" We can sing all we want about the joy and light of the season, but for so, so many that is not a reality. For many, it is a season of despair.

Let us remember that Isaiah clearly says it is God who will raise up this new ruler from the stump of Jesse to usher in the new envisioned creation. It will not be of human creation. And while we hope and wait, what then is our role? My wife's doctor, as he talks about her medical condition, says it's a time of "watchful waiting." I would encourage us to wait watchfully to discern what God might be calling us to do to bring that creation of peace and justice a little closer to reality, not necessarily for the whole world, but for our neighbor(s) who we encounter regularly. Come Lord Jesus, and stir up your power. Come Lord Jesus, and stir up your power in us to move toward Isaiah's vision.

Dwight Kessler, Peace Lutheran Church

Tuesday, December 2

Philippians 2:1-11

¹If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ²make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. ⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

I'm a life-long Lutheran: infant baptism, raised in the church, daily prayer at meals, scripture reading after dinner, 7 grades at parochial school, and confirmation at the same church. Until eighth grade all my friends, classmates, and relatives were Lutherans, nearly all from the same church. You'd think with that background I'd have been a model Christian, and from outward appearances you probably were right. It didn't take much effort. I could be mischievous, but mostly stayed within the norms of good church people. I was a Christian by default—one of the ninety nine sheep that didn't go astray, following the herd, not because of any great effort on my part. But I always felt there was something lacking in my faith. I wasn't willing to dig deeper and let the spirit take control.

Because of guidance from pastors and deacons, and by the grace of God and guidance from the Holy Spirit, I'm slowly pushing forward in my faith journey. This reading resonates with me, and each time I read it, I understand it more. Paul's words of encouragement are meant to build up those who are floundering or at odds with others. In these small churches among a huge population of predominantly Jesus deniers, it had to be really difficult, without the guidance of someone like Paul, to keep focus on the message of Jesus.

Paul reminds them to "have encouragement to be united with Christ." Jesus while teaching his disciples expresses it a little differently in John 15:15, "I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you." A commentator I recently read said in the culture of the time, the Greek term for friend described a relationship like those found in John 15.

So when Paul enumerates the qualities of a Christian, he is asking them to be a friend—one in Christ, one who fully knows the mind of Jesus who is one with God. The list of attributes reminds me of the more extensive beatitudes given by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-12). These same words are the words of encouragement we hear from our pastors and deacon every Sunday, during every Bible study. This is the encouragement we share with each other whenever we come together to socialize, serve, celebrate, and grieve as Christians.

Paul then shifted gears to remind us, through what has been called the Hymn of Christ (vv.6-11), the story of Christ's purpose for taking the form of a human at Christmas and then paying the ultimate price of humanity by dying on the cross for our sins. Only because of Jesus's resurrection has death been defeated so we have hope for something after death. This is the message of Christmas, the beautiful beginning of the Christian story.

Pete Etzler, Friend of Jesus, Peace Lutheran Church

Wednesday, December 3

Psalm 29:11

¹¹May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord bless his people with peace!

WHO-VILLE STRONG

The Grinch is in pain, he's alone, grumpy, fed up with conventions that don't seem to resonate with him. He sees his neighbors going about their traditions, preparing, engaging, anticipating. But by the end of the story, we see a radical reversal in the Grinch's perspective, not unlike St. Paul's radical and instant conversion on the road to Damascus.

What we see in Who-Ville is a community that is strong in the face of adversity, after all the Grinch *steals their Christmas*. But of course, Cindy Lou and company know the true meaning of Christmas and go on to celebrate the blessings of peace and love. After all, though it's not explicit in the story, the birth of Jesus, who is the Christ(mas), brings deeper joy than any Who-Pudding or rare Who-Roast, any glitter of commercialism, any pop guns, bicycles and roller skates or any gifts, gifts, gifts, gifts, gifts!

The true fortunes of Christmas are well described in Psalm 29:11. Our **strength** and **peace** do not come from our ego, our wallet, or even our efforts, they are gifts of God's almighty grace. Our **strength** is born of knowing, feeling and following a God of love that brings us a unique type of **peace**.

As we await the culmination and highlight of Advent, let's not worry with the what, when, where, why or how, let's just be the Who of Christ's Who-Manity.

NOTE: Dr. Theodor Geisel was a lifelong Lutheran and you might have caught his nod to Trinitarian symbolism when "The Grinch's small heart grew three sizes that day." Some have also attributed his heart expanding three times as making room for God's love, peace, and joy.

Valerie Taylor, St. John's Lutheran Church

Thursday, December 4

Advent Prayer

Steve Garnaas-Holmes

www.unfoldinglight.net

O Coming One,
give me a steadfast spirit
to wait for you with grace.

Give me patience to listen
for your breathing
in the breath of your people.

Give me courage to trust
your continually blossoming presence
even in the unseeing darkness.

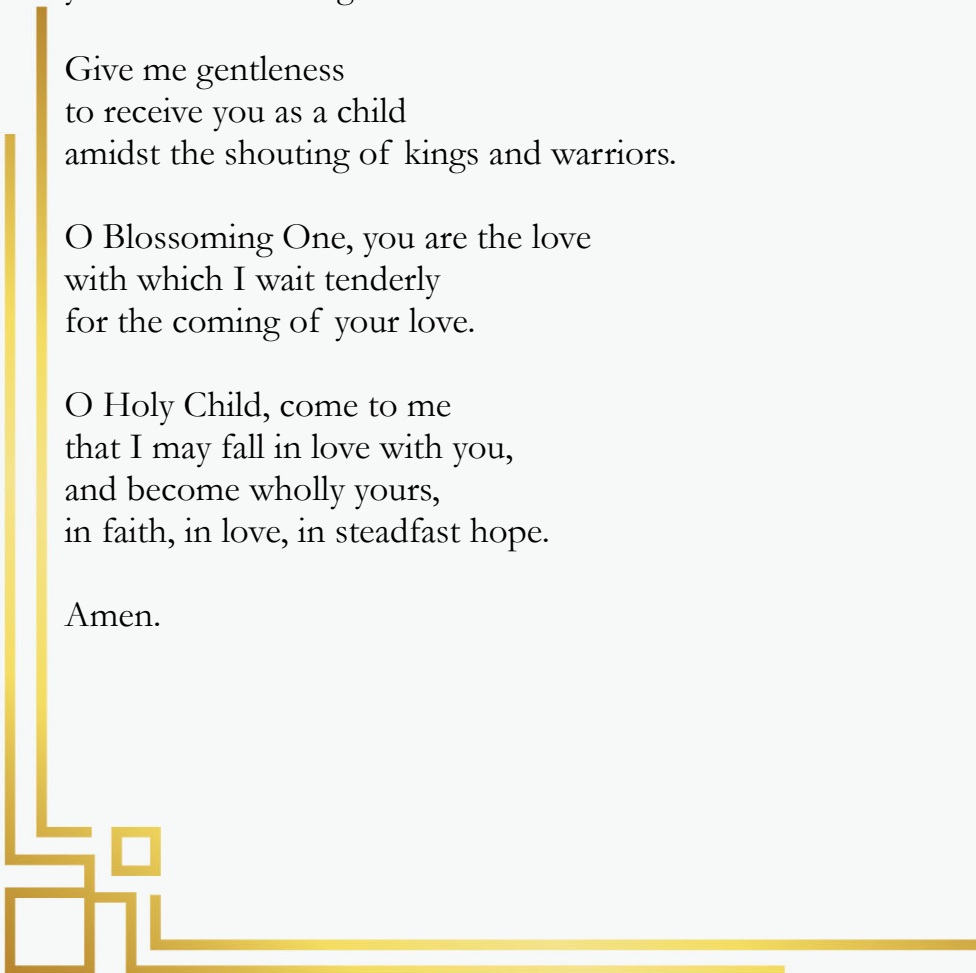
Give me wisdom to see
your manger in rough places,
your star in dark nights.

Give me gentleness
to receive you as a child
amidst the shouting of kings and warriors.

O Blossoming One, you are the love
with which I wait tenderly
for the coming of your love.

O Holy Child, come to me
that I may fall in love with you,
and become wholly yours,
in faith, in love, in steadfast hope.

Amen.



Friday, December 5

Luke 1:35-37

³⁵The angel said to 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 holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God."

Nothing is impossible for our Lord and God! He has shown us many miracles throughout the bible. However, there is one that stands out the most; it is the ultimate of all miraculous events! Or to quote a movie title, "The Greatest Story Ever Told," it is the conception of Jesus Christ & His life.

My personal thoughts are how wonderful for Mary to be so devout that God chose her and how truly blessed she was.

Oh, to have such an honor as to give birth to our Lord Jesus & to have such a strong faith. I've come a long way in my Christian life, but I cannot begin to be equal to Mary.

These verses give me reassurance that God can love even me, a lowly sinner.

After all, "nothing is impossible for God". Amen.

Cindy Merkel, St. John's Lutheran Church

Saturday, December 6

Luke 1:46-55

⁴⁶And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Let me set the scene for you: Mary is visiting with her cousin Elizabeth, who was pregnant (with John the Baptist). When Mary greets Elizabeth, the baby in Elizabeth’s womb leaps for joy (Luke 1:41). Elizabeth blesses Mary, recognizing her as “the mother of my Lord.” In response, Mary bursts into this hymn of praise: **“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.”**

When Mary sang these words, her world had just been turned upside down. She was young, engaged but not yet married, and now miraculously pregnant. The road ahead was uncertain — yet her first response was not fear or complaint, but worship. I don’t know about you, but that would not have been MY first reaction. As a woman in a time when women were not respected or valued, she chooses to magnify the Lord, not wallow in self-pity. Her joy doesn’t come after everything makes sense; it comes right in the middle of confusion and risk. Her song reminds us that true faith chooses praise even before the outcome is clear.

Mary rejoices that God “has looked on the humble estate of his servant.” In a world that celebrates power and prestige, Mary praises a God who notices the unseen and lifts up the overlooked.

Mary also praises God for His unchanging promises: “He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever.” (vv. 54–55) She recognizes that what God is doing in her life is part of a much bigger story — one that began generations before her. The same God who was faithful to Abraham and Israel is faithful to her, and to us. Even when we can’t see how everything fits together, we can trust that God’s mercy never runs out. Every moment of grace in our lives is a continuation of His long story of faithfulness.

Magnify the Lord This Christmas.

To “magnify” means to make something appear larger or more significant. We can’t make God any bigger, but we can make Him bigger in our hearts. During this super busy season, it’s easy to magnify the noise, the to-do lists, and the worries. But Mary shows us a better way.

Mary could have *magnified* her fears. Instead, she *magnified* the Lord. She chose gratitude, trust, and praise.

*Lord, thank You for seeing me, just as You saw Mary. Help me to **magnify** You in every season — in joy and in uncertainty. Thank You that Your mercy and faithfulness never fail. May my life be a song that brings You glory. Let my heart echo Mary’s song: “My soul magnifies the Lord.” Amen.*

Katie Gagley, Peace Lutheran Church

Sunday, December 7
Second Sunday of Advent
Peace Candle

Micah 5:2

²But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

Recently, my five-year-old granddaughter saw a picture of Peace's companion congregation in Las Rosas, Guatemala standing in front of their church. She looked at the dry ground behind them and asked, "Do they live in the desert?" Not quite—but they do live on dry, barren land, still waiting for rain.

I see that same theme of waiting in many places around me. The UT students I work with are anxiously waiting for their first teaching positions. Yesterday my granddaughter waited for me to pick her up from aftercare, worrying I might not arrive on time. And just last week, my niece reminded me that I'm not very good at waiting either. My lifelong mantra has been, "If it needs to be done, let's do it now!"

All of this brings me to the people in today's passage—people who were told that a ruler would come from their small, unremarkable village of Bethlehem. What must it have been like to receive such a promise and then...wait? If I had heard Micah's words, telling me that a source of peace for the whole world would come from Bethlehem, I know I would have asked, "How soon? When will this gift arrive?" Could I sit still long enough to let God's promise unfold on God's timeline? Could I quiet my spirit, prepare my heart, and simply wait?

This is exactly what Advent invites us to do. We prepare, and we wait for Jesus to come and show us the way. Our choir often sings, "We are waiting for the Lord..." during Advent, and one verse resonates deeply with me: "Come and help us by your birth, come and brighten all the earth." Jesus is the light appearing all around us in this season—if we slow down enough to wait, look, and reflect.

The Advent candles help me remember this. Each Sunday we light another flame, and as they burn down week by week, I picture all that Jesus pours into us through His coming—love, peace, joy, salvation. These are gifts worth waiting for.

So my mantra this year is "Peace over productivity." I will choose to wait—not with impatience, but with an open heart, ready to receive Him.

Linda McClanahan, Peace Lutheran Church

Monday, December 8

Luke 1:68-80

⁶⁸“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. ⁶⁹He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, ⁷⁰as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, ⁷¹that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. ⁷²Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, ⁷³the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us ⁷⁴that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. ⁷⁶And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, ⁷⁷to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. ⁷⁸By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, ⁷⁹to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” ⁸⁰The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

Although this isn't the first time I have read or heard these verses, it is the first time I have had to think about what these words really mean to me. I always focus on the word “prepare” in verse 76. I seem to gravitate towards “preparing” my home and the church for Advent and Christmas. Making sure the trees are up, the lights are lit, the cookies baked, the cards are written. This is the hustle and bustle and stress that can fill the days and take the joy out of the season.

Then I reread and much like Zechariah I had an ah-ha moment when I read: “for **you** will go before the Lord to prepare his ways (verse 76)...to guide our feet into the way of peace(verse 79)”. You? Who me? I realized that that is our call, our responsibility to help prepare ourselves and others not just for the celebration of Jesus' birth. Rather what we are preparing for is our salvation and new life through Jesus. But my job is not to just prepare myself, my heart and my life for this amazing gift. God has enlisted all of us who believe and know this good news to be messengers of His faithfulness and endless love.

This is our call, all of us, to witness with others in whatever way we can. Yes, we can still prepare our homes-I can't wait to set up my 13 nativities. The lights, the decorations, the presents, the cookies are all a wonderful way to honor Christ and enjoy the season. We just need to take the time to “guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Susan McLemore, Peace Lutheran Church



Tuesday, December 9

Matthew 1:18-23

¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²²All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

Righteous as Joseph was, I can't imagine the hurt in his heart. Though scripture doesn't tell us, I suspect that Joseph had plans for the future with Mary. Plans that were disrupted by the shock and shame of apparent adultery. He must have been outraged as his vision of the future he had planned with Mary crumbled before his eyes.

In one way or another, we all know the pain of having our plans upended. You drop the catch. The deal falls through. The test result is abnormal. The school, the hiring committee, the girl says "no." In an instant, the future is on hold. The beach trip becomes a last hurrah to make memories. The door closes and the house is quiet. You're locked out of the system: no longer employed.

That is where the Lord met Joseph: in the space between the heartache and the plan to move forward. There an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and changed his life. The Lord, through the angel, gave Joseph a new future to imagine. God called Joseph to a new vocation: naming and raising the One who "will save his people from their sins." In that half beat between devastation and a new resolve, God painted a new trajectory for Joseph's life. It wasn't the old vision. But instead, a new vision infused with the goodness of the Lord.

Not every disruption is from the Lord. The violence, the terminal diagnosis, the ruptured relationship. These are not implicitly of God. Yet, as we see in the experience of Joseph, and as we see in the cross, our God is powerful enough to find us in the midst of any tragedy that befalls us and he refuses to let that be the last word. After the cross, the Father raised Jesus. After Joseph's vision crumbled, the Lord had a new vision for Joseph.

Our calling is to be like Joseph in the midst of these things. You and I are called to be attentive to the Lord and the messages that he will give you in this time. The message will not likely restore your previous dream – it sure wasn't that for Joseph. Yet the message will likely call you to join God's work in the midst of this new reality.

Friend in Christ, keep your eyes open for what the Lord will reveal. You can do this by asking your friends and your pastor and your deacon to pray for you in this season of Advent waiting. Ask them to pray with you for an attentive soul ready to receive God's vision and calling that will guide you into the future.

Pastor Stephen Friedrich, Peace Lutheran Church

Wednesday, December 10

Amos 5:14-15

¹⁴Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. ¹⁵Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

These first 5 words: “seek good, and not evil”, why is such instruction necessary? Aren’t we surrounded already by evil people, evil deeds, and evil circumstances. Isn’t evil the primary source of so much suffering, pain, need, estrangement, etc.? Who would go seeking more of that?

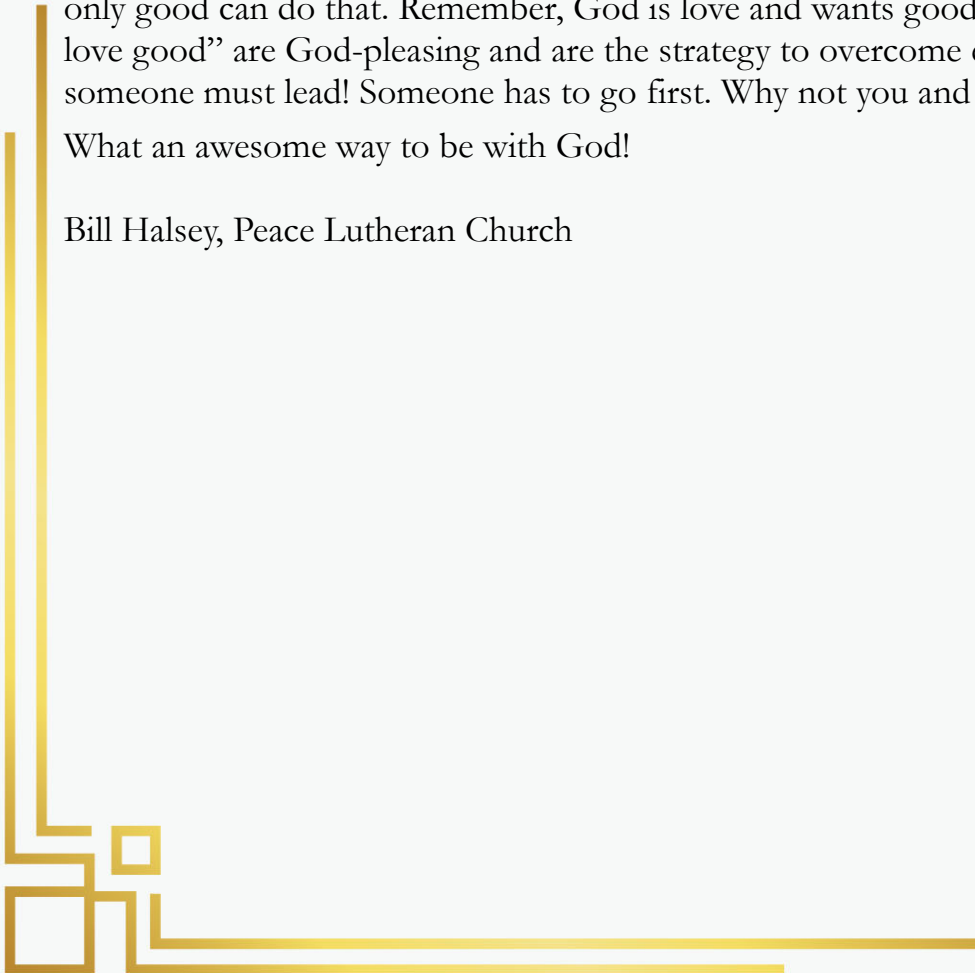
Guilty! How many times have I wished for and even prayed for judgment, justice, and punishment on those who would traffic humans, abuse babies, commit mass terror, and so on?! I reason, “You who have been evil and caused such suffering and wrong, now suffer as you have caused suffering.” Sound familiar?

In the time of Amos, many people had turned to evil. The remnant of Joseph in verse 15 was a small element of the people who clung to good and right. God will be with those who seek good. How does that work?

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” I would add, evil cannot drive out evil; only good can do that. Remember, God is love and wants good. The words “hate evil and love good” are God-pleasing and are the strategy to overcome evil.” But in the midst of evil, someone must lead! Someone has to go first. Why not you and me? God is in seeking good.

What an awesome way to be with God!

Bill Halsey, Peace Lutheran Church



Thursday, December 11

Psalm 34:11-14

*¹¹ Come, my children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the Lord.
¹² Whoever of you loves life
and desires to see many good days,
¹³ keep your tongue from evil
and your lips from telling lies.
¹⁴ Turn from evil and do good;
seek peace and pursue it.*

My Lutheran Study Bible tells me that Psalm 34 is one of the many **songs of thanksgiving** found in the Psalms and that in Hebrew it is also **an acrostic poem** (each of the 22 verses begins with a different letter—in alphabetical order—of the Hebrew alphabet).

To me the whole chapter emphasizes the importance of positive and truthful speech, something we need in today's world. The chapter opens this way: "I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad. O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together."

Verses 11-14 continue this theme: the author of the Psalm urges his readers to listen to him so that he can teach us to fear (some translations say "revere") the Lord. If we desire to have a long life and to enjoy good, we should refrain from speaking evil and being deceitful. Instead, we should do good and seek peace.

With our words we can build people up or tear them down. Psalm 34 makes it pretty clear that we should aim to do the first. I'm reminded of Luther's explanation of the 8th commandment. (I learned that commandment in confirmation as "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor," but a more modern translation says, "You shall not give false testimony against our neighbor."). Luther's explanation says that "we should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way." In our contemporary digital world, it's really tempting—and easy--to respond to angry posts on social media with equally angry insults, denunciations, and name-calling. Although that may offer a temporary release to our anger, it's unlikely to change anything. Our psalmist rather advises us to "keep our tongues from evil and our lips from telling lies" and rather "do good, seek peace, and pursue it." Let's try to use kinder, truthful words as one way to counter the polarization we so often experience in our contemporary world.

Acrostic summary of the passage:

Always
Be
Careful to curb
Deceitful words and
Evil actions,
For they create enemies.
Go instead for kind words and peace.

Chuck Maland

Friday, December 12

Isaiah 40:3

³A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

How many times do we feel like outsiders looking in? Surrounded by darkness and feeling lost, fear ensnares us. Afraid that we may never find the door, we lose faith. Alone in our own wildernesses, weighed down by the pressures of our daily lives, we turn inward and stop.

Then we hear it: a voice. A prophet crying out. Another person imploring us to just keep moving. "Prepare" and "make," extolls the voice. Our Father sees what we do not: He sees where we stand in the desert and how close we are to home.

Through others, He reminds you to keep moving. Through others, He throws back the curtains hiding the family room light the kids left on. Through others, He reveals the red flicker of the Sanctuary Lamp. The light reveals what you did not see in the darkness of the desert: a path home. As you begin to see it, the hymnal words come back. Measured and peaceful: "Christ, be our light. Shine in our hearts, shine through the darkness. Christ, be our light, shine in Your church gathered today." Slowly, you take a step forward and then another. Some steps are on your own; others with a friend; some with a stranger; and some are only possible because God carried you.

Moved by the love of God; moved by the light of Christ; moved by the voice of the Holy Spirit, we walk into the Advent Season. Now, we wait. We wait with bated breath. We wait with hope. We wait with our brothers and sisters for the coming of Christ. We wait for the warmth of Christmas cookies. We wait for the renewal of friendships. We wait for the laughs of the nativity play. We wait for the tears that will come. We wait for the profound peace that wraps around us when singing "Silent Night" and the exuberance we feel when the organ belts us with "Joy to the World."

As we wait for the solemnity of the Christmas season, God's love reminds us that we are welcome. As we wait for the renewal of the world, God's grace reminds us that the wilderness is finite. As we wait for the arrival of the Prince of Peace, God's promise reminds us that there is a place at the table for all of us. As we wait for the celebration of Christ's birth, God's voice reminds us that we are never outsiders.

A faithful disciple, St. John's Lutheran Church



Saturday, December 13

John 1:1-4, 14-18

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

¹⁵(John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") ¹⁶From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

What considerations did God the Creator ponder in choosing to become Jesus the Redeemer?

What did it mean for the Creator whose hands flung the stars into place to be bound by time and space, to take shape in a single life?

What did it mean for the Creator, who comprehended all knowledge and resonated with all emotion, to redefine that knowledge and emotion in the context of a solitary life with a birth and a death?

How would the Creator experience the taste of tears, the sting of blisters from physical labor, and the confusion of being lost, whether figuratively or literally?

It was a holy exchange to reach out and touch hand-to-hand. To experience the wonder of a starry sky while rooted to the land. To know side-aching, lungs-exploding, tears-streaming laughter or heart-breaking, soul-wrenching, body-wracking sadness. These are the risks of Incarnation.

The Word became flesh and lived among us, or as Eugene Peterson puts it "became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood." This incarnation, this slipping into the vulnerability of skin, is scandalous in the very best sense of the word. Jesus chose to be stripped down and then swaddled in love. In doing so, Jesus seeks us, finds us, relates to us, identifies with us as "the Son, who is close to the Father's heart, making Love known."

Pastor Amy Figg, St. John's Lutheran Church

Sunday, December 14
Third Sunday of Advent
Shepherd Candle

Luke 2:8-9

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.
⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

Advent's Purpose is for Us to focus on the 1st Coming of Jesus and to look forward to His 2nd Coming. Without Christ's 1st Coming, we would still be lost in our sins. The word: advent derives from the Latin word *adventus*. The term signifies a sense of "coming" or "arrival", reflecting a feeling of anticipation.

Upon 1st reading this Scripture, I am smiling from a memory that comes to mind as I think of anticipation. There was a Heinz Ketchup commercial from the 1970's whose song lyrics were, "Anticipation! Anticipation, it's making me wait! Ketchup so rich and thick, it's the taste that's worth the wait!" It was sung by Carly Simon and every time we had to wait for that delicious ketchup to land on top of our juicy burger, hotdog or French fries, we'd giggle as we hummed the song lyrics.

Now, we are all aware that the coming of Our Lord and Savior has absolutely nothing to do with ketchup and doesn't even compare. Yet somehow, the frustration of wanting something to happen quick and the pains of having to wait despite our own desires is in exact correlation to awaiting the birth of Jesus Christ.

I confess that I would sometimes try to speed things up with getting the ketchup to come out faster, such as shake the bottle really hard, smack it hard on the bottom with the palm of our hand, or stick a butter knife in it to get it started. Nothing worked, I just had to wait until it was time, then it would slowly slide out of that glass bottle and trickle onto whatever food I was desperately hovering it over.

Do We not do the same thing with Our own Faith? Sometimes in Our wait, don't we look for various ways to 'help' God along? We jump ahead by taking unnecessary steps towards getting a resolution instead of waiting on God's Will. Perhaps, God has not given us the 'go ahead' to take any actions at all, yet we go full steam ahead and become disappointed with the outcome.

What actions do I need to do in my WAIT? Yes, I can Pray, but what else should I do? Is it enough to just simply WAIT? In Our WAIT, we're called to do just that: WAIT! Trust God through the process to KNOW that He is the Great I AM and HE WILL!

"Anticipation! Anticipation, it's making me wait! God's Love is so wonderful that it's worth the wait!"

In this Season of Advent, WAIT on God! His rewards far exceed anything that We can begin to imagine...

Elisha 'Lisa' M. Jimenez, St. John's Lutheran Church

Monday, December 15

Luke 1:26-38

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He 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 ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵The angel said to 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 holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

"FOR NOTHING WILL BE IMPOSSIBLE WITH GOD." vs.37

In what I imagine was a fairly short encounter with the angel Gabriel, a very young Mary's emotions jump from worry, if not outright panic, to questioning to humble acceptance. Even though she acknowledges herself "the servant of the Lord" and reconciles herself to her fate, Mary's mind must still have been reeling as she looked back on what had taken place during that brief interlude. How often over the next days and weeks must she have pondered her experience.

The Greek word describing Mary is Theotokos, literally God-bearer. In bearing the Son of God, she herself would be looked upon as holy. How scandalous! How terrifying! The only certainty with which she could possibly console herself was her faith in her God. The impossible was soon to become a reality. "For nothing will be impossible with God." And so, acceptance: "let it be with me according to your word."

When upheaval enters our lives, and we are afraid and questioning how to go on may we, like Mary, remember that we are servants of the living God, for whom all things are possible.

Lee Ley, St. John's Lutheran Church

Tuesday, December 16

Isaiah 65:17-19

¹⁷For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. ¹⁸But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. ¹⁹I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress.

"Jesus calls us, o'er the tumult, of Life's wild and restless sea;
Day by day his sweet voice soundeth,
saying "Christian follow me"".

My heart strings are most often stirred by the texts of hymns--not even including the musical lines--just the words! Their meanings are as poignant today as they were fifty, or even a hundred years ago. This particular hymn calls out to us, to hear God's voice during our trials and tribulations, even as He is building a new way for us to flourish.

As we begin the season of Advent, I hear God's proclamations to us all:

Prepare ye the way of the Lord!

Wait for the Lord.

Be strong! Take heart!

My soul proclaims your greatness O Lord.

Jesus Christ is the Light of the world--the Light no darkness can overcome.

In the text of Isaiah 65: 17-19, God says he will create a new heaven and a new earth. God takes delight in his people.

Throughout our times of trials and tribulations, God is creating us to be his people, made in His image, to be a Light in the world--to be a Light TO the world.

While the world around us demands our time and presence, God's word can offer us peace. God's word can bring us Light, God's word is worth waiting for.

Listen! God is calling.

Deb Sousa, St. John's Lutheran Church



Wednesday, December 17

Isaiah 65:25

²⁵The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

One beautiful thing about this vision of the new heaven and earth God promises is that it doesn't explain how it will happen. It just says that it will and leaves our imaginations to do what they will with that. We can picture the furry wolf, the woolly lamb, the soft grass, a lion napping by a pile of fresh-strewn straw. We can wonder, how long did it take, for animals that used to eat and be eaten by each other, to get along so well that the lamb is not running away but happily munching? Was it a process? Did it take time? Did the wolf and lion have to grow molars and long, curvy intestines to digest new food? Was it painful? Did the grass change, to feed animals a different way? Did people help with this?

Of course, all this talk of animals may be a way of saying that people will get along better, that people who used to act like wolves will become gentle, that people as vulnerable as lambs will be safe, that in God's new heaven and earth, we'll love and serve each other. If this is the meaning, the same kinds of questions apply. Will the wolves among us have to grow new ways of getting along? Will the lambs among us need time to heal? Will we need each other's help? The world God is bringing about may take time, and it may be a process, requiring growth and healing, as well as grace and love. The key thing to remember is that God has promised it, and God will bring it about.

An interesting bit is that the snake doesn't seem to be let off the hook at all, at least not unless dust becomes a tasty treat in the new creation! And who knows, maybe it will. If lions can enjoy straw, maybe snakes can enjoy dust. Certainly mice will rest easier, knowing the serpent is no longer interested in them.

A key idea of Martin Luther's is that the Kingdom of God is both "now" and "not yet." We see glimpses of God's promised peaceable kingdom, in moments like Baptism and Communion, when our sins are forgiven and we're strengthened to do God's will in the world. And there's also a lot in our lives that does not yet shine in glory. What's an area in your life that you're working on? Or that God is calling you to work on? To let go of something or take something on? Might it be a process? Might it take time? Might it be good to ask for support? Faithful God, help us to wait well, for your Son, for Christmas, and also for ourselves, to heal and grow and change. Amen.

Pastor John Tirro, St. John's Lutheran Church

Thursday, December 18

Matthew 11:28-30

²⁸“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Sometimes life feels like it's all uphill, climbing with an overstuffed backpack. We aren't really getting anywhere and we get weighed down by the constant demands of life; work, personal failings, loss and the pressure to always measure up. The religious systems of Jesus' time only added to the burdens of life, piling on rule after rule that never offered relief. It is into this world that Jesus issues a profound and timeless invitation: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11: 28)

This absolutely universal invitation is personal and Jesus sees our exhaustion, spiritual and emotional burnout and the growing anxiety that keeps us awake at night. The “rest” he promises is not a simple vacation from work; it is a deep, soul-level peace that transcends all of our circumstances. It is the relief that comes from knowing our sins are forgiven, our futures are safe and we aren't alone in this life.

The next part is key: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest in your souls” (Matthew 11:29) A yoke is a tool for sharing the load. Jesus isn't replacing our burdens with new ones, religious or otherwise. He is inviting us to be yoked with him. In partnership, we are linked to the source of strength, grace and wisdom. His burden is light because he carries the weight. Learning from him means adopting his gentle and humble way of life – a posture that resists the manic pace of striving for more, or doing and of constant GO, GO, GO!

Today, when you feel burdened, remember that this invitation is for you. Swap your heavy load for his light one. Give all your plans, anxieties and troubles to his gentle guidance and you will find genuine rest for your soul.

Clarke Hinkle, St. John's Lutheran Church



Friday, December 19

Psalm 62:5

⁵For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him.

Although this reading is short, fourteen simple words, there is an amazing power of comfort with it. I first focused on the powerful words, “God alone”. There is no question here, God is the one and only place where I should put my trust and faith. Alone implies that there is no need to look somewhere else. God is the One. Sometimes we try to put our trust in other things, especially this time of year as we are bombarded with unending advertisements for all the things we need to make our life better. The psalmist says, “For God alone my soul waits in silence.”

Just reading those words, “waits in silence” sends a feeling of tranquility and peace over me. How do I keep that feeling from going away? I looked at the words “my soul”? When I looked up synonyms for soul I found: inspiration and passion. I have passions in my life, but here the message is for my emotional spirit. This spirit is waiting in silence the verse says. There is a quietness that is in my soul when I give myself to trusting in “God alone.”

Finally, there is the assurance that “my hope” comes from God. If I place my soul in God’s care, my desires and expectations - “my hope” - will be guided by God. So, I need to listen to my soul and appreciate the fact that God’s hope in me and my trust in Him comes with a quietness that soothes the soul and will guide my life. With this quietness I would hope that others would see God’s love through me.

Jim McLemore, Peace Lutheran Church

Saturday, December 20

Psalm 46:10

¹⁰“Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.”

Psalm 46 is a familiar favorite to those of us who grew up Lutheran. It's the basis for our unofficial Lutheran fight song, *A Mighty Fortress is our God*. As a former choral director and church musician, Psalm 46 is also featured in a couple of my personal favorite choral arrangements. “God is our Refuge and Strength” by Allen Pote is one such anthem that both St. John's and Peace choirs have sung over the years. It features dueling trumpets and exciting sections where everyone sings the same notes until we burst into harmonies of victory in God's strength. When I was in college, my choral director, the Rev Dr Paul Weber wrote a rousing rendition of *A Mighty Fortress* where the Lenoir-Rhyne Youth Chorus enjoyed echoing the A capella Choir with “though hordes of devils fill the land...they cannot overpower us” as though it were a lilting playground taunt to the devil. These anthems are ridiculously fun to sing but neither have any moment or mention of stillness. In fact, if these songs are one of your only encounters with Psalm 46, you might be surprised that the common contemplative prayer mantra of “Be still and know that I am God” is a verse from the same victorious war-cry of a psalm.

It also happens to be my least favorite verse in the entire bible, so thanks for that, Deacon Joe. I'll admit, as someone who lives with the disabling effects of chronic pain and chronic illness, I do not enjoy being still. Stillness is when the volume of my pain gets louder and begins to feel unbearable.. Stillness is often an unwelcome visitor that reminds me I live with a life-long illness that presents like a confusing rollercoaster of symptoms that has created a life I didn't want. Not to mention, when taken out of context from the rest of Psalm 46, “Be still and know that I am God” feels a lot like some sort of patronizing, “If you just did x then the outcome of your illness would be y,” as part of my anxiety and fear of not being a good enough patient to deserve healing.

No thanks. I'd prefer to keep reading on to verse 11 where I'm told my God isn't just any God - but, the God of Jacob who has an incredible track record when you look back through salvation history, but alas, I'm limited to 500 words or less so I'll keep this focused on Advent theme. In Advent, we anticipate the next chapter of Salvation history when the same God of Jacob will become incarnate and live through the daily trials and tribulations of actually being human.

I still maintain that the whole of Psalm 46 is much better than its part and perhaps I always will. Maybe this is just part of God's divine sense of humor. I like to picture God as a gentle bedside soul sitting next to me as my body demands stillness saying, “Just because you don't like it, doesn't mean it isn't useful.” Meanwhile, my mind sings verse 11 loudly in protest, as God softly chuckles at my righteous indignation.

Betsy Friedrich, Peace Lutheran Church



Sunday, December 21
The Fourth Sunday of Advent
The Angel Candle

Luke 2:10-14

¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

From Darkness to Light

It was a dark night, and fear was in the air. Shepherds were watching their flocks. They weren't sleeping and dreaming of sheep, but on alert, ready for danger. There were predators out in the dark who were ready to steal the sheep - or perhaps an unwary shepherd! This is the setting for something astonishing.

It was a dark night in the ancient world, literally, emotionally and spiritually. The Jews were subjugated. Rome was in control. There was a fear of the darkness. This is reflected in many of the prayers of the early church: protect us tonight; we entrust to you, God, the night; protect us through the hours of this night.

When I was a child, fear of the dark prevailed for most children. We couldn't see what was out there and it was likely to be bad.

Once, while visiting Norway, I asked an old man what it was like to live during the months of no sunlight. He tapped his chest while saying, "It gets very dark in here."

But there is hope. The Jews looked for a messiah to deliver them from Rome. As Christians, we know the end of that story and so we celebrate His coming on that first Christmas and anticipate Jesus' return. Advent becomes a time to renew our sense of anticipation and hope.

Into the dark night of the shepherds, came an explosion of light. Truly, a terrifying experience. The angel comforted them with the words, "Don't be afraid!" Now it was a fear of the light and a celestial being speaking to them! It was certainly an auspicious announcement for the beginning of God's plan to save the world. And He sent It in such a tiny package!

When the burdens of my world begin to wear me down and the future looks bleak, I think of Advent and that wonderful anticipation of the announcement, "I bring you great news of great joy for all people." ALL PEOPLE! That means ME and YOU!

Dr. Gary Klukken, Peace Lutheran Church

Wednesday, December 24
Christmas Eve
Christ Candle

Luke 2:25-32

²⁵Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, ²⁹"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; ³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

Salvation is born! ...but it's still a baby

"My eyes have seen your salvation." ...but it looks pretty helpless.

Yay! ...but also...the savior might have a poopy diaper.

Imagine you're Simeon, just a random guy in the temple and you see a month-old baby. It's perfectly normal to have hopeful thoughts when you meet a child—thoughts of what the child might someday become or accomplish—but when you see this particular child your thoughts jump right over hope and land on faith. "My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all peoples." Despite his frailty and utter dependence on the help of others, you see in this child the fulfillment of promises that had been made centuries earlier.

Here we are, centuries later, and when we look around the world, with its persistent strife and uncertainty, it seems like our salvation might still be in its infancy. Like Simeon, though, we stubbornly cling to God's promises, and like Mary and Joseph we take on the work of nurturing those promises and revealing them to all who find themselves living in a hostile world. We change the world's dirty diapers. We feed those who are hungry, and find clothing for those who have none, remembering that as we act toward "the least of these" we're acting on behalf of that child who brought salvation to us so many centuries ago. As we wait for and, more importantly, work toward the day when all who bear the image of God share equally in God's abundance; —to borrow from Pr. Amy's favorite benediction—we recognize that the world is much too small for anything but love and much too dangerous for anything but truth.

Jamie Wallace, St. John's Lutheran Church



Monday, December 25 ... Christmas Day

Luke 2:4-7

⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

God provides. God provides maybe not according to our comfort level but he provides. I know this is true in my life.

Last year at this time I was led by God to leave my job. I had been in that job for over twenty years in various capacities. I always loved helping people, and when I could do that at my job I came alive. But most of my job was not that. So I began praying for a sign from God to lead me to where I can be of best service. Literally Jesus showed me a sign. It wasn't the neon sign that I had asked for, but it was my sign and I knew it. God led me to set out in faith. I did. I left my job.

As I have stepped out in faith, God has continued to provide. I thought I would be a wreck when I left my job and stepped out in faith. Instead, I felt the peace that he has given me. I worried about finding a new job. Then an opportunity was presented to me for new employment where I could use my gifts to help people.

As God provided for me, we also see in the text how God provided for Mary on her journey to Bethlehem. It wasn't with the comforts of home and family, but God provided. God provided Joseph to care for her. God provided a stable for shelter. And through it all God provided Jesus to bring his peace into the world.

The promise isn't that all will be easy or in our comfort zone. The promise of God is that Jesus came into our world, and that he still comes into our worlds. Into Amy's world. Into your world. Into your world with all of challenges in life. We might not all be facing the same challenges like Mary, nine months pregnant, traveling to Bethlehem with no room in the inn.

Yet we all have our own challenges. The promise of God is that as Christ came into Mary's life, he comes into ours, too. He comes into the challenges of our life. And he brings his peace.

Amy Anderson, Peace Lutheran Church

