

Walking Together in the Word

Devotions on the Weekly Scripture Readings for December 2023

The purpose of the Chapel Devotion Project is to encourage individuals and families to make prayer and devotional time in God's Word a regular part of their daily lives. We believe many good things will come from your intentional study and reflection of God's Word:

- Your relationship with God and with others will grow and be strengthened.
- Study of the Scripture and hymns for the upcoming weekend will enhance your worship.
- You will come to the Lord daily in prayer, bringing your praise, thanks, and requests to Him.

How to Use These Devotions

Each week contains five pages of devotional material. How you choose to use the material is up to you. You could study one reading or one page a day. You might read several portions every other day. You may use the short order of worship provided below. Use the material in the way that best fits you and your family.

ORDER OF WORSHIP

Leader: In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
All: Amen.

SCRIPTURE READING

DEVOTION and REFLECTION

PRAYERS and THE LORD'S PRAYER

LUTHER'S MORNING PRAYER

I thank You, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have kept me this night from all harm and danger; and I pray that You would keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please You. For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me.
Amen.

or

LUTHER'S EVENING PRAYER

I thank You, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have graciously kept me this day; and I pray that You would forgive me all my sins where I have done wrong, and graciously keep me this night. For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen.

Leader: The almighty and merciful God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, bless us
and keep us.
All: Amen.

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Devotions and supporting material written by Pastor Ted Laesch and Mary Laesch.

The Season of Advent

Advent marks the beginning of the Christian Church Year. Advent begins the fourth Sunday before December and ends with midday prayer on December 24. During the time of Advent, many churches add midweek evening services that focus on reflection and preparation to receive God's promise of a Savior. The word Advent comes from the Latin *adventus*, which means "coming." The four weeks of Advent are a time of reflective preparation for Christ's first coming as a baby in the manger at Bethlehem. But we also look ahead to Christ's second coming, when He will return in glory and take all believers to be with Him forever.

During the Advent season, we prepare to receive Jesus, the hope of the world. The color of Advent is purple or blue. Purple represents royalty and repentance and blue symbolizes anticipation and hope.

Many congregations use the custom of the Advent wreath to mark the progress of the four Sundays leading to the celebration of Christmas. An Advent wreath has four candles—three purple or blue and one pink—one for each week in Advent. Each week an additional candle is lit, and our anticipation grows as we look forward to Jesus' coming.

December Feasts, Festivals and Commemorations

- 4 John of Damascus, Theologian and Hymnwriter
- 6 Nicholas of Myra, Pastor
- 7 Ambrose of Milan, Pastor and Hymnwriter
- 13 Lucia, Martyr
- 17 Daniel the Prophet and the Three Young Men
- 19 Adam and Eve
- 20 Katharina von Bora Luther
- 21 St. Thomas, Apostle (festival)
- 26 St. Stephen, Martyr (festival)
- 27 St. John, Apostle and Evangelist (festival)
- 28 The Holy Innocents, Martyrs (festival)
- 29 David
- 31 Eve of the Circumcision and Name of Jesus (Feast of Christ)
New Year's Eve

Walking Together in the Word

November 27–December 2, 2023

This devotional material is based on Bible readings for Sunday, December 3.

Advent 1

The Gospel: Mark 13:24–37

24 “But in those days, following that distress, “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; 25 the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’ 26 “At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. 27 And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens. 28 “Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. 29 Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. 30 Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. 31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. 32 “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 33 Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. 34 It’s like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch. 35 “Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. 36 If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. 37 What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’”

Devotion on the Gospel

Jesus tells a little Advent parable: Once upon a time there was a fig tree. As time went on, green leaves sprouted on that tree. It’s a sure sign that summer will soon be here.

That’s the story. Doesn’t sound like much. Doesn’t sound like any kind of lesson. But Jesus explains: As the sprouting green leaves are a sure sign that summer is coming, so there are signs all around that I will be coming back again. So stay awake. Don’t get complacent. Always be ready.

But how easy it is to get distracted. How easy it is to lose focus. How easy it is to have more “important” things to do. And we ignore the warning.

Don’t ignore Christ’s warning! I’m coming, He warns. Be prepared, He says. It’s relevant! It’s important! It’s serious!

And it’s wonderful! How wonderful that second coming will be for we who, by the work of the Holy Spirit, are prepared, having faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. It’s something we can look forward to with joy, with excitement, with anticipation!

And so we cry out, “Come, Lord Jesus!” That’s the cry of Advent. That’s your cry and my cry. That’s our cry because we know Jesus and how He was born for us, died for us, rose for us - how He loves us, forgives us, blesses us. Come, Lord Jesus! We’re ready.

Notes, Thoughts, Questions

*Jesus warns: “Be on guard! Be alert!”
What does Jesus mean by those words?*

What attitude does Jesus encourage His followers to have regarding the end of the world?

While we long for Jesus to come, why are we also thankful that He delays His return? (See 2 Peter 3:3-9)

Notes, Thoughts, Questions

What words does Isaiah use to describe the Israelites' relationship to God, and God's relationship to the Israelites?

What hope does Isaiah still hold in spite of Israel's rebellion against God? (See verse 8.)

*Verse to Remember:
Isaiah 64:8*

St. Paul thanks God for the church in Corinth. What specific things does he thank God for? (see vv. 4-7)

Paul writes: "He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus." How can Paul speak with such confidence? What confidence and comfort do these words give you?

The Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 64:1-9

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains would tremble before you!

2 As when fire sets twigs ablaze
and causes water to boil,

come down to make your name known to your enemies
and cause the nations to quake before you!

3 For when you did awesome things that we did not expect,
you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.

4 Since ancient times no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,

no eye has seen any God besides you,
who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.

5 You come to the help of those who gladly do right,
who remember your ways.

But when we continued to sin against them,
you were angry.

How then can we be saved?

6 All of us have become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags;

we all shrivel up like a leaf,
and like the wind our sins sweep us away.

7 No one calls on your name
or strives to lay hold of you;

for you have hidden your face from us
and have given us over to our sins.

8 Yet you, Lord, are our Father.
We are the clay, you are the potter;
we are all the work of your hand.

9 Do not be angry beyond measure, Lord;
do not remember our sins forever.

Oh, look on us, we pray,
for we are all your people.

The Epistle: 1 Corinthians 1:3-9

3 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

4 I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. 5 For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge— 6 God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. 7 Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. 8 He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

The Psalm: Psalm 80:1-7

- 1 Hear us, Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock.
You who sit enthroned between the cherubim,
shine forth 2 before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh.
Awaken your might;
come and save us.
- 3 Restore us, O God;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.
- 4 How long, Lord God Almighty,
will your anger smolder
against the prayers of your people?
- 5 You have fed them with the bread of tears;
you have made them drink tears by the bowlful.
- 6 You have made us an object of derision to our neighbors,
and our enemies mock us.
- 7 Restore us, God Almighty;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.

Restore us, God
Almighty;
make your face
shine on us,
that we may be
saved.

Notes, Thoughts, Questions

Psalm 80 begins with a familiar picture of God and His people: the Shepherd and His flock. What is it about the image of the Shepherd that gives encouragement, comfort, and peace to you? (see Psalm 23, John 10)

Verse 3 includes a blessing that should be familiar to us: "Make your face shine upon us." Where do we often hear those beautiful words? (see Numbers 6:24-26)

Notes, Thoughts, Questions

Verse 2 speaks of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The Palm Sunday story is even the alternate Gospel reading for this 1st Sunday in Advent.

Why is the Palm Sunday story an appropriate text to hear and sing about as we enter into the season of Advent?

The Hymn: O Lord, How Shall I Meet You *LSB 334*

O Lord, how shall I meet You,
How welcome You aright?
Your people long to greet You,
My hope, my heart's delight!
O kindle, Lord most holy,
Your lamp within my breast
To do in spirit lowly
All that may please You best.

Your Zion strews before You
Green boughs and fairest palms;
And I too will adore You
With joyous songs and psalms.
My heart shall bloom forever
For You with praises new
And from Your name shall never
Withhold the honor due.

I lay in fetters, groaning;
You came to set me free.
I stood, my shame bemoaning;
You came to honor me.
A glorious crown You give me,
A treasure safe on high
That will not fail or leave me
As earthly riches fly.

Love caused Your incarnation;
Love brought You down to me.
Your thirst for my salvation
Procured my liberty.
Oh, love beyond all telling,
That led You to embrace
In love, all love excelling,
Our lost and fallen race.

Sin's debt, that fearful burden,
Cannot His love erase;
Your guilt the Lord will pardon
And cover by His grace.
He comes, for you procuring
The peace of sin forgiv'n,
His children thus securing
Eternal life in heav'n.

He comes to judge the
nations,
A terror to His foes,
A light of consolations
And blessed hope to those
Who love the Lord's
appearing.
O glorious Sun, now come,
Send forth Your beams so
cheering,
And guide us safely home.

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Faith + Life Connections

Have you ever sat at the window, waiting for a special visitor to come? You know they're coming soon, but you don't know the exact time, so you wait and watch, eyes glued on the road. Jesus tell us to watch for His second coming. No one knows the day or hour He'll come, so we keep watch! How? We pray and read His Word and worship with other Christians. How awesome it will be when He arrives!

Mark 13:24-37

Take out some clay or playdough and make something. What did you make? Isaiah calls God the potter (one who makes clay pots) and us the clay. Talk about how God made you. You are His special creation!

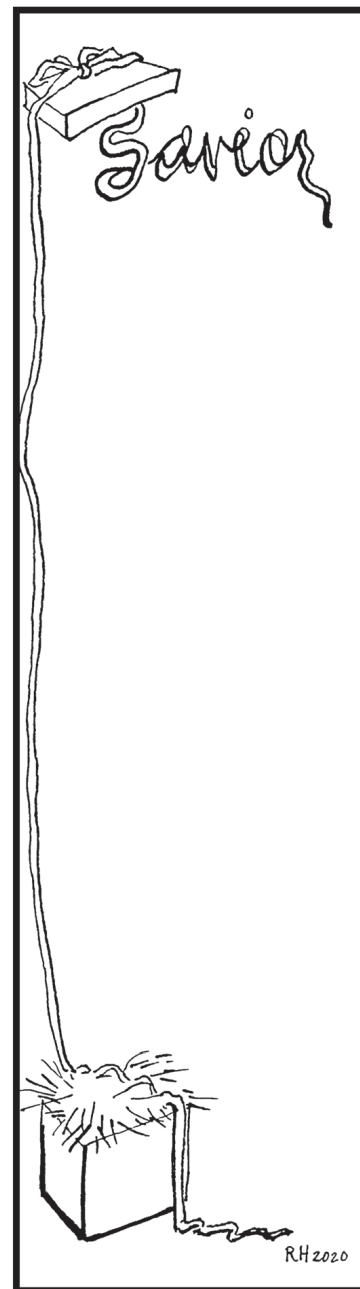
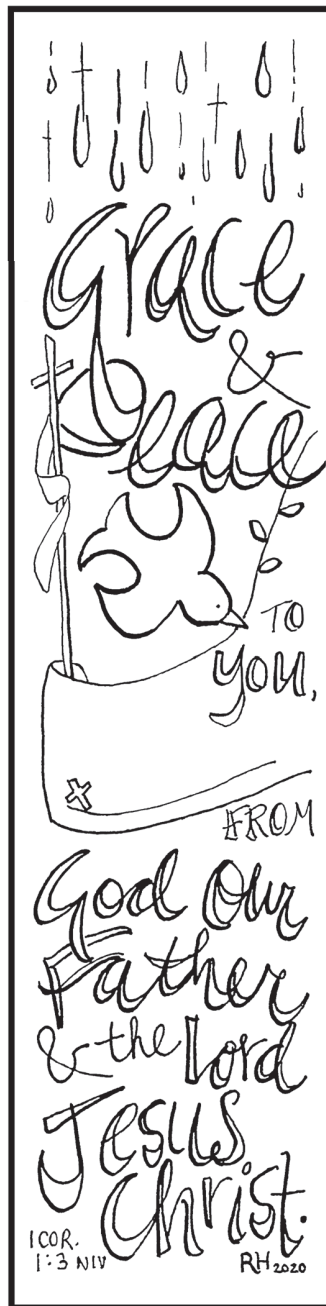
Isaiah 64:1-9

Read verse 7 of the psalm. Then look up Numbers 6:24-26. Think about this blessing and God's face shining on you and giving you peace!

Psalms 80:1-7

Memorize:

Yet you, Lord, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. *Isaiah 64:8*



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Devote Yourselves to Prayer *Colossians 4:2*

Throughout the week, write prayers of praise, thanksgiving, and requests on slips of paper and place them in your prayer bowl. Take turns praying when you gather for devotions.

Walking Together in the Word

December 4–December 9, 2023

This devotional material is based on Bible readings for Sunday, December 10.

Advent 2

The Gospel: Mark 1:1-8

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

1 The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, 2 as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way” – 3 “a voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”

4 And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. 6 John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. 8 I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Devotion on the Gospel

A voice is crying out in the wilderness. It’s that unkempt and uncouth prophet who eats bugs and wears camel skin: John the Baptist. And what is he crying out? He preaches repentance—repentance in preparation for the coming of the Lord. Repent! Prepare to meet your God! Prepare to receive your Savior! Jesus is coming! Change your ways!

Do we have crooked paths in our lives that need to be straightened out? Are there paths that we tend to take that we know are off track? Do we have rough places in our lives that need to be smoothed out? Is it the way we talk to people, our loved ones and family members even? Is it anger or a lack of forgiveness that we have in our heart? Is it a grudge we’re nursing and won’t let go of? John says come to the wilderness and repent!

Repent. That’s the message of John. But that’s not John’s only message. John is also the bringer of some good news—some very good news. In that sinful world in which he lived, John preached hope to those who came to him. John says, there’s One coming who’s so much more powerful than I. The Christ is coming. The Messiah is coming. Your Savior is coming!

John brings us to the wilderness to point out our sins, yes, but also to point us to our Savior. John came to point to Him who was born as a baby, Him who came to live with us, Him who came to die for us, Him who came to give us the power to change, the power to repent, the power to live for Him. John brings us to the wilderness to show us Jesus. And that gives us hope, that gives us comfort, that gives us peace as we await Him who is to come—our Advent King.

Notes, Thoughts, Questions

Notice how Mark 1:1 echoes Genesis 1:1. Mark tells us that God is making a new beginning. What is it the beginning of?

What was John the Baptist’s role according to Mark and the Old Testament prophecies? How did he carry it out? What was His message?

Notes, Thoughts, Questions

In what ways does this reading point to Jesus and who He is and what He does?

Three "voices" are mentioned in this passage (verses 3,6,9). How does each voice show how comfort will come about? Who in particular is this voice linked to in the New Testament?

The Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.
2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and proclaim to her
that her hard service has been completed,
that her sin has been paid for,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.
3 A voice of one calling:
"In the wilderness prepare
the way for the Lord;
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.
4 Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.
5 And the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."
6 A voice says, "Cry out."
And I said, "What shall I cry?"
"All people are like grass,
and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.
7 The grass withers and the flowers fall,
because the breath of the Lord blows on them.
Surely the people are grass.
8 The grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of our God endures forever."
9 You who bring good news to Zion,
go up on a high mountain.
You who bring good news to Jerusalem,
lift up your voice with a shout,
lift it up, do not be afraid;
say to the towns of Judah,
"Here is your God!"
10 See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power,
and he rules with a mighty arm.
See, his reward is with him,
and his recompense accompanies him.
11 He tends his flock like a shepherd:
He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young.

The Epistle: 2 Peter 3:8-14

8 But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. 9 The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.

11 Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives 12 as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. 13 But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.

14 So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.

The Psalm: Psalm 85

You, Lord, showed favor to your land;
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.

2 You forgave the iniquity of your people
and covered all their sins.

3 You set aside all your wrath
and turned from your fierce anger.

4 Restore us again, God our Savior,
and put away your displeasure toward us.

5 Will you be angry with us forever?
Will you prolong your anger through all generations?

6 Will you not revive us again,
that your people may rejoice in you?

7 Show us your unfailing love, Lord,
and grant us your salvation.

8 I will listen to what God the Lord says;
he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants—
but let them not turn to folly.

9 Surely his salvation is near those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.

10 Love and faithfulness meet together;
righteousness and peace kiss each other.

11 Faithfulness springs forth from the earth,
and righteousness looks down from heaven.

12 The Lord will indeed give what is good,
and our land will yield its harvest.

13 Righteousness goes before him
and prepares the way for his steps.

Notes, Thoughts, Questions

In Peter's day, some false teachers believed that Christ would never return. Why might some people think so today? What reason does Peter give for the delay in Christ's second coming? (see verse 9)

Even though the day of the Lord sounds ominous with destruction and fire and melting, how do Peter's words provide hope and comfort for God's people?

This psalm is a communal prayer for the Lord to restore His people and renew His mercies after a time of suffering and distress. What hope and comfort does this give us today?

Read again verses 8-13. Note the answer to the prayer of God's people and write down the attributes and actions of God that the Psalm describes (eg. peace, salvation, steadfast love...)

Notes, Thoughts, Questions

This hymn closely follows the text of the Old Testament reading from Isaiah 40. How do the words and melody of the hymn give peace and comfort to those experiencing the pangs of sin and its consequences?

The Hymn: Comfort, Comfort Ye My People *LSB* 347

“Comfort, comfort ye My people,
Speak ye peace,” thus saith our God;

“Comfort those who sit in darkness,
Mourning 'neath their sorrows' load.

Speak ye to Jerusalem

Of the peace that waits for them;

Tell her that her sins I cover

And her warfare now is over.”

Yea, her sins our God will pardon,

Blotting out each dark misdeed;

All that well deserved His anger

He no more will see or heed.

She hath suffered many_a day,

Now her griefs have passed away;

God will change her pining sadness

Into ever-springing gladness.

Hark, the herald's voice is crying

In the desert far and near,

Calling sinners to repentance,

Since the Kingdom now is here.

O that warning cry obey!

Now prepare for God a way;

Let the valleys rise to meet Him

And the hills bow down to greet Him.

Make ye straight what long was crooked;

Make the rougher places plain.

Let your hearts be true and humble,

As befits His holy reign.

For the glory of the Lord

Now o'er earth is shed abroad,

And all flesh shall see the token

That His Word is never broken.

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Play "Telephone." One person whispers a message to the next, and so on. Is the last message the same as the first? John the Baptist had a message, but he didn't whisper it—he shouted it! Repent! Say you're sorry for your sins! Jesus is coming! It's a message we listen to today. Tell Jesus you're sorry—He loves and forgives you.

Mark 1:1-8

Who comforts you when you are sad? God comforts us with His Word. He says, "I love you! I forgive you! I have sent Jesus to save you!"

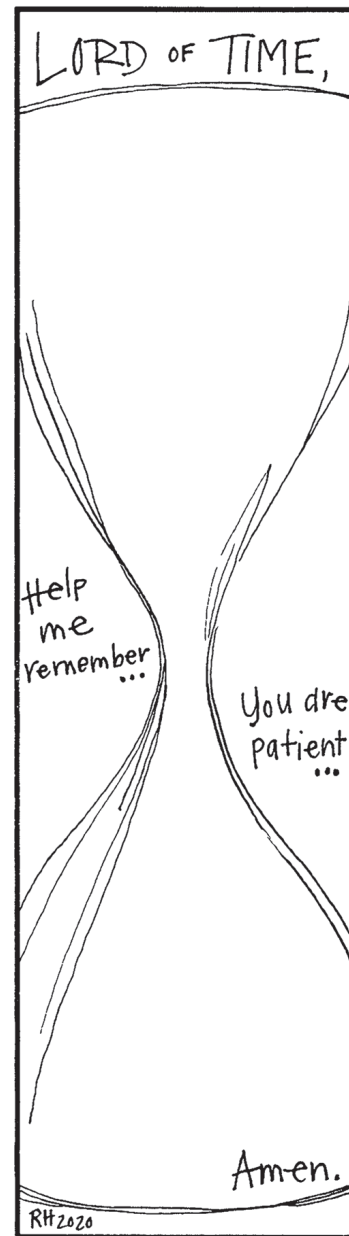
Isaiah 40:1-11

Do you ever wonder when Jesus is coming back? He promised He would return, so why is it taking so long? God isn't slow—He wants more people to repent and believe in Him! Who can you tell about Jesus this week?

2 Peter 3:8-14

Bible Verse to Memorize:

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. 2 Peter 3:9



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Devote Yourselves to Prayer *Colossians 4:2*

Throughout the week, write prayers of praise, thanksgiving, and requests on slips of paper and place them in your prayer bowl. Take turns praying when you gather for devotions.

Walking Together in the Word

December 11–December 16, 2023

This devotional material is based on Bible readings for Sunday, December 17.

Advent 3

The Gospel: John 1:6–8, 19–28

6 There was a man sent from God whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe.

8 He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

19 Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. 20 He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Messiah." 21 They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?"

He answered, "No." 22 Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

23 John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

24 Now the Pharisees who had been sent 25 questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

26 "I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. 27 He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

28 This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

Devotion on the Gospel

John the Baptist again! This time from the pen of the Apostle John. Last week we heard him cry out "repent!" and saw him pointing to the Savior. This week St. John makes it clear that John the Baptist was the forerunner of the Christ. John pointed to Jesus who was to come; he was the herald for "the Light," Jesus, who was to come into the world.

Oh what a dark world of sin it was! But John the Baptist shouts out: It won't be dark for long! The Light is coming! The Savior is coming! Jesus is coming! He is the Light that shines in our dark world of sin. He shows us that we have a God of life. He shows us that we have a God of hope. He shows us that we have a God of compassion. He shows us that we have a God of love.

And His light shines as He shows us His manger. He came so lowly and humbly—born for us! His light shines as He shows us the cross—and we see sins paid for, sins forgiven. His light shines as He shows us the empty tomb—death swallowed up in victory!

He shines His light into our world. He shines His light into our lives. He shines His light into our hearts. And we praise the One who breaks the darkness.

Notes, Thoughts, Questions

John the Baptist was a very popular preacher. Some thought he might even be the Messiah. But in what ways was Jesus the Messiah different from John the Baptist? (see John 1:6-8)

Humanly speaking, how might have John the Baptist's testimony of who he was (and who he was not) been difficult to give? Instead of drawing attention to himself, who does John the Baptist consistently point to?

Notes, Thoughts, Questions

Anoint means to rub or sprinkle on or apply ointment. Priests were anointed for their special service to the LORD. See Exodus 28:41. In the New Testament, anointing has the idea of being filled with, and blessed by, the Holy Spirit. Believers are anointed with the Holy Spirit at Baptism.

What does the water and the Holy Spirit open for you in Baptism? See John 3:5.

As Christians under the New Covenant, where does our anointing originate? See 1 John 2:20.

Christians find joy, not only rejoicing in happy things, but in the midst of sorrows also. Christians can rejoice always because our joy isn't based in circumstances, but in God.

What comfort do you find in knowing that circumstances change, but God doesn't?

What are you rejoicing in today?

The Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, 2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, 3 and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor. 4 They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.

8 "For I, the Lord, love justice; I hate robbery and wrongdoing. In my faithfulness I will reward my people and make an everlasting covenant with them.⁹ Their descendants will be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples. All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people the Lord has blessed."¹⁰ I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. ¹¹ For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.

The Epistle: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray continually, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. ¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not treat prophecies with contempt ²¹ but test them all; hold on to what is good, ²² reject every kind of evil. ²³ May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

*Rejoice always, pray continually,
give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is God's will for you in
Christ Jesus.*

The Psalm: Psalm 126

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dreamed.

2 Our mouths were filled with laughter,
our tongues with songs of joy.

Then it was said among the nations,
“The Lord has done great things for them.”

3 The Lord has done great things for us,
and we are filled with joy.

4 Restore our fortunes, Lord,
like streams in the Negev.

5 Those who sow with tears
will reap with songs of joy.

6 Those who go out weeping,
carrying seed to sow,
will return with songs of joy,
carrying sheaves with them.



Notes, Thoughts, Questions

Verse to Remember:
Psalm 126:3

The Psalms of Ascent (Psalms 120-134) were sung by worshipers as they made the journey up to Jerusalem for the annual feasts. Psalm 126 was likely written after the captives returned from the Babylonian exile.

As you read these verses—what is the singer's hope?

It has been said, “We are pilgrims, but we are also disciples—always moving and always learning.”

How does Good Friday and Easter morning connect to this Psalm?

Notes,
Thoughts,
Questions

Almost every line of this hymn is related to a passage from Scripture. Look up the following passages and match them to the text of the hymn as you are assured that "Christ is near!"

Romans 13:11-12
Isaiah 60:1-3
John 1:29
Romans 3:23-24
Luke 21:25-27
Psalm 103:10,14

The Hymn: Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Sounding *LSB 345*

Hark! A thrilling voice is sounding!
"Christ is near," we hear it say.
"Cast away the works of darkness,
All you children of the day!"

Startled at the solemn warning,
Let the earthbound soul arise;
Christ, its sun, all sloth dispelling,
Shines upon the morning skies.

See, the Lamb, so long expected,
Comes with pardon down from heav'n.
Let us haste, with tears of sorrow,
One and all, to be forgiv'n;

So, when next He comes in glory
And the world is wrapped in fear,
He will shield us with His mercy
And with words of love draw near.

Honor, glory, might, dominion
To the Father and the Son
With the ever-living Spirit
While eternal ages run!

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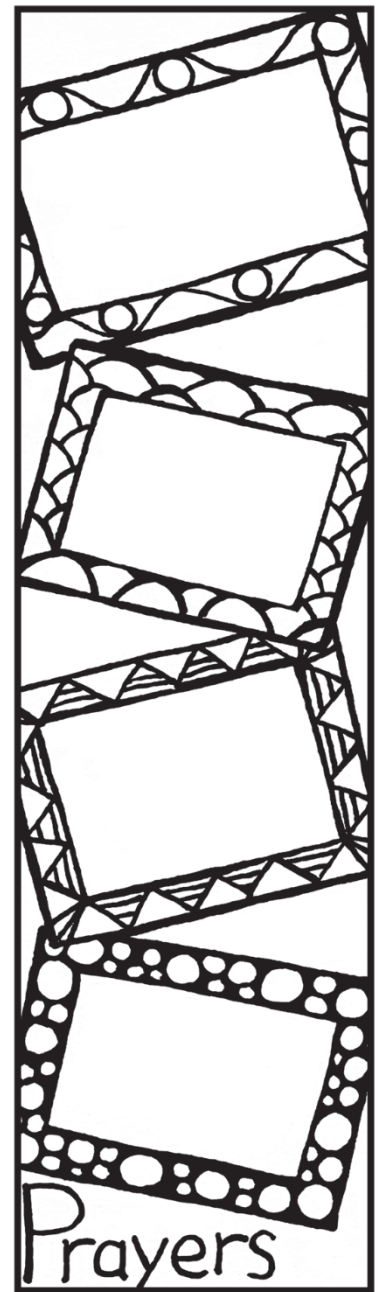
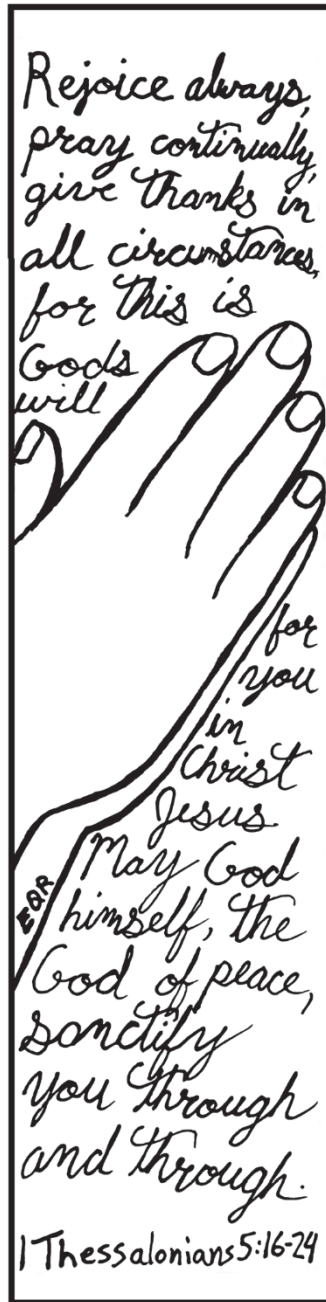
Faith + Life Connections

Turn off the lights for a moment. Then light a candle or turn on a flashlight. How wonderful to have light to help you see! John said that Jesus is the Light. John the Baptist pointed to Jesus, who lights the way to God the Father and shows us what a loving, forgiving God we have.
John 1:6-8, 19-28

What do you do when you have some good news, like “Grandma’s coming!” or “My tooth finally came out!”? You share it, right? The prophet Isaiah had good news for God’s people: God will set you free! He will save you! It’s the good news about Jesus, and we have it too—share it!
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Rejoice *always*? Pray *all the time*? Give thanks *no matter what*? Even when we don’t feel like it? Yes, says, God! Why? Because Jesus saved us and loves us. How? The Holy Spirit will help us! So Rejoice! Pray! Give thanks!
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Memorize:
The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.
Psalm 126:3



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Devote Yourselves to Prayer *Colossians 4:2*
Throughout the week, write prayers of praise, thanksgiving, and requests on slips of paper and place them in your prayer bowl. Take turns praying when you gather for devotions.

Walking Together in the Word

December 18–December 23, 2023

This devotional material is based on Bible readings for Sunday, December 24.

Advent 4

The Gospel: Luke 1:26–38

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, 27 to a virgin betrothed[a] to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" 29 But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. 30 And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

34 And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

35 And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. 36 And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

Devotion on the Gospel

Did you catch the angel's words? When the Gabriel announced to Mary that she would be the mother of Jesus, the angel said that the baby who would be born would be great.

"Great." That may just be one of the most overused, misused, and abused words in the English language! The word "great" is used so much that it isn't so great anymore! And that's too bad. Many are called great. But not many live up to the title. But Jesus does. Jesus is great.

But it wasn't the place where He was born that made Jesus great. It wasn't His mother or family that made Him great. It wasn't the crowds He hung out with—they were about as far away from great as you could get. There was nothing great about His followers either. Oh, they argued about who was the greatest, but a more ragtag group of guys you couldn't find!

And yet the angel said to Mary that the child she would bear would be great. He would be great because He was the Messiah, the very Son of God. It was who He was—and what He would do—that made Him great.

Jesus came to redeem all. "Greater love has no man than that he lay down his life for his friends." Jesus laid down His life for you—to make you His friend. St. Paul says, "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Now that's greatness! Greatness of heart and love and grace.

It is what made Jesus truly great. It is what made Him the greatest. Jesus came to this world in order to die—and to rise—to give you and me life. And that's great! In fact, there is no one greater.

Notes, Thoughts, Questions

Mary could not understand the mystery of her Son's birth, but she believed God's word from the angel and humbly submitted to His will. How is the Virgin Mary an example for all Christians?

*Verse to Remember:
Luke 1:37*

The Bible teaches that Jesus is true God and true man. Why is it necessary for Jesus to be true God and true man? Look up the explanation of the Second Article of the Creed (Part 1) in Luther's Small Catechism to review.

Notes, Thoughts, Questions

Notice how David sought God's will. How might David's action be an example for us as we make decisions in our life, our family, or our church?

David's focus was on building an earthly temple for the Lord. But God's focus was not on what David would do for Him, but what He would do for David: building an everlasting house and kingdom (verse 16). In whom does this promise to David come true?

The Old Testament Reading: 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

After the king was settled in his palace and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, 2 he said to Nathan the prophet, "Here I am, living in a house of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent."

3 Nathan replied to the king, "Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the Lord is with you."

4 But that night the word of the Lord came to Nathan, saying:

5 "Go and tell my servant David, 'This is what the Lord says: Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in? 6 I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling. 7 Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?"'"

8 "Now then, tell my servant David, 'This is what the Lord Almighty says: I took you from the pasture, from tending the flock, and appointed you ruler over my people Israel. 9 I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have cut off all your enemies from before you. Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men on earth. 10 And I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people will not oppress them anymore, as they did at the beginning 11 and have done ever since the time I appointed leaders over my people Israel. I will also give you rest from all your enemies.

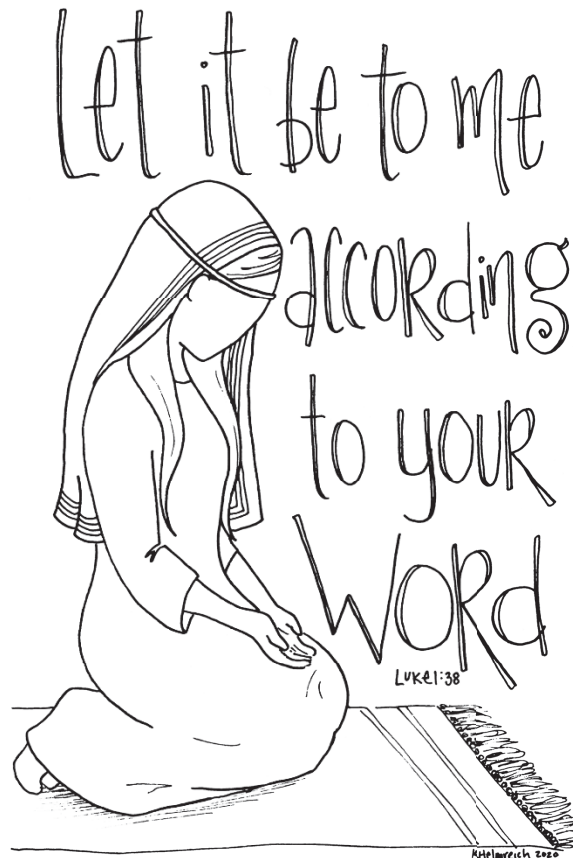
"The Lord declares to you that the Lord himself will establish a house for you:

16 Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever."

The Lord declares to you that the Lord himself
will establish a house for you:
"Your house and your kingdom will endure
forever before me; your throne will be
established forever."

The Epistle: Romans 16:25-27

25 Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, 26 but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith— 27 to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.



The Psalm: Psalm 89:1-5

I will sing of the Lord's great love forever;
with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known
through all generations.
2 I will declare that your love stands firm forever,
that you have established your faithfulness in heaven itself.
3 You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
I have sworn to David my servant,
4 'I will establish your line forever
and make your throne firm through all generations.'"
5 The heavens praise your wonders, Lord,
your faithfulness too, in the assembly of the holy ones.

Notes, Thoughts, Questions

The final words of Paul's letter to the Romans summarizes the essence of the Gospel. What is the proclamation about? When was it revealed? For whom? To what end?

How do Paul's words to the Roman Christians assure them (and us) that God has been and will continue to be active in their lives and in their world?

"Faithfulness" is a word repeated three times in these five verses. What comfort does it give you that the Lord is faithful?

Some have called Psalm 89 a "poetic expression" of 2 Samuel 7 (see this week's Old Testament reading). Re-read both texts and note the similarities.

Notes,
Thoughts,
Questions

Though we do not worship her, Mary is held in high honor because she is the mother of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. How does the hymn express the honor we give to Mary?

The Hymn: The Angel Gabriel from Heaven Came *LSB 356*

The angel Gabriel from heaven came,
With wings as drifted snow, with eyes as flame:
“All hail to thee, O lowly maiden Mary,
Most highly favored lady.”

Gloria!

“For know a blessèd mother thou shalt be,
All generations laud and honor thee;
Thy son shall be Emmanuel, by seers foretold,
Most highly favored lady.”

Gloria!

Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head;
“To me be as it pleaseth God,” she said.
“My soul shall laud and magnify God’s holy name.”
Most highly favored lady,

Gloria!

Of her, Emmanuel, the Christ, was born
In Bethlehem all on a Christmas morn,
And Christian folk throughout the world will ever say:
“Most highly favored lady.”

Gloria!

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Faith + Life Connections

How would you feel if an angel appeared to you? Happy? Surprised? Afraid? Mary might have felt all of these at once. She wondered how she could be the mother of Jesus, our Savior! Remember what the angel said to her? Nothing is impossible with God. What a surprising, loving, amazing God we have!

Luke 1:26-38

Chances are, you're looking forward to gift-giving—and receiving—this Christmas, right? King David wanted to build a house for God, but instead, God gave David a gift—the promise that the Savior would come from his family line—what a gift!

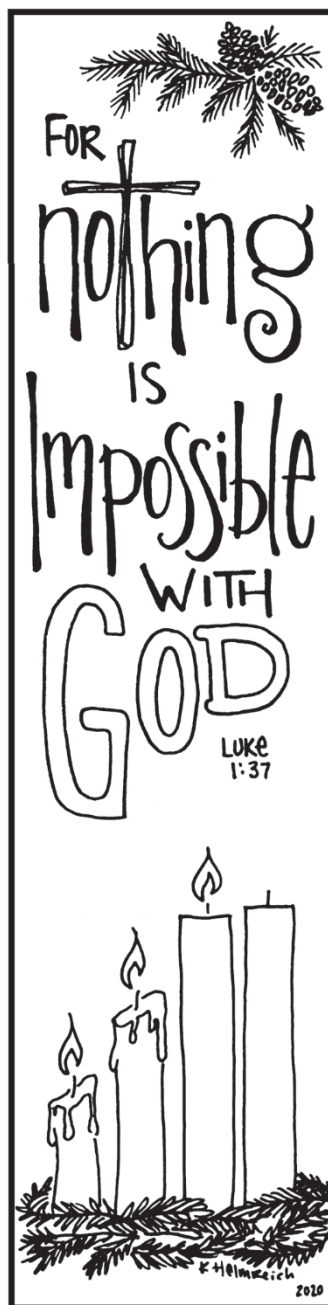
2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

In a few weeks, the mystery of what is inside wrapped packages will be revealed. The time and the way that God would send a Savior was a mystery for years—but now God's Word tells everyone how Jesus has come!

Romans 16:25-27

Memorize:

For nothing will be impossible with God.
Luke 1:37



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Devote Yourselves to Prayer *Colossians 4:2*

Throughout the week, write prayers of praise, thanksgiving, and requests on slips of paper and place them in your prayer bowl. Take turns praying when you gather for devotions.

Walking Together in the Word

December 25–December 30, 2023

This devotional material is based on Bible readings for Sunday, December 31.

Christmas 1

The Gospel: Luke 2:22–40

22 When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”[a]), 24 and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.” 25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. 26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. 27 Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, 28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: 29 “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace.

30 For my eyes have seen your salvation, 31 which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: 32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.”

33 The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, 35 so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

36 There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37 and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. 38 Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. 39 When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. 40 And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.

Devotion on the Gospel

Have you noticed how the Christmas story is filled with ordinary people? Mary and Joseph are just a poor couple from backwater Nazareth. They were pretty ordinary folks, but ordinary folks who were used by God for extraordinary purposes.

Lowly shepherds watching their flocks in the middle of the night become the awe-struck audience of the angels. Those shepherds were some pretty ordinary folks, but ordinary folks whom God used to spread the “good news of great joy.”

And then there’s Simeon and Anna. Pretty ordinary folks. Here’s how the Bible describes Simeon: “There was a man in Jerusalem.” Just an ordinary guy from the city. And Anna? Her claim to fame according to Luke 2 is that she is old!

But there is something special about these two. They were always open to the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. It is why Simeon is described as righteous and devout and waiting for the consolation of Israel. It is why Anna worshiped at the temple night and day. It is why they received the Christ into their arms and proclaimed God’s praise.

You and me? We’re pretty ordinary too, aren’t we? But through the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and lives, God has some pretty extraordinary things to share with us. As the Spirit works in us, we see His extraordinary love and forgiveness and mercy and grace. As the Spirit works in us, through His leading and His action and His prompting, like Simeon and Anna, we too take the Christ into our arms and proclaim God’s praise.

Notes, Thoughts, Questions

Re-read Luke 2:29–32. This hymn of Simeon has been called the Nunc Dimittis. The first words of the Latin translation mean “You now dismiss.” Sing from Lutheran Service Book one of the versifications of these words (see LSB 165, 211, 937, and 938).

What kind of example do Simeon and Anna set for us as they encounter the Christ-child?

Notes, Thoughts, Questions

In the Old Testament, the Sabbath provided time for physical rest. (See Exodus 23:12)

The Sabbath provided time for spiritual rest through worship, fellowship, and private devotion to God's Word and promises. (See Deuteronomy 6.)

What is the significance of the Sabbath for the Church today?

What debts of yours has God cancelled in Christ?

God sent His Son, Jesus, into the world to become man and to redeem (buy back) humanity by His death and resurrection. God sent His Spirit so that people might once again be His own through faith in His Son, Jesus. He is the world's only hope, life and salvation.

What is a Christian? See the Introduction to Luther's Small Catechism.

What has God done in your life?

The Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 61:10-62:3

I delight greatly in the Lord;
my soul rejoices in my God.

For he has clothed me with garments of salvation
and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness,
as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

11 For as the soil makes the sprout come up
and a garden causes seeds to grow,
so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness
and praise spring up before all nations.

62 For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
for Jerusalem's sake I will not remain quiet,
till her vindication shines out like the dawn,
her salvation like a blazing torch.

2 The nations will see your vindication,
and all kings your glory;
you will be called by a new name
that the mouth of the Lord will bestow.

3 You will be a crown of splendor in the Lord's hand,
a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

The Epistle: Galatians 4:4-7

4 But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. 6 Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father."

7 So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.

*When the set time had fully come,
God sent his Son, born of a woman,
born under the law, to redeem those
under the law, that we might receive
adoption to sonship.*

The Psalm: Psalm 111

Praise the Lord.

- I will extol the Lord with all my heart
in the council of the upright and in the assembly.
- 2 Great are the works of the Lord;
they are pondered by all who delight in them.
- 3 Glorious and majestic are his deeds,
and his righteousness endures forever.
- 4 He has caused his wonders to be remembered;
the Lord is gracious and compassionate.
- 5 He provides food for those who fear him;
he remembers his covenant forever.
- 6 He has shown his people the power of his works,
giving them the lands of other nations.
- 7 The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.
- 8 They are established for ever and ever,
enacted in faithfulness and uprightness.
- 9 He provided redemption for his people;
he ordained his covenant forever—
holy and awesome is his name.
- 10 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
all who follow his precepts have good understanding.
To him belongs eternal praise.

*The fear of the Lord is
the beginning of
wisdom;
all who follow his
precepts have good
understanding.*

Notes, Thoughts, Questions

*What does God
require of us in the
First Commandment?
We should fear, love
and trust in God
above all things.*

*To fear God is not to
be afraid of Him, but
to respect and be in
awe of Him. What
are some reasons the
psalmist gives for
fearing, or respecting,
our awesome God?*

Notes,
Thoughts,
Questions

Stanza 3 of this hymn is a beautiful prayer that we would be presented in glory as forgiven children of God. Take a moment to speak or sing this prayer.

The Hymn: In His Temple Now Behold Him *LSB* 519

In His temple now behold Him,
See the long-expected Lord;
Ancient prophets had foretold Him,
God has now fulfilled His word.
Now to praise Him, His redeemed
Shall break forth with one accord.

In the arms of her who bore Him,
Virgin pure, behold Him lie
While His aged saints adore Him
Ere in perfect faith they die.
Alleluia, alleluia!
Lo, the incarnate God Most High!

Jesus, by Your presentation,
When they blessed You, weak and poor,
Make us see Your great salvation,
Seal us with Your promise sure;
And present us in Your glory
To Your Father, cleansed and pure.

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Faith + Life Connections

You've been waiting and waiting, and finally Christmas has come! God's people had been waiting and waiting—and finally, Jesus came! When Mary and Joseph entered the temple with baby Jesus, Simeon and Anna rejoiced! The waiting was over! Jesus, the Savior, is born. Sing your favorite Christmas song to celebrate!

Luke 2:22-40

Who calls you their daughter or son? People who take care of you. People who love you. There is someone else who calls you daughter or son. Do you know who it is? It's God! Because of Jesus, you are God's child. He is your heavenly Father who loves you, forgives you, and will always be there for you.

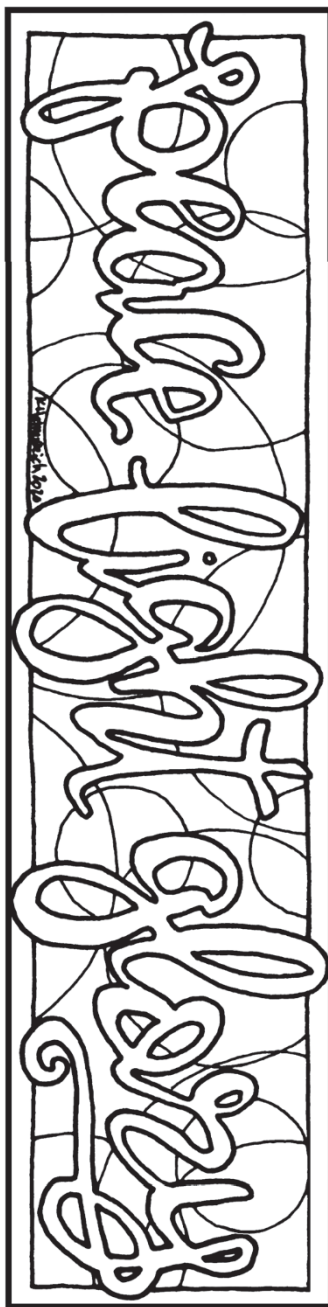
Galatians 4:4-7

Our God is great! Listen to Psalm 111 and make a list of all the things God does for us. Thank Him with a song!

Psalm 111

Memorize:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. Psalm 111:13



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Devote Yourself to Prayer *Colossians 4:2*

Throughout the week, write prayers of praise, thanksgiving, and requests on slips of paper and place them in your prayer bowl. Take turns praying when you gather for devotions.

