

When Jesus Comes

Devotions for the Season of Advent
Corresponding with the Readings of the Church (ILCW Series C)

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If there's a season of the church year that doesn't get any respect, it's got to be Advent. By the time it begins, the shopping stampede has already begun in the stores and lights are going up on roof lines around the neighborhood. Christmas is right around the corner, and all of December is consumed with its preparation. (When was the last time you were invited to an *Advent* party?)

Certainly, Advent leads us into Christmas, where we celebrate our Lord's advent—His coming—in the flesh, born of Mary. But there's more: Jesus has promised that He will come again on the Last Day in an advent so glorious that every knee shall bow before Him. Until then, Jesus comes to us in His means of grace, an advent veiled in Word and Sacrament.

All three of these advents are related, and we cannot do without any of them. If Jesus has not come in the flesh and gone to the cross, there is only dread, not joy, for us in His glorious return on Judgment Day. Likewise, if He does not come in His means of grace to give us forgiveness, we have no hope because we remain unforgiven. And if Jesus is not going to return to deliver us to heaven, we remain in the grave.

All three of these advents are part of the season that gets no respect. I look forward to Christmas along with everybody else. But until then, let us not rush past the Good News that Advent holds.

For while we rejoice in the Incarnation, it is always a blessed story when Jesus comes.

A blessed Advent to you.

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Advent 1: Sunday**Read Psalm 25:1-9**

Lead me in Your truth and teach me, For You are the God of my salvation; On You I wait all the day. (Psalm 25:5)

If you have any children in the house, you have an especially acute sense that Christmas is coming. In other words, they don't stop talking about the holiday on the horizon, and from their perspective it's going to be forever before December 25 arrives. For you, the feeling might be different: there's so much to do, and so little time.

Advent is a time of waiting and preparation, waiting and preparing to celebrate the birth of Christ. Waiting and preparation go together: as you wait, it's wise to get ready. That's true for expectant parents, military troops and students before finals week. The preparing also helps the time go by. Sometimes, though, there's nothing to do but wait. Wait and see if the treatment helps. Wait for your friend to say whether or not he'll give you another chance. Wait for the verdict. Wait and see if you've gotten the job. That's agonizing time.

David was in such a time when he wrote Psalm 25. Surrounded by enemies and treacherous followers, there was nothing left for him to do but wait—wait for the Lord to deliver him. He prayed that the Lord would not put him to shame in defeat. He prayed that the Lord would not hold his sins against him. But he also prayed that the Lord would lead him in truth and teach him—“For you are the God of my salvation.” Here was David's hope: even though there was nothing more that he could do, the God of His salvation was still at work. While it was given to David to wait, he could be certain that the Lord was *doing*. God was working David's deliverance in His perfect, secret wisdom. In some ways, that wait would go on a long time: it would be centuries before the Son of David was born to deliver David from sin and death. But it would happen.

As this Advent season moves toward Christmas, it may find you waiting for deliverance, too. The devil delights to use such waits to torment you with all sorts of temptations and doubts. Read Psalm 25, and rest assured. No matter what the devil whispers, God does not hold the sins of your youth against you—or the sins of your later years, for that matter. His work and deliverance is often cloaked humbly, so much so that many miss it. But you can be sure that He delivers you. Look at the Infant Son of God in the manger—and then on the cross. Hear the Lord speak to you in His Word, leading you in His truth. Remember your Baptism and receive your Savior in, with and under the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper. There, the Lord waits upon you; so that as you wait you can be sure that you are prepared for salvation—because Jesus has prepared you by His life, death and resurrection.

Jesus, Thy Church with longing eyes For thine expected coming waits.

When will the promised light arise And glory beam from Zion's gates?

E'en now, when tempests round us fall And wintry clouds o'ercast the sky,

Thy words with pleasure we recall And deem that our redemption's nigh.

(TLH 64:1-2)

Advent 1: Monday**Read Jeremiah 33:14-16**

And this is the name by which she will be called: THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.'

(Jeremiah 33:16)

David wasn't the only man to wait for deliverance. Jeremiah was the reluctant prophet to the people of Jerusalem as the end was drawing near. He continued to voice God's call for the people to repent and be saved. For his trouble, he was persecuted; in fact, in chapter 33, he was imprisoned for speaking the truth.

Among the many unrepentant in Judah, there were also the people of God who were praying for deliverance. Outnumbered in a society that had rejected the one true God and defiled the temple—His holy dwelling on earth, they could only watch and pray and trust God's promises. So they waited and watched and prayed...even as the Babylonians knocked down Jerusalem's walls, destroyed the city and temple, enslaved many and killed many more.

But despite the destruction they witnessed, God's promise remained certain. The time would come, He declared, that Jerusalem would be called THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS. Why? Because the Branch of David would come and execute justice and righteousness on the earth (v. 15). In other words, the Savior would be born among David's descendants. He would see that justice was done and evil punished—by suffering God's judgment for the sins of the world! Having suffered for all sin, He would give His righteousness to all those who believed in Him.

Hear this Gospel proclamation from 2 Corinthians 5:21: “[God] made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” In our present day, whole peoples wait for deliverance from tyranny—rescue that may not happen in their lifetime. In our nation, we live with the constant tension of terrorist attacks that could come. Individually, you may be waiting for deliverance from peril, from sickness, from some sin that seeks to hold on tight.

While you may see only trouble, you watch and you wait and you pray, because you know by faith that the Lord's promises are certain. Even if we are subjected to the anguish of those believers in Jeremiah's time, God's Word remains. Jesus, the Branch of David, has suffered God's judgment for your sin. With His forgiveness, He clothes you in His own righteousness. He did so at your Baptism, and He continues to do so now in His Word and Supper. For Jesus' sake, you're righteous before God...and so eternal deliverance is only a matter of time.

Lo, the Lamb, so long expected, Comes with pardon down from heaven.

Let us haste, with tears of sorrow, One and all to be forgiven,

That, when next He comes with glory, And the world is wrapped in fear

He may shield us with His mercy And with words of love draw near.

(TLH 60:3-4)

Advent 1: Tuesday**Read 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13**

...so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints.

(1 Thessalonians 3:13)

A pharmacist recently told me that the vast majority of prescriptions she fills—by far—are for antidepressants. The reasons for depression might be many. For some, circumstances in life have relentlessly beaten them down until their vision inevitably darkened. For others, chronic physical pain has fed an ongoing frustration or suppressed anger. It may be guilt over past actions that changed life for the worse. But among the anguished cries of those who suffer is the plaintive plea of failed expectations: “I’m not who I want to be,” or should be, or could be, or used to be.

We should quickly note that depression and faith are apples and oranges. In other words, depression does not signal a lack of faith any more than optimism indicates God’s favor. Christians who are strong in faith may see only a world of dust and gristle. If you want proof straight from the Bible, look at Jeremiah. Actually, it’s hard to see any of the Old Testament prophets as a happy lot.

Even so, it’s a huge temptation for those who are depressed to infer they are cut off from God. Depression and its causes (injury, guilt, etc.) all conspire to convince the victim that God is loveless; or if God is loving, the victim isn’t whole enough to properly love or believe in return. It can feel as though his heart is far too bruised and blemished to be anywhere near God’s mercy.

Depressed or not, here is news to cling to: your heart is blameless. It’s blameless because it doesn’t depend on you. It depends upon your Savior. He has come in the flesh to save you wholly, to restore you for eternity in body, soul *and* mind. The pains of your body do not reflect the condition of your heart: before God, for Jesus’ sake, your heart is whole and blameless. The dark tunnel of thoughts are no reflection of your heart, which is firmly fixed by faith in the light of Christ.

We often give thanks that Christ’s works are far more certain than our own, which are tainted by sin and evil motive. We give thanks, too, that the Lord’s thoughts toward us are far more sure than our own thoughts about ourselves. Rest in this certain truth: in Christ, your heart is blameless and whole, and so deliverance and healing are coming.

*In God, my faithful God, I trust when dark my road;
Tho' many woes o'ertake me, Yet He will not forsake me.
His love it is doth send them And when 'tis best will end them.*

(TLH 526:1)

Advent 1: Wednesday**Read Luke 21:25-36**

“So you also, when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near.”
(Luke 21:31)

As we prepare to celebrate the Lord’s coming as the infant born to Mary, we dare not forget that He is coming again in glory. The two cannot be divorced: Jesus was born humbly in the flesh for your redemption in order to prepare you for His glorious return on the Last Day. The Lord wants you to be ready—He’s died for you to be ready.

Furthermore, in this text He reveals to you some things to look for so that you might know that all is ready, that the end is near. He speaks of signs in the sun, moon and stars. Like Matthew 21:29, He may here refer to signs that immediately precede His coming; or He may refer to things that happen even now, but that our foolishly “wise” world dismisses as natural anomalies. On earth, we will see nations distressed, perplexed and despairing. The seas and waves will roar. Furthermore, men’s hearts will fail them from fear and dread of what is to come.

Given the recent history of nations in turmoil, hurricanes and tsunamis, and the ongoing fearful threat of nuclear and biological attack, it would seem that the Lord could return at any time. On the other hand, the signs which Jesus recites have been around since He ascended into heaven.

That is precisely the point. Rather than declare a set day and time, the Lord reveals this to us: He could return at any time and will come at some time. He does not establish a target date, but instead urges us to be prepared at all times. The End may come this very day, or many generations from now. Caught between Jesus’ coming in the flesh in Bethlehem and return in glory sometime in the future, this could leave us lost in history and misplaced for eternity.

Except for one thing: Jesus comes to us even now. The Word-made-flesh visits us by His Word, speaking His forgiveness to cleanse us from sin. He makes us His own in the waters of Holy Baptism, so that we are not forgotten—we are His! He feeds us His own body and blood in His Supper, again for forgiveness. Thus He keeps His promise, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).

So as you wait to see your King in glory, you rejoice in this gracious truth: the Kingdom of God is near you even now, because your King draws near to you even now.

*A Helper just He comes to thee, His chariot is humility,
His kingly crown is holiness; His scepter, pity in distress.
The end of all our woe He brings; Wherefore the earth is glad and sings:
We praise Thee Savior, now, Mighty in deed art Thou! (TLH 73:2)*

Advent 1: Thursday**Read Luke 21:25-36**

"Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man."

(Luke 21:36)

Jesus was born in Bethlehem during the "Pax Romana," the "Roman Peace," a two-hundred year stretch of time known for its peace within the Roman Empire. Under the Romans, it was relatively safe to live and travel—why? Not because folks back then were more peaceable than today, but because the Romans ruled with an iron fist. Criminals and rebels were punished in terrible ways, culminating in crucifixion. Forty years after Jesus' cross, General Titus and his Roman troops would surround Jerusalem and conduct one of the most barbaric sieges in history. The details of Roman cruelty upon those in the city will turn your stomach—and events like this took place during the "Roman Peace"! Sadly, it's not that the era was mis-named; rather, life in the Empire *was* relatively peaceful when compared to those lands without Roman control.

Though seldom covered in the evening news, cruelty rules the day in many parts of the world; and consistently, wherever God's Law is rejected, the barbarity increases. Yet the Lord still cares for this creation, providing all that we need for this body and life. He permits trial and sorrow, fear and perplexity, but only as a preaching of the Law to show the wages of sin and our need for redemption.

My point is this: if this is how the world goes when the Lord still extends His mercies, I cannot imagine how terrible hell would be, with no such mercy or help. Clearly, you want to be prepared for the Lord's return. Clearly, you want to be counted worthy to stand before the Son of Man and escape condemnation. You want to leave nothing to doubt. And yet, soiled from the start by original sin, there's no way you get through this life worthy on your own. No one does.

But still, you're worthy—and you can be sure of it. Why? Because Jesus is worthy, and He's washed you in His blood. He's clothed you in His own righteousness, even as He's taken all of your sin and unworthiness upon Himself. No matter what comes to pass, the cross has already happened. Jesus has taken away all of your sins. That's the promise He made you in your Baptism, and the Word He renews in His Absolution. That's the same gift in His holy Supper, given for those repentant people who believe His Word.

In Him, you're worthy.

*Therefore my Intercessor be and for Thy blood and merit
Declare my name from judgment free with all who life inherit,
That I may see Thee face to face
With all Thy saints in that blest place
Which Thou for us hast purchased. (TLH 611:6)*

Advent 1: Friday**Read Luke 19:28-40**

"And if anyone asks you, 'Why are you loosing it?' thus you shall say to him, 'Because the Lord has need of it.'"

(Luke 19:31)

The Lord has need of a donkey. He's about to enter Jerusalem triumphally, and He has to borrow a donkey for the ride. Now, the donkey is necessary to fulfill prophecy (Zechariah 9:9), so that part makes complete sense. But why would the Lord, who created all animals in general and this donkey in particular, need to borrow it? Why would the Son of God need to borrow anything?

We can draw at least two lessons from this. One is the ongoing humility of Jesus, something that Martin Luther never lets us forget. Time and time again, Luther points out that Jesus acts most humbly as He goes about saving us. Why would He consent to be born of lowly Mary, then placed in a manger for His first bed? Why would He grow up in backwoods Nazareth as the carpenter's son, rather than the palaces of Jerusalem? Why does He take the role of the traveling teacher rather than the powerful king—one who needs to borrow a donkey? Throughout His incarnate ministry, Jesus lives as such a humble Servant that it scandalizes many—for how could one so humble be the Son of God? The cross is the climax: as He wins salvation for us, Jesus is executed in a manner reserved for only the worst of criminals and most rebellious of slaves. This, too, scandalizes many who refuse to believe in a Savior who saves by such a shameful death. By faith, you know that this is how Jesus works: and therefore you rejoice that He continues to forgive through humble means, like water, a pastor's sermon, bread and wine. As He once came to save His people riding on a donkey, He still comes to give salvation by means of His Word and His Sacraments. This isn't scandal to you: it's the Lord's salvation.

Second, God gives and entrusts us with all that we have. He makes us stewards and uses us as His instruments. Where Jesus could simply and rightly summon a donkey to Himself, instead He has entrusted the beast to an individual, and He uses the owner as His instrument. "The Lord has need of this donkey," say His disciples; believing the Word, the owner consents to the Lord's need. Now, the Lord doesn't need anything from us—but He does give us the privilege of serving Him by serving others. "As you did it to the least of these, you did it unto Me," He declares (Matthew 25:40). Those things that we have are given so that we might serve those who are in need. And so we do, because the Lord has first served us and saved us by His death and resurrection.

Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!

*A Helper just He comes to thee, His chariot is humility,
His kingly crown is holiness; His scepter, pity in distress.
The end of all our woe He brings; Wherefore the earth is glad and sings:
We praise Thee Savior, now, Mighty in deed art Thou! (TLH 73:2)*

Advent 1: Saturday

But He answered and said to them, "I tell you that if these should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out."
(Luke 19:40)

Even a rock tells you something about God: it tells you that He exists, because nothing comes from nothing. Scientists say so in the 1st Law of Thermodynamics. Philosophers speak of a "Prime Mover." Somebody had to get the ball rolling for there to be a creation.

Beyond that, though, rocks don't tell you much about God. I suppose that big rocks will display His artistic handiwork, and really big rocks—like continents—demonstrate His power. But for all the different rocks out there, none of them get personal about God. None of them tell you His name or His will for you. For that, you need the Lord to declare His Word.

As our text describes Palm Sunday, Jesus' countrymen cry out their hosannas and "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord." When told to shush His followers, Jesus replies, "I tell you that if these should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out." Perhaps He is declaring that there will never be a time when believers do not sing His praises, that His Church will never perish (Matthew 16:18). However, commentators suggest that "stones" is a nickname for Gentiles (as in Luke 3:8), and that Jesus is declaring that He is the Savior of all.

Either way, rejoice: the Lord does not leave you to guess His intentions from rocks. People have long tried to find God in nature—Baal and Asherah, gods of stone and wood, are two examples. When people try to discern God's will through nature, then paganism or some other false religion always results.

Instead, the Lord reveals Himself specifically through His Word. He declares His Law and His Gospel. But He gets more personal than that. He could call out in a thunderous voice from heaven, but instead He becomes the Word made flesh (John 1:14) and rides a donkey into Jerusalem to teach His people—and to die for all. Even today, He could retire to His heavenly throne and watch from afar; but He continues to visit His people by His holy means of Word, Baptism and Supper. This is your ongoing Advent joy: it is not just that the Lord has come, and now you are left with stones until He returns in glory. He continues to be the living bread who comes down from heaven (John 6:51). That is why we still sing, "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!": for in His Word and Sacraments, the Lord is just as triumphally, fully present with us as that day He rode into Jerusalem. He comes to "save now" (the meaning of "hosanna"), so that you might be prepared for the day He returns to judge.

Rejoice! The Lord is with you.

*He comes the broken heart to bind, The bleeding soul to cure,
And with the treasures of His grace T'enrich the humble poor.
Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace, Thy welcome shall proclaim
And heaven's eternal arches ring With Thy beloved name. (TLH 66:4-5)*

Read Luke 19:28-40**Advent 2: Sunday**

The LORD has done great things for us, And we are glad.

Read Psalm 126

(Psalm 126:3)

The Old Testament Israelites knew captivity. They suffered the 400 years in Egypt before the Lord sent Moses, then led them to freedom Himself—present with His people in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. They suffered the various incursions during the time of the Judges, until each time God raised up a leader to set His people free. Later on, after Assyria exiled the northern ten tribes into oblivion, the Babylonians captured Jerusalem and led the people captive once more. But God kept His promises, and a faithful remnant returned to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple, the Lord's house.

Scholars are somewhat divided as to when this psalm was written and to which captivity it refers, but this is true: it is good to be freed from captivity. It is even better to return to Zion, the temple hill in Jerusalem. There, the Lord was present with His people, dwelling in the Holy of Holies. There, sacrifices were offered, pointing to the promised Sacrifice for sin. No wonder the former captives declared, "The LORD has done great things for us!"

Centuries later, a virgin in Nazareth would repeat the praise: "He who is mighty has done great things for me" (Luke 1:49). In Mary's case, however, it was not that she had gone to Zion; rather, Zion had come to her. The Lord was now incarnate in her womb, conceived by the Holy Ghost. Make no mistake: He was just as present in Mary's womb as He was in the Holy of Holies. And why was Jesus become flesh? To be the Savior—to rescue His people from the bondage of sin, the captivity of the grave and the tyranny of the devil.

To rescue you.

That is why He bore all your sins and infirmities to the cross, destroying their power and setting you free for eternal life.

And that is why Zion visits you. Jesus bears the name "Immanuel," "God with us," and keeps the promise in the name. Your Savior comes to you, hidden not in a cloud or behind a curtain or a manger, but in words and water, bread and wine. In His Word and Sacraments, Jesus is just as present with you as with Mary, and He is doing great things. He is giving you forgiveness, strengthening your faith and granting you eternal life.

For now, you're still assaulted by those who would take you captive. The devil still seeks to afflict you and drive you from your Savior into His kingdom of darkness; but Jesus has conquered the devil. And by taking away your sin, Jesus has robbed the devil of His power. Death still seeks to haunt you, plaguing you with its outriders of disease and injury, but Jesus has conquered death and risen from the grave. He gives this victory to you in His means of grace, too.

These are great things. For Jesus' sake, and by His work, they are yours.

*Oh, come, Oh, come, Emmanuel; And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here Until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel Shall come to thee, O Israel. (TLH 62:1)*

Advent 2: Monday*Behold, He is coming," Says the LORD of hosts.***Read Malachi 3:1-4**

(Malachi 3:1)

Just 24 verses before the end of the Old Testament, the Lord is still promising the Savior's coming. Just before the Bible goes silent for nearly 450 years of waiting, the Lord repeats His faithful promises. As in so many prophecies before, He adds some additional details so that people will know for whom to look: in this case, He declares that the Messiah will be preceded by a messenger, by an Elijah (Malachi 5:5) to prepare the way. This is John the Baptist (Matthew 17:12-13), who will prepare the way through his proclamation of Law and Gospel. Along with the messenger, declares our text, "the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to His temple."

On this promise, like all of God's promises, believers can hang their hat.

Jesus appears at the temple several times between birth and crucifixion, and perhaps we do well to remember that the word "suddenly" can also be translated "surprisingly." Jesus comes to the temple as a 40-day-old baby for His presentation (Luke 2:22ff). This is prophecy fulfilled—the Lord has come in the flesh to His temple, but in such surprising form that few notice! Simeon and Anna do, declaring that Yahweh's glory is hidden in infant flesh; but for most, He's just another baby.

Jesus returns to the temple at age 12 (Luke 2:41ff), speaking an acute and surprising knowledge of the Word; but not even His parents understand that He's about His Father's business.

Among other times, He comes and cleanses the temple, driving out merchants and money-changers violently (Luke 19:49), surprising those who expect a Messiah to conform to man-made expectations. Furthermore, the Lord spends time teaching in the temple courts (Luke 21:37): believers cling to His Word, while unbelievers plot His death.

If we might find some Law in this, I would suggest that we must also guard against being surprised by our Lord's coming. Instead of infant flesh, He arrives in our midst by Word and Sacrament—which is why we sing Simeon's song, the Nunc Dimittis, after Holy Communion. This arrival is far too ordinary for many, who want God to be more glorious in this world. Likewise, the Lord will strike us with His Law to convict us of our sin, not leaving us to die in our man-made expectations of what holiness should be. Let us not be surprised, but repentant.

The Gospel is clear and rich: the Lord comes. Jesus, who came in the flesh to die on the cross and redeem the world, comes to you personally. He washes you clean in your Baptism and speaks His Word into your ear. He feeds you His body and blood for grace and life. He comes to you; and having come with grace, He will never leave you nor forsake you.

*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.*

(TLH 139:1)

Advent 2: Tuesday*But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire And like launderer's soap. (Malachi 3:2)***Read Malachi 3:1-4**

Just 23 verses before the end of the Old Testament, the Lord is still promising the Savior's coming. However, it sounds frightening, to say the least. "Who can endure the day of His coming?" The anticipated answer is, "No one." If you read through the rest of Malachi 3, you'll find many of the sins of which the Israelites were guilty, including favoritism, hypocrisy, immorality, pride, selfishness and failing to take God's Law seriously. Spend some time examining yourself, and you'll find that your guilt is plain. Those who are stained with sin cannot stand the day of God's coming. Your only hope is to be made clean.

So Jesus comes to make you clean, but it still doesn't sound hopeful: He comes as a refiner's fire and like launderer's soap. Refiner's fire largely speaks for itself, for it has to be hot enough to melt metal in order to separate the impurities. As to launderer's soap, I suspect that it wasn't designed to leave your skin feeling soft and moisturized (the word "lye" comes to mind). Given the description, it sounds like your cleaning process is going to hurt. Hurt a lot.

Now, before we get to the Good News, we also note this: the pain is not the fault of the One who cleans. The pain results from the truth that impurities are present that must be removed—sin saturates us all, and must be purged if we are to have eternal life. The fault for the pain of refining lies with us sinners, not with Jesus.

But here is the Good News: while Jesus comes as the refiner's fire and the launderer's soap, He suffers the pain of refining for us. When Jesus speaks of sending fire on the earth (Luke 12:49-50), He relates to the distressing baptism that still awaits Him: His cross. Indeed, He takes the sin of the world on Himself and bears it to the cross, where He suffers the judgment for sin. He suffers hell on the cross as even His Father forsakes Him.

And having suffered the cross for you, He takes your sin away. You are already cleansed and refined, and where did you feel the pain of the refiner's fire or the burn of the launderer's soap? It felt like a splash of water on your head as the Lord shared His death and resurrection with you in Holy Baptism. By the grace of God, you're already clean before Him.

As we continue through Advent, we dare never divorce the cross from His comings. The Baby in the manger has flesh and blood for the specific purpose of going to the cross for your purifying. He comes to you now in His means of grace only because He has sacrificed Himself for your sin. And when He comes again on the Last Day to judge...well, who can endure the day of His coming? You can, because by His cross Jesus has made you clean.

*Who is this that comes in glory With the trump of jubilee?
Lord of battles, God of armies, He hath gained the victory.
He who on the cross did suffer, He who from the grave arose,
He hath vanquished sin and Satan; He by death hath spoiled His foes.*

(TLH 218:2)

Advent 2: Wednesday**Read: Philippians 1:3-11**

I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy...
(Philippians 1:3-4)

It seems that, in the present day, we Lutherans don't especially rejoice in God's gift of prayer. It may be as simple as our old sinful nature: Old Adam hates God's gifts, and he'll fight every attempt to bring our pleas before the Lord. It may be that we're put off by the poor doctrine of others, who say that "God will give you what you want, as long as you pray well enough," thus turning prayer into a faux means of grace. It may be that we misunderstand prayer. It may be that, in our proper desire to extol the means of grace and God's work toward us, we neglect the privilege of speaking back to Him. It is most certainly a privilege, especially given the many pains of the people of God, be it sickness, rebellious children, victimization, loss, or more.

So we take St. Paul's example to heart today, who often gave thanks for the Philippians and prayed for their welfare with joy. This is something we can all do: pray confidently for good, with joy. Why? Because prayer is really nothing else than repeating back what God has said to us. To praise Him, we declare what He has done. To thank Him, we give thanks for His mercies. And when we petition Him, we pray His promises back to Him. If it is the rebellious child who has left the faith, we remind God of His promise to be faithful, and ask that He would continue to pursue His runaway baptized child. If it is disease, we pray for healing in His time and the comfort of grace in the meantime. If it is victimization, we pray for comfort and help from the One who was the Victim for us on the cross. Though the situations often mask and assault the joy of which Paul speaks, there is a joy and confidence to our prayers: God always keeps His promises.

God *always* keeps His promises.

Though we don't know if the rebel will repent, we know that God will faithfully pursue, even as He did not forsake His wayward Israel. While we don't know if God will provide healing in this life or will wait until the Last Day, we do know that the healing will come—and that His final Word for us is one of life, not death. While one may never fully recover from suffering an assault in this life, the Paschal Victim grants grace and declares His people clean, even when they feel violated and defiled.

There will be brutal days when words are so scarce that the longest prayer you might muster is one you've sung in the liturgy: "Lord, have mercy." It's short and not particularly specific, but it prays God's promise back to Him: God promises mercy and help for Jesus' sake.

And God always keeps His promises.

Rejoice, O people of God. The Lord hears your prayers and keeps His promises—and all will be answered ultimately when your Savior comes again.

*Jesus comes again in mercy When our hearts are bowed with care;
Jesus comes again in answer To an earnest, heartfelt prayer;
Alleluia! Alleluia! Comes to save us from despair. (TLH 56:2)*

Advent 2: Thursday**Read: Philippians 1:3-11**

...it is right for me to think this of you all, because I have you in my heart, inasmuch as both in my chains and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers with me of grace.
(Philippians 1:7)

In the prayers of the Church, we call them George, James and David. The rest of the time, we call them the President, the Governor and the Mayor. It sounds strange at first, that we're on a first-name basis in prayer, as if we're claiming a close relationship that obviously isn't there. But that's not the point of the first names. Rather, this is about the two kingdoms.

In the kingdom of the left hand, people have stations and titles and different responsibilities. I can't walk into the Oval Office and call the Prime Minister of Great Britain: that goes with the Office of the President. Likewise, the President of the United States doesn't coach the Hillcrest Speeders, the best team of six- and seven-year-old soccer players ever to practice on the back field of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church. That privilege belongs to Coach Pauls. If the President wanted a shot at coaching them, he'd need to ask my permission. That sounds strange, but that's how stations go. Life is full of distinctions, rights and responsibilities. These extend into families, where husband, wife and children all have different roles. These extend into the Church, even into the worship service: the pastor, the parishioner, the acolyte and the organist all have different duties according to their station.

In the kingdom of the right hand, though, there are no such distinctions. According to God's Law, all are sinners. All deserve God's wrath and no one can earn His way to heaven. Compared to God's glory and holiness, the celebrity of man is null. Station doesn't matter—the grave makes a claim on all.

Likewise, according to the Gospel, Christ has died for all without partiality. A ruler qualifies for grace no more than a child—and no less. Or, as St. Paul says in our text, there is no difference between the apostle, the prisoner or the Philippian Christian: all are partakers of grace.

You may have a station that commands the respect of your fellow man, which may or may not be a good thing—some of the most important stations in life, like teacher and parent, receive far less adoration than those of rap star or celebrity vixen. You may have a presence about you that gives others pause, or a personality that leads others to take advantage. In a world full of stations and sin, your standing will be unsure. But before God, your position is certain because it all depends on Christ. Christ has come and died for you; He comes and forgives you now in His means of grace; and He will come again to raise you from the dead to life everlasting, for you are a partaker of His grace.

*When Jesus comes,—O blessed story!—He works a change in heart and life;
God's kingdom comes with pow'r and glory To young and old, to man and wife;
Thro' Sacrament and living Word, Faith, love and hope are now conferred.*

(TLH 65:4)

Advent 2: Friday*Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar...***Read: Luke 3:1-6**

(Luke 3:1)

I was watching a TV show with my kids one weekday afternoon, one that makes it a point to include all sorts of cultures, for better or worse. In this episode, a shaman gathered children around and began to tell his story with, “Long ago, when the wolf and the raven still talked to each other...” The children knew right away that there never was a time when the animals spoke to each other, that this religion wasn't part of the real world. It sent me back to my elementary days, when I checked out every book about Greek mythology and read all the stories about those gods—but knowing all the time that they were stories, nothing more. A lot of religions will sound like that, their gods operating in this world, but in a surreal time that everyone knows didn't really happen. Likewise, other religions create a history before human history in which their religious doctrines were formed. (Some feminist theologians, for instance, posit a prehistoric world where women ruled and men were fully subservient to them, with no evidence whatsoever.) Sooner or later, it's obvious that these religions are outside of reality—that they're man-made religions with cultural agendas, but they offer no real hope.

While not all are history buffs, it's significant that God's plan for salvation takes place in measurable time. He didn't perform some mystical work back when animals were still talking to one another. Jesus followed John the Baptist onto the scene in the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, when Pilate, Herod, Philip and Lysanias were rulers of various regions. Rather than call us to believe in a religion that's not quite historical, Jesus arrives right in history and says, “Here I am.”

That's the same history which continues, in which you live today. It's the same world, not a variation of another. Furthermore, the Savior appeared in the same flesh and blood of which you are made. Therefore, He has borne the same sins and infirmities to the cross that you bear in your body. He knows the afflictions of this world and how to deliver you from them. And He declares that He will come again into this very same world on the last day of this world, to deliver you to eternal life.

Your religion is not a cultural legend or a power play by some group or another. It's a real hope—a real hope for forgiveness, for healing, for everlasting life. In reality, Jesus Christ came into this history and world, to deliver you by His cross to eternity and everlasting life. In reality, He comes to you now by His means of grace, forgiving your sin. In reality, He's coming again for you. Really.

*O bride of Christ, rejoice; Exultant raise thy voice**To hail the day of glory Foretold in sacred story.**Hosanna, praise and glory! Our King, we bow before Thee. (TLH 57:1)***Advent 2: Saturday***And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins...***Read: Luke 3:1-6**

(Luke 3:3)

Multitudes came out to hear John the Baptist as he prepared the way for Jesus. His wilderness location was hardly convenient, but “all Judea” (Matthew 3:5) made the trip anyway. The voice in the wilderness had a life-changing message they were dying to hear; and in our world obsessed with marketing and catchy ads, you've got to think that he had the most stylish of sermons to present to the people. So, what was it? What was this glamorous message?

John preached to them “a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.” That's not glamorous at all.

But it was the message that prepared the way for Jesus. Called to repentance, the people confessed their sins, their misuse of their stations and things, their defiance of God's law. Exposed as sinners with no ability to save themselves, they were ready to follow the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

John's messages, by the way, was strikingly similar to Peter's words to the crowd on the day of Pentecost. After the loud rushing wind, the tongues of fire and his sermon, the people cried out, “What shall we do?” He replied, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

It is tempting to believe that the preaching of repentance is a snoozer in our modern society, and evangelical leaders have been known to write against it: people want “how-to” sermons, it's said, not “ought-to” sermons—and certainly not “you-ought-to-but-you-can't-so-you'd-better-repent” sermons. But if we are to follow in the footsteps of John and Peter, we use this measure: while “how-to” sermons may help you know how to do things for yourself, do they prepare the way of the Lord? No. Only the preaching of repentance does. We're prepared for Christ by the news that we must abandon trust in ourselves and confess it for the idolatry that it is, then trust in the One who has died to redeem us.

I think that many Christians fret that their lives are unremarkable: all they do is go to church, get forgiven and go about their daily lives. But what does John tell the crowds? He tells them to repent—be forgiven, and then go about their daily lives. No matter your station (and more on this with the next Gospel lesson), to live as one forgiven is to live the life of a baptized child of God. It's to live the life of one prepared for Jesus to come again, because it is to live in His grace.

*Hark, the Herald's voice is crying In the desert far and near,**Bidding all men to repentance Since the Kingdom now is here.**Oh, 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.*

(TLH 61:3)

Advent 3: Sunday**Read: Isaiah 12:2-6**

And in that day you will say: "Praise the LORD, call upon His name; Declare His deeds among the peoples, Make mention that His name is exalted."

(Isaiah 12:4)

This week's psalm is from Isaiah, and this day's devotion may be a bit of a detour; but please bear with me as I climb into my pulpit of pet peeves. We live in a world where the word "praise" gets bandied about the Church a lot: there's the "praise service," which makes use of the genre of "praise music" performed by the "praise band." It's become a code word for lively worship that dispenses with liturgy, hymns and reverent instrumentation; and in doing so, it's come to imply that "praise" is about contemporary enthusiasm, and by extension that praise is lacking in liturgical worship.

This devotion is not intended to debate the merits of liturgical vs. contemporary worship. Rather, it's to ask and answer this simple question: what is "praise"?

Isaiah 12:4 tells us, as does Psalm 9:1 and other verses: to praise the Lord is to declare His deeds—to tell what He has done. This should come as no big surprise: if I sing the praises of a vacuum cleaner, I tell how well it cleans up the floor. To praise God is to declare what God has done. This bears some thought-provoking ideas about worship.

For instance, if a text set to music—either a contemporary song or a centuries-old hymn—speaks only of us and what we are doing, then who is it praising? If it speaks of what we have done, then it is praise of us, not of God. On the other hand, that formal recitation of the Athanasian Creed ("Oh no, not again this year!") declares who God is and what He has done for us; therefore, it truly is praise. Perhaps the best example is the *Te Deum Laudamus*, sung during Matins: it begins with "We praise thee, O God," and then spends the rest of the song declaring the works of the Lord.

I say this because the word "praise" is so often used to imply uplifting emotion that a Christian may feel guilty if he is so beaten down that he feels no happiness at all. The grieving Christian who says, "I see no good on earth; but You, O Lord, will raise me from the dead," is praising God. The one who joyfully sings about his own deeds is not.

No matter your emotions this Advent season, rejoice in this news. The Lord promised Adam and Eve that the Savior would come. He repeated that promise throughout the Old Testament, and He fulfilled it in Jesus Christ. Christ has come in the flesh and died for your sins, rising again three days later. Christ comes to you now in His means of grace to forgive you. Christ will come again to deliver you to heaven. That is the praise of Advent.

*He wears no kingly crown, Yet as a King is known;
Tho' not arrayed in splendor, He still makes death surrender.
Hosanna, praise and glory! Our King, we bow before Thee. (TLH 57:3)*

Advent 3: Monday**Read: Isaiah 12:2-6**

Cry out and shout, O inhabitant of Zion, For great is the Holy One of Israel in your midst!"

(Isaiah 12:6)

The strength of Israel was God's presence in Jerusalem. Unlike pagan temples where statues symbolized their gods which were supposedly elsewhere, the temple in Jerusalem had no such images. Instead, God Himself dwelt there with His people, hidden behind the curtain of the Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies was well-named, for it was the place where the holy God was present. He was present there to declare His people holy, to protect and provide for them. As long as the Holy One of Israel was in their midst, the people could cry out and shout for joy.

Yet the story of Old Testament Israel is a tragedy. False gods and idols appealed to sinful desires, and the people continually turned to worship them. Eventually, they brought idols into Yahweh's temple (cf. 2 Kings 23:4). Since they wanted false gods to help them instead, Yahweh gave them what they wanted (Isaiah 57:13) and eventually left the temple (Ezekiel 10). He was no longer in their midst, and it was only a matter of time until Zion was destroyed by Babylon.

It's the tragic sequence of sinful man: faithful to His promises, God comes into their midst to make them holy, and they prefer unholiness instead. Look at the Gospels: the incarnate Jesus dwells among His people to make them holy in His sight...and the vast majority worships their own works and tries to get rid of Him via the cross.

Yet the Lord remains faithful. He still comes in the midst of His people—not concealed behind a temple curtain, but in words and water, bread and wine. By His means of grace, the Lord is just as present with His people as He was when He dwelt in the Holy of Holies. He is just as present with you as He was with His disciples as He taught them His Word or fed them His Supper. Therefore, rejoice! When we hear this text about the Holy One in the midst of His people, it is not to mourn the lost opportunity of that Zion long ago. Rather, you still ascend to Zion when you hear the Lord's Word and when you eat at His altar.

Beware the temptations, though. Many shake their heads at the foolishness of those who rejected the temple or who crucified Jesus, yet show little regard for the means of grace. To approach these things casually, or to value them less than a lazy morning in bed, is to begin the road toward replacing God completely. No, rejoice! The Holy One is in your midst! He comes to you in His Word and Sacraments. He washes you clean with water from the wells of salvation, to be your song and salvation. If you are to live a holy life, this is the beginning: the Holy One—who died for your unholiness—comes to you, to make you holy.

*Arise, ye drooping mourners! The King is very near;
Away with grief and sorrow! For, lo, your Help is here.
Behold in many a place—O blessed consolation!—
You find Him, your Salvation, Within His means of grace. (TLH 69:3)*

Advent 3: Tuesday**Read: Zephaniah 3:14-18**

The LORD has taken away your judgments, He has cast out your enemy. The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; You shall see disaster no more.

(Zephaniah 3:15)

“Sing, O daughter of Zion!” begins our text, so let us begin with this. Zion was remarkable because of God's presence there, and the daughter of Zion is the people of God—those who rejoice in the Lord's presence and grace. Another name would be the Bride of Christ, the Church. This bid for joy is for you.

Many people today are in pursuit of holy living, though that definition will vary. Since holy means “set apart,” it seems that many believe that a holy life is one that is different from the norm, perhaps one imbued with a happy spirit or an added zest and commitment to life. Some will say that a life set apart is one with noticeable works above and beyond your normal duties.

But is that what makes a life “holy”?

It's true that holy means “set apart,” but not in the sense of out-of-the-ordinary. Something that is holy is set apart for God. Think of the temple: what made the Holy Place holy? The fact that it was the Lord's house. What made the Holy of Holies even holier? That was the place set apart for the Holy One to dwell.

Now, please bear with me: second graders tend to get this next sequence right, while we grown-ups do a fine job of getting it wrong. To be set apart or holy is to be *not* unholy, and what makes you unholy? Sin, of course. If you're sinful, you're not holy; and if you're not holy, you're not set apart from the world and you can't be in God's presence. So if you want to be holy, what must you do? Get rid of your sin—get rid of whatever makes you unholy. How is this done? Through the forgiveness of sins, which God gives you for Jesus' sake.

It's God's grace and presence that makes you holy, not your works or zeal or passion. Look at the verse above: what makes the daughter of Zion holy? The Lord has taken away the grounds for her to be judged. He has thus defeated the enemy, for the devil has nothing left with which to accuse. Furthermore, the Lord is in her midst—He's present with His people for their good.

What makes you holy? The Lord makes you holy with forgiveness. He gives it to you because He is present with you in His Word and Sacrament. If that leaves you zealous and energetic, so be it. If not, you are still holy because Jesus says you are. The one who suffers immobilizing depression but still clings to grace is holy; the one who works energetically for charities, but remains impenitent, is not. As we'll see in the Gospel lesson this week, one is tempted to believe he's holy only if he feels holy. But it depends not on your feelings or work, but upon the Lord. Rejoice, daughter of Zion: your King is with you, the judgments against you are gone, and in Him you are pure.

*When Jesus enters meek and lowly To fill the home with sweetest peace;
When hearts have felt His blessing holy And found from sin complete release,
Then light and calm within shall reign And hearts divided love again.*

(TLH 65:2)

Advent 3: Wednesday**Read: Zephaniah 3:14-18**

The LORD your God in your midst, The Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing.

(Zephaniah 3:17)

Works-righteousness and angry gods go together. Except for Christianity, every other religion teaches that you're saved by what you do—be that good works, martyrdom, meditation or throwing the maiden into a volcano. In these religions, the gods usually range from strict disciplinarians to downright angry deities who need to be appeased right away: pay up now, or else the next harvest is going to be awful. Keep paying, and you might get a spot in heaven.

It makes sense—the two ideas go together. If a religion is going to teach that you're saved by works, then it has to create a god that demands those works in a way that you take it seriously.

So look at today's verse and wonder: the Lord is in your midst to save. And in your midst, He rejoices over you with gladness. He quiets you with His love. He rejoices over you—God sings over you! It's quite the contrast to that panoply of false gods who might give you a nod if you just work hard enough.

Why the difference? Why does the Mighty One rejoice over you? Because the hard work is already done—and He's done it Himself. He is the One who has done the hard work of redemption, bearing your sins to the cross. He is the One who has credited you with His good works and holiness, so that you might stand righteous before Him. He is the One who comes into your midst in Word and Sacrament to give these gifts to you. He delights to give you these gifts, and even the angels rejoice when you receive them (Luke 15:10).

We make this note: does this mean that we care nothing about good works? Hardly. That old sinful nature wants us thinking, since we do not earn our salvation by works, that we need do no works whatsoever; and sadly, many believe this is what we Lutherans teach. However, we still do good works, just for an entirely better reason. In all those other religions, it's as if the gods say, “If you impress me enough, then I'll let you into the house.” The one true Lord declares, “I've brought you into My house and made you My children. Now, do these good works, lest you forfeit My favor by being lured back into sin. And when you sin, confess and be forgiven—because you remain in My house by My grace, not your works.” In other words, we don't do good works to earn God's favor. We do them because He favors us for Jesus' sake—He's set us free from sin to do them!

This passage from Zephaniah is a remarkable verse, and one to treasure. Even when the days are at their darkest and all the world accuses you that God has forgotten you, you have His promise: the Lord is with you, rejoices over you with gladness and singing, and quiets you with His love.

*Arise, ye drooping mourners! The King is very near;
Away with grief and sorrow! For, lo, your Help is here.
Behold in many a place—O blessed consolation!—
You find Him, your Salvation, Within His means of grace. (TLH 69:3)*

Advent 3: Thursday**Read: Philippians 4:4-9**

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy -- meditate on these things.
(Philippians 4:8)

As you await the Lord's return, St. Paul bids you to meditate on those things which are true, noble, just, pure, lovely, praiseworthy, virtuous and of good report. Let's just take one of these to illustrate the Law.

No matter our efforts, our thoughts aren't pure—and it's important that we confess this to be true. It's easy for us to think of purity on a sliding scale, as in “At least my mind isn't in the gutter like those prime-time TV shows or the music you hear on the radio.” Well and good if our minds are less filthy, as we shouldn't be filling them with the crass immorality that passes for entertainment today. But let's be clear: “less filthy” is in no way the same as “pure.” (If you have a choice between drinking “less filthy” water or “pure” water, your decision is quite clear.) Purity is an absolute, and something to which we cannot attain.

Our thoughts aren't pure. Do your best to purge your mind of the bombardment of media images that lead to coveting and lust, for so you should. But as you do, you'll find another array of evil thinking—perhaps pride in how you've cleaned up your act, or anger that your mind cannot stay on task in prayer. And as you seek to achieve purity, you'll find how pure your thoughts are not. I've found that those whom I respect most for their pious thoughts are also the first to admit how far from godly is their mind.

So, as you seek to purify your mind through your efforts, let the Law accuse you of your sinful inability to fulfill the task.

And then, above all, meditate upon your Savior.

Jesus Christ is more than true: He is the Truth (John 14:6). In His nobility, He placed your need above His own welfare and went to the cross. In His justice, He punishes sin; and to His praise, He has suffered the punishment so that you need not. Therefore, the pure and lovely Son of God purifies you with grace and makes you lovely before Him. He therefore speaks this good report of you, that you are cleansed of your sin and given eternal life.

Meditate upon Jesus Christ, for in Him is the forgiveness that cleanses your sinful mind, soul and body, that you might be His forevermore. Meditate upon Him, who gives His purity, truth, grace and all good things to you until the day that He comes to raise you up, pure and holy.

For Thou art our Salvation, Lord, Our Refuge, and our great Reward.

Without Thy grace our souls must fade And wither like a flow'r decayed.

(TLH 63:3)

Advent 3: Friday**Read: Luke 3:7-18**

"Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones."
(Luke 3:8)

The Lord gives us much instruction on the Christian living in Luke 3:7-18, and one of the first that His Messenger declares is, “Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance.” That one can be a stumper. It's that “worthy” word. What sorts of fruits are worthy of repentance? It sounds as if you're doing some sort of works in order to earn forgiveness. That can't be...can it? But it sounds as if it is.

Maybe we should start with “repentance” and work our way back. As the Augsburg Confession succinctly states, repentance has two parts: contrition and faith. To be repentant is to be sorry for one's sin *and* to trust in Jesus and His forgiveness. One or the other is insufficient. (Digressing for a moment, one also notes that doctrine is divided into Law and Gospel, and confession embraces two parts—confessing sins and receiving absolution. These pairs are all connected. One is driven to contrition by the Law, and so he confesses his sins. He hears the Gospel in the Absolution, and by faith believes the promise of forgiveness.)

John's audience is an eclectic mix: among his hearers are tax collectors and Pharisees both, groups at the opposite ends of Judean morality. The tax collectors are dismissed with other “sinners” as caring little about their behavior. Therefore, we might say that they have little regard for contrition. The Pharisees, on the other hand, are convinced that their behavior makes them righteous before God, and so they have no need for a Savior; therefore, we might say that they have little regard for faith. Both groups fall short of repentance.

John the Baptist declares to them all that they are to bear fruits worthy of repentance. In other words, the fruits that they bear should be in keeping with the repentance John preaches. For the tax collector, it means to stop dismissing sin as acceptable, confess it and trust in the Savior; then, forgiven, all that he does is good fruit that befits repentance. For the Pharisee, it means to stop trusting in his own works, confess that sin and trust in the Savior; then, forgiven, all that he does is good fruit that befits repentance. Though the groups are far different, the answer is the same as it is for you: the works that you do—the fruits that you bear—are good, as long as you are forgiven. The secret to Christian living, then, is not what you do, but what you are—a repentant child of God, forgiven by Jesus your Savior. As one of His forgiven people, the fruits you bear are good in His eyes.

Lo, the Lamb, so long expected, Comes with pardon down from heaven.

Let us haste, with tears of sorrow, One and all to be forgiven,

That, when next He comes with glory, And the world is wrapped in fear

He may shield us with His mercy And with words of love draw near.

(TLH 60:3-4)

Advent 3: Saturday**Read: Luke 3:7-18**

Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, "And what shall we do?" So he said to them, "Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages."
(Luke 3:14)

No one liked the tax collectors, and it probably wasn't much different for soldiers. Tax collectors were classified in society with harlots, and disliked because they collected taxes that went to the hated Roman Emperor; even worse, they had a habit of overcharging and keeping the extra for themselves. No, tax collectors had few friends besides their colleagues in the office. As for the soldiers, whether Roman or Herod's, they were ultimately there to preserve hated Caesar's interests, to the disgust of many. Furthermore, they weren't above a few threats to extort money or goods that they wanted.

So one can imagine delight in the crowd when tax collectors and soldiers came to John the Baptist and asked, "What shall we do?" It was the perfect opportunity that talk show hosts dream about, a hanging curve ball that John could use to blast these unpopular men. It was the big chance to tell them to quit their jobs and start doing charity work or go on a mission or something. Let 'em have it, John.

But the prophet simply said to the tax collectors, "Collect no more than is appointed for you." And to the soldiers, he instructed, "Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages." The Bible doesn't say, but I'm betting this wasn't popular with a lot of people. John declared it was okay to be a tax collector, a soldier and a servant of Caesar—as long as these men acted honestly and justly. In other words, they were to act as forgiven tax collectors and soldiers, because those were the vocations God had given them.

This teaches us much about our daily lives as Christians, and remember yesterday's lesson that our fruits and works are good because we are forgiven. God gives us vocations in life, specific stations in which we serve others; and Christian living means that we do these things as God's forgiven people. I've come across Christians who were worried that they weren't doing enough for Jesus because they were too busy going to work, raising kids, and taking care of elderly parents. But these are precisely the things that God has given them to do, and your life is likely little different. That ordinary life of yours is part of God's plan to keep this world going, and you're an instrument in the hand of your Maker. That much is true for all people, believers or not.

What makes your daily life into Christian living? Christ and His grace do. His lowly life and death won salvation for you. As one forgiven for Jesus' sake, your daily tasks, no matter how lowly, are pleasing to Him. The answer to holy living is not a change in vocations: the answer is Christ, who makes you and your life holy by His grace.

*Once He came in blessing, All our ills redressing;
Came in likeness lowly, Son of God most holy;
Bore the cross to save us, Hope and freedom gave us. (TLH 74:1)*

Advent 4: Sunday**Read: Psalm 96**

For all the gods of the peoples are idols, But the LORD made the heavens.
(Psalm 96:5)

All the gods of the peoples are idols, but the Lord made the heavens. That's quite the contrast. The gods that people create are smaller than their own imaginations, and they craft them out of wood and stone, perhaps paper or earth or even bits and bytes of memory. But trusting in a chunk of matter to help you is just silly. Expecting it to raise you from the dead is tragic. Psalm 135:18 puts it succinctly: "Those who make [idols] are like them; so is everyone who trusts in them."

In contrast to a face carved onto a rock that does nothing, the Lord made the heavens. The poetic simplicity of His creative power in Genesis 1 is both truly astonishing and astonishingly true: God spoke and the heavens and earth were made. There's no reason to doubt that the Lord could create a mature heaven and earth in six days' time and rest on the seventh: He is God, after all. He will do what He wills to do. Remember, too, that when we speak of creation, this isn't just the Father's work: Jesus, the Word, was there at the beginning, and through Him all things were made.

Thus far in our text, here is your choice for a God to worship: a hunk of dead matter that has less life than you at the moment, or the one true God who spoke and made the heavens. The choice is clear. But here's the mind-blowing twist.

Within the week (depending on the year, perhaps as early as tonight), you celebrate the Nativity of Our Lord. You celebrate the astonishing truth that the Word—through whom all things were made—became flesh and dwelt among us. You marvel in the truth that the Lord who made the heavens has become an infant born of the Virgin Mary, who lies swaddled in a manger. And why? To be your Savior. Jesus has taken on flesh and blood so that He can be scourged and crucified to deliver you from sin.

Behold! Those who worship dead gods become like them—but the living God becomes like you in every way, yet without sin. Then He undergoes His baptism and trudges to the cross, bearing your sins and iniquities in order to deliver you. There, the heavens He made grow dark for three hours of His Passion as God dies for man's sin. But the Son rises again three days later.

One cannot really divide Christmas from Good Friday: Jesus is born on the former for the latter. And thus one cannot divorce Advent from the two: He has come to redeem you, to prepare you for His return. And in the meantime, the God who made the heavens visits you in His means of grace, to preserve and keep you until He comes. Mark well the words from Gerhardt's Christmas hymn, one that sends shivers up my spine every time:

*Thou Christian heart, Whoe'er thou art,
Be of good cheer and let no sorrow move thee!
For God's own child, In mercy mild,
Joins thee to Him; how greatly God must love thee! (TLH 81:4)*

Advent 4: Monday**Read: Psalm 96**

For He is coming, for He is coming to judge the earth. He shall judge the world with righteousness, And the peoples with His truth.
(Psalm 96:13)

He is coming. That's the conclusion to Psalm 96, and that's Advent in a nutshell. Furthermore, He's coming to judge—to judge with righteousness and truth.

I recently read an article about attempts to rebuild Uganda after years of war, and Ugandans are hesitant to adopt a justice system like that of the United States. Why? As one Ugandan village leader opined, a trial often involves two lawyers trying to outsmart each other, to prevent the truth from being told. Sadly many a defendant who awaits judgment does not want the truth to be told about his acts, for the truth will surely convict him.

If that is true for a criminal in a court of man, how much more so for the sinner before God? There is absolutely no way around the truth that the Law proclaims, that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. There's no way to hide sin before the Judge who knows all things. If we are to be judge on the basis of our own acts and actions, the verdict will surely be “guilty.”

That is why we rejoice that, before Jesus comes to judge the world with righteousness and truth, He has already come to prepare us for that judgment. To frame His Incarnation in a slightly different way than yesterday, we can say this: the Lord earnestly desires to declare you righteous and innocent on Judgment Day. This, however, was impossible as long as you remain a sinner: the wages of sin is death of body and soul, and the sentence must be carried out. Therefore, Jesus took on flesh like yours, and suffered your death sentence and hell on the cross, for there His Father judged Him for all the sins of the world. This is your salvation: the judgment has been carried out.

In fact, the One who will Judge you on the Last Day desires to declare you “not guilty” so much that He has suffered your death sentence for you. In your Baptism, He has joined you to His death and resurrection, credited you with His work on Calvary. In the Absolution, He already tells you the verdict you'll hear on the Last Day: you're not guilty, because Jesus has taken your guilt upon Himself. The only way to be condemned is to refuse the grace that the Judge desires to give!

Therefore, you do not fear that Jesus will come to judge with righteousness and truth, because this is the truth with which Jesus will judge you on the Last Day: you're righteous before Him, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

*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 Thy beams most cheering, And guide us safely home.* (TLH 58:9)

Advent 4: Tuesday**Read: Micah 5:2-4**

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Though you are little among the thousands of Judah, Yet out of you shall come forth to Me The One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth are from of old, From everlasting."
(Micah 5:2)

Stuff happens in the big cities. Occasionally, there's a big story that breaks far out on the countryside, but there's a reason why newsgroups put the bureaus in New York and L.A., rather than, say, Pierce, Idaho or Roy, Washington. The shakers and movers do their shaking and moving in metropolitan areas; if they're out in the country, they're at the estate or the resort with the big privacy wall and the security guards at the gate. If you want to find big happenings, hang around big cities.

Without a doubt, Jerusalem was the big city of Judea, site of king and temple. Bethlehem was close by, but merely a rest stop along the way. It was little at the time of Micah and apparently hadn't grown much when Joseph and Mary arrived. Other than the birthplace of Israel's greatest king to date—David, the little town had little on its resume. Big things and important people were in Jerusalem, not in sleepy Bethlehem.

But back in Micah's time, the Lord declared that the One from everlasting would be born there. Not in Jerusalem. In Bethlehem! The only thing that would make less sense would be the Messiah growing up in Nazareth!

Rejoice: when it comes to salvation, God isn't interested in what makes sense to us. Rather, He goes about His plan and gives us the faith to believe it. So, according to His will, the Savior is born in tiny little Bethlehem, where He's promptly laid in a trough for His first bed. After fleeing to Egypt, He grows up in backwoods Nazareth. After about thirty years of life as an apparently unremarkable—though sinless—carpenter, He is baptized in the Jordan. Then the Ruler of Israel from everlasting lives the life of a homeless, traveling rabbi until He's executed among thieves. It's not a very glorious life in human terms; but the Lord declares that His life and death are your salvation.

His work continues—in big cities or where only two or three are present to gather in His name. Wherever His Word is preached, and wherever His Sacraments are administered according to His Word, Jesus is truly present and going about salvation. To a world that glorifies grandeur and gaudiness, these means of grace look like impotent signs, nothing more. But according to God who works by manger and cross, this is your salvation. By these means, the Ruler from Everlasting forgives your sins.

*Jesus, Thy Church with longing eyes For thine expected coming waits.
When will the promised light arise And glory beam from Zion's gates?
E'en now, when tempests round us fall And wintry clouds o'ercast the sky,
Thy words with pleasure we recall And deem that our redemption's nigh.*
(TLH 64:1-2)

Advent 4: Wednesday**Read: Hebrews 10:5-10**

Therefore, when He came into the world, He said: "Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, But a body You have prepared for Me." (Hebrews 10:5)

Wow! Now, there's some Law and Gospel as Advent and Christmas meet! Hebrews finds the Incarnation and the Gospel together in Psalm 40:6 and puts them in Jesus' mouth—"a body You have prepared for Me."

So why has Jesus made His advent in the flesh?

Because God didn't desire sacrifices and offerings.

Sure, the Lord commanded all sorts of sacrifices for sin and guilt throughout the Old Testament. They were part of His law. But the purpose of the sacrifices was not that the people would earn His favor by slaughtering sheep or waving grain. Rather, the purpose was to point to Jesus, the promised Messiah who would come and be *the* Sacrifice for the sins of the world.

Left to their own thoughts, though, people always turn salvation around and believe that their works do the saving. Thus they believed that their offerings and works of sacrifice were earning God's favor for them. This is really no different than our present day. All religions but Christianity say that people please their gods by their works of service. Even within Christianity, there's an ongoing misunderstanding that worship is all about *our works* of worship toward God—not about *His coming* to us in Word and Sacrament to give us forgiveness.

If God willed that we be saved by works and sacrifices, there was no need for Jesus to come in the flesh. Jesus could still have done so, but His message would have been much different: rather than climb Calvary and die for the sins of the world, He could have turned the Temple Mount in Jerusalem into a second Sinai, sat on a throne and said, "Keep working."

But God doesn't want you saved by your works, which would never be good enough anyway. He desires that you be saved by His work and grace: that is why He prepared a body for His Son.

Christmas and gifts go together nearly inseparably. We do well to remember that the Babe in the manger is the greatest gift of all, and that the latest gadget or sweater under the tree is not what Christmas is about. But we also do well to remember that the purpose of Jesus' coming and giving was not foremost to inspire us to give to others, but to redeem us by His death in our place. The joy of Christmas is that God desires to save you by His work so much that He has taken on flesh and gone to the cross to give you forgiveness, life and salvation.

*Thy light and grace Our guilt efface, Thy heaven'ly riches all our loss retrieving.
Immanuel, Thy birth doth quell The pow'r of hell and Satan's bold deceiving.
(TLH 81:3)*

Advent 4: Thursday**Read: Hebrews 10:5-10**

By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. (Hebrews 10:10)

"The road to hell is paved with good intentions." You've probably heard the phrase before. Good intentions are a good start, but that's all. "I meant to" doesn't fix things if the work doesn't get done. That's why parents and teachers and counselors are fond of saying, "I don't want you to *try* to do better. I want you to *do* better."

The Greeks had a proverb, "Well begun is half done." I'd have to quibble with the "half." You can start out the day or a new project with plenty of gusto and good intentions, but circumstances and disappointments have a way of beating you down. Slow and steady wins the race, God willing, because good intentions and enthusiasm aren't going to get the job done. That's reality in a sinful world.

If it's true for things like a new project, how much more so for overcoming bad habits? I believe it's Mark Twain who quipped, "I quit smoking—several times." What about addictions or gossip or impatience? New Year's resolutions and plans to change your life are good, but Old Adam has a way of wearing you down until you're back where you started again.

So as you re-read Hebrews 10:5-10 for a second day, rejoice. You have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Jesus didn't just wish you were forgiven—He died to make you so. Furthermore, there's no expiration date on the cross: Jesus has died once for all—for all people, for all time, for you. It's done.

This devotion will likely find you when you're wishing that there's something you could change about yourself, getting rid of some sin for the better. Some of those changes are possible, though you'll slip back now and then. Some of those things may require professional counseling if you're going to avoid destroying your life on this earth. Since Jesus has set us free from sin, we really have no excuse for continuing in sin (Romans 6:1-2). For such sins, be sure to repent.

And always rejoice: while sin still dogs you in this world, Christ has died for you and accomplished your salvation. Before God, you're righteous and holy—not by your work, but by your Savior's. Not a day will go by that you avoid sin. But not a day goes by where Jesus' forgiveness doesn't cover you. So He continues to cover and keep you in grace...until He comes.

*Comfort, comfort, ye My people, speak ye peace, thus saith our God;
Comfort those who dwell in darkness, mourning 'neath their sorrow's 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. (TLH 61:1)*

Advent 4: Friday**Read: Luke 1:39-45**

Then she spoke out with a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"
(Luke 1:42-43)

Of all the things Elizabeth could have said when Mary arrived at her house, this one was nearly impossible. Her cousin, in her young teens, had hurried to tell her of Gabriel's visit and the news that she was with child by the Holy Spirit. Since Mary wasn't very far along, Elizabeth was hardly going to accuse her of being pregnant; and even if she was, it's highly unlikely that Elizabeth would declare that Mary was the mother of the Lord.

To believe that, to confess that, required faith—faith given by the Holy Spirit, who filled Elizabeth at the sound of Mary's greeting.

The Virgin Birth of Jesus is an article of faith. It certainly doesn't make sense that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Ghost: babies just don't happen that way. That's why many scoff at the idea that Jesus was born to the Virgin, even within theology departments and churches. Make no mistake, "born of the Virgin Mary" is an irrational, sensational confession of faith; yet it's one that you make by faith, because the Holy Spirit has come to dwell in you, too.

If Jesus wasn't conceived by the Holy Spirit, what does it mean? It means that He had a human father, and that He was just another ordinary human being with a talent for preaching. It means that He couldn't die for the sins of the world, but could only be a good example for you and me, nothing more. It means that you have no hope. Might as well make Christmas all about doing good to others and giving gifts, because all of that makes sense. The Virgin Birth does not. That's how the world looks at Christmas.

But you know better. Against all human understanding, the Baby in Mary's womb is her creator, begotten of the Father from all eternity. Even more *unreasonable* is that the all-powerful, holy Son of God hangs on a cross, condemned by His Father as the Sinner for all the world.

Of course, it's far too amazing for many to believe that the same Jesus comes to you in His Word and Sacraments to give you forgiveness. You'll encounter your share of people who think such doctrines are ridiculous—and apart from faith, they will seem that way. Our response is not to argue, but rather to keep confessing the truth of God's Word, because that is how the Holy Spirit works.

By the work of the Holy Spirit, Mary conceived and was made the mother of Jesus. By the work of the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth knew it to be true. By the work of the Holy Spirit, you believe it, too, along with this miraculous truth: the Son of God wasn't just born to Mary.

He was born to Mary for you.

*Once did the skies before Thee bow; A virgin's arms contain Thee now,
While angels, who in Thee rejoice, Now listen for Thine infant voice.
Hallelujah! (TLH 80:2)*

Advent 4: Saturday**Read: Luke 1:46-55**

"As He spoke to our fathers, To Abraham and to his seed forever." (Luke 1:55)

Elizabeth isn't the only one who makes an astounding confession of faith that day. Mary sings the *Magnificat*, her song of praise for God's goodness. Among the early phrases is "For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed." Taken on its own, it might lead one to believe that Mary's getting a little bit proud. From a human standpoint, could you blame her? God has chosen her, after all, to be the mother of the Savior.

But the faith that Mary has received also includes humility. When you read through the *Magnificat*, you find out that it's not about her, but about all that the Lord has done. He has been merciful to His people unfailingly, from generation to generation. He has shown strength with His arm, even as He has scattered the proud who trusted and worshiped their own instead. He has put down the mighty, exalted the lowly and fed the hungry and sent the unbelieving rich away empty. All of this is true, a general description of God's faithfulness throughout all of the Old Testament.

But Mary saves the best for last, when speaking of God's remembered mercy: "As He spoke to our fathers, To Abraham and to his seed forever." Why bring Abraham into this? Because to Abraham God promised, "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed." With these words, God promised that one of Abraham's descendants would be the Savior for all nations. So as Mary recites the many things that God has done, she finishes by singing the Gospel. Furthermore, she is rejoicing that God is keeping that promise through her. But even better, God is keeping that promise for her.

Through Mary, God has kept His promise and brought Jesus into the world, for the sake of the world. The angels sang to the shepherds and said, "there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." To you, shepherds, and to all. You included, dear readers.

The Savior came via Mary to go to the cross for you. With Christmas upon us, you celebrate that the Creator of all things was wrapped immobile in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. For you.

He still comes to you in His means of grace. In His Word and Sacraments, He is no less present with you than He was in that manger in Bethlehem. Thus He visits you to forgive your sins, to prepare you for the Last Day and your deliverance to eternal life.

Thus the Lord comes to you, to prepare you by His grace, until He comes again.

A blessed Christmas to you.

*So praise with me the Holy One
Who cometh in humility
Divine Redeemer, God's own Son,
Eternal glory be to Thee! (TLH 275:6)*