

When Jesus Comes

Devotions for the Season of Advent
Corresponding with the Readings of the Church (LSB 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 4: Saturday**Read: Luke 1:46-56***“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 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)*

Advent 1: Sunday**Read Psalm 25:1-10***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 of 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

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

Read Jeremiah 33:14-16

(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 4: Friday

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?"

Read: Luke 1:39-45

(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: Thursday

By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Read: Hebrews 10:5-10

(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 1: Tuesday

...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.

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

(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

“So you also, when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near.”

Read Luke 21:25-36

(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 4: Wednesday

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)

Read: Hebrews 10:5-10

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: Tuesday**Read: Micah 5:2-5a**

"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 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

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

Read Luke 19:28-40

(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 4: Monday

Restore us, O God; Cause Your face to shine, And we shall be saved!.

Read: Psalm 80:1-7

(Psalm 80:3)

"The Lord make His face to shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee."

That part of the Aaronic benediction (Numbers 6:24-26) has always given me pause.

On the one hand, sinners can't look upon God's face and live (Exodus 33:20), so it seems a bit reckless to invite God to cause His face to shine upon them.

On the other hand, God doesn't desire to look upon unclean things. He turns away from unclean things (Deuteronomy 23:14) and the people who do them. So why would the Lord heed the prayer of those who pray Psalm 80? And why would it be good for them if He did?!

The answer is Jesus, your Savior.

He took on the burden of all your sin and iniquity and bore it for you to the cross. There, He was smitten and afflicted by God (Isaiah 52:4), because God made Jesus to be sin for you (2 Corinthians 5:21). And as Jesus suffered your judgment on the cross, He was forsaken by His Father. In other words, because He was now the unclean sinner, God turned His face away from His Son—thus the Son cried out, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46).

Because the Son has taken your sin upon Himself, He declares you clean. And because you are clean, the Lord turns His face toward you, and He causes His face to shine upon you graciously.

Are you plagued by thoughts of past guilt? God doesn't look away. He looked away from Jesus on the cross to look at you, and He sees you as one clothed in His Son's righteousness.

Are you isolated—immobilized by illness? God doesn't look away. You are not alone, because Jesus bore your infirmities and wages of sin to the cross. God has looked away from His Son there and looks upon you graciously now. He sees you as His beloved child.

Are you, as the psalm speaks, derided by your enemies—rightly or wrongly? Jesus was despised on the cross as He bore your sin...and even if all others look away from you, God looks upon you graciously. His face shines upon you, because you are on for whom Christ died.

For Jesus' sake, God causes His face to shine upon you.

For Jesus' sake, you are restored in God's grace...and you are saved.

*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: Sunday

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, You who lead Joseph like a flock; You who dwell between the cherubim, shine forth!

Read: Psalm 80:1-7

(Psalm 80:1)

“You who dwell between the cherubim.” That’s an image of holiness and power. It was cherubim who stood with flaming swords and blocked the entrance to Eden after the fall into sin (Gen 3:24). And when God commanded that the Ark of the Covenant be built, He specified that its cover—the mercy seat—have two golden cherubim. From above them, God would speak as He lived in the Holy of Holies of the tabernacle, later the temple. Do not forget the sacredness of that room, for it was where God dwelt on earth for His people; only the High Priest could enter, and then only once a year after sacrifices had been made.

So to speak of the Lord as the One who dwells between the cherubim is to remember His holiness, His glory and His power. This is not a safe place for sinners. Think of Isaiah, who had a vision of the temple in which he saw the Lord on His throne as seraphim surrounded him and sang their Sanctus (Isaiah 6). The prophet threw himself face down and declared he was undone—finished!—because he was a man of unclean lips who had seen God in His glory.

This could be a terrible paradox for man: he needs the power of the One who dwells between the cherubim for deliverance, but that very power and holiness is his undoing.

But rejoice! God has heard the prayer and He has shone forth—not with glory that is visible to the eyes, but certainly evident to faith.

If you wish to see the One who dwells between the cherubim, look into the manger in Bethlehem. There you will find the Shepherd of Israel, swaddled up tight and unable to move. The Lord has cloaked His glory in human flesh to be your Savior. If you wish to see the One who dwells between the cherubim, look at His cross as He hangs between thieves. That’s where He defeats sin and death for you. If you wish to see the One who dwells between the cherubim, make haste to hear His Word and partake of His Supper, because He is present there to give you grace, to make you holy and righteous.

As Advent nears its end and the Christmas celebration comes near, marvel and rejoice. It is certainly true that you have needed the One who dwells between the cherubim to save you by His work—and He has submitted Himself to manger and cross to do exactly that!

*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 1: Saturday

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

Read Luke 19:28-40

(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 aganism 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)*

Advent 2: Sunday

Say to God, "How awesome are Your works! Through the greatness of Your power Your enemies shall submit themselves to You.

Read Psalm 66:1-12

(Psalm 66:3)

The Old Testament Israelites knew captivity. It was woven throughout their history. 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.

It was good to be freed from captivity. It was even better to gather at the tabernacle, later the temple on Zion. 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 former captives declared, "Blessed be God, Who has not turned away my prayer, Nor His mercy from me!"

Centuries later, a virgin in Nazareth would echo such 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 visited the Lord at His temple; rather, He had come to her in the most miraculous of ways. 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.

The Lord 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 3: Saturday

And the Lord said, "To what then shall I liken the men of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, saying: 'We played the flute for you, And you did not dance; We mourned to you, And you did not weep.'"

Read: Luke 7:29-35

(Luke 7:31-32)

So...what does a Christian look like? How does a Christian act? More than once, different ethnic groups have sought to prove that a Christian looks like them, and not like someone of a different color or appearance. A few crackpots still make this argument today, but Scripture clearly defeats this with the proclamation that Jesus has come to save all nations. The idea that He's the Savior of only certain races gets very little traction these days.

There is, however, a popular notion that Christians act in stereotypical ways: the Christian doesn't drink, smoke, dance, chew or go with girls who do. In some circles, these behaviors are used to measure one's faith and commitment. This is called Pietism, the notion that living the Christian life is very much about certain behaviors. Left unchecked, it has a lot in common with the Pharisees of old.

Now, don't misunderstand: I'm all for manners and politeness, and against boorish behavior and needless offense. The problem is that Pietism insists that Christianity is about following rules that the Lord doesn't give in His Word. While He forbids drunkenness, He doesn't prohibit drinking. And while a lot of current dance moves are sinful in their imitations of sexual behavior, dancing itself isn't forbidden, either. Yet we Lutherans come under criticism for being too worldly when we do things which the Lord permits. Such critics would add that our reliance on the Sacraments for grace further robs us of good behavior.

Our Lord rescues us from Pietism with today's reading. John the Baptist lived an ascetic life, isolated in the desert and eating locusts. Despite his avoidance of pleasure, the Pharisees accused him of being demon-possessed. Jesus, on the other hand, attended dinners with tax collectors and weddings, and the Pharisees rejected Him, too, on the pretext that He was a drunkard. In reality, the Pharisees used the behavior of Jesus and John as an excuse: they were really rejecting the Gospel that both proclaimed. Thus Jesus quoted the children's adage, "We played the flute for you, And you did not dance; We mourned to you, And you did not weep."

So what does a Christian look like—and how does a Christian act? Christian behavior looks like someone confessing his sins and receiving absolution, trusting that Christ has died for his sins. It looks like someone kneeling at the rail to receive the Lord's body and blood for grace and faith. The following day may find him puffing on an abominably bad cigar, hopefully nowhere near me. We take care as Christians not to offer needless offense; at the same time, we make sure we do not demand obedience where the Lord does not. And we rejoice all the more that we're saved not by our rules, but by Jesus' 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 3: Friday**Read: Luke 7:18-28**

Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and tell John the things you have seen and heard: that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me." (Luke 7:22-23)

"Are you the Coming One, or should we look for another?" That was what John's disciples asked Jesus. Someone had doubts: perhaps it was John the Baptist as he languished in prison for speaking the truth. Perhaps it was his disciples, so John sent them to the source.

Jesus responded, "Go and tell John the things you have seen and heard: that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me." Why point to the miracles? Because Jesus was pointing to the Word. Old Testament prophecies (see Isaiah 35:5-6, for example) declared that the Messiah—the Coming One—would perform miracles. Therefore, when people saw the Man who performed miracles and fulfilled the rest of the Old Testament prophecies, they could be sure that they had found the Messiah. In effect, Jesus said in His reply, "I'm the Coming One: not because I say so, because anyone can say so. I'm the Coming One because all of Scripture says so." Then He added, "Blessed is he who is not offended because of Me."

Who would be offended at the Coming One healing people? We could put them into two categories. There were those who heard of Jesus performing miracles, but simply didn't believe the Word they heard and so they didn't come and weren't healed; and there were those who saw the healings, but chose to rely on their own power and kill the Savior on a cross. At that point, even the disciples were offended and fled. Plenty were offended by the Savior—He had very few supporters on Calvary.

There are a couple of important lessons we can draw from this text. Plenty are offended by Jesus today: there are those who hear that He offers forgiveness and eternal life, but they don't believe it. There are those who want to follow Jesus, but they're offended by His Law and want Him to conform to their wishes; or they're offended by His Gospel and want their works to be part of the plan for salvation. Plenty of people are offended by Jesus and His free gifts of life and salvation. Blessed are you that—by God-given faith—you are not offended by the Savior.

The second is a lesson of great comfort. When Jesus performed miracles on the way to the cross, He certainly did so to fulfill prophecy and prove He was the Savior. In doing so, He also gave you a glimpse of heaven: for on the Last Day, He will raise you up, fully healed, for eternity. Oh, yes: blessed are you.

*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 2: Monday**Read Malachi 3:1-7b***Behold, He is coming," Says the LORD of hosts.* (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**Read Malachi 3:1-7b**

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)

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 3: Thursday**Read: Philippians 4:4-7**

Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand. (Philippians 4:4-5)

Rejoice always. Let your gentleness be evident to all. Don't be anxious, but pray with thanksgiving. These are all good traits, to be sure—and truly, they ought to be part of the Christian life. As a Christian, you are to be joyful, for your sins are taken away and your salvation is certain. You should be gentle and patient with those around you, since the Lord has been so patient and gentle with you. You shouldn't worry, because the Lord numbers the hairs on your head and will take care of you in all circumstances. Therefore, no matter the situation, you can pray with thanksgiving. Right?

Right?

Of course, if that's the case, it would then follow that if you're not joyful or gentle or thankful or worry free, then you're not much of a Christian.

And if that's the case, then it would seem that your Christianity is pretty flighty. On good days, life is joyful-gentle-worry-free. On bad days, life isn't; and days when you most poignantly see the need for the Lord's help are also the days when it's most easy for you to be joyless—irritable—worried. That's pretty awful, if your faith is the least when you see the need for it most.

So maybe it would be better if we reread this text with a better distinction of Law and Gospel. What we've discussed so far is, in fact, the Law of God: as a Christian, you really have no excuse not to be joyful, gentle, thankful and worry-free. Christ has conquered sin and death—of what should you be worried? As long as you're sinful and living in a dying world, though, you're going to fail to do what you ought. You're going to fail to be what you ought. If your faith is built on your joy and gentleness, it's not just going to waver: it's not going to get started, because you can't possibly be perfectly joyful and gentle enough! Joylessness and worry and irritability and thanklessness should clearly show you your sin and your need for a Savior.

Now, here's some great news: the Lord is at hand. He is near—as near to you as His Word and His Sacraments. He who came and died for you—and who will come again in glory—comes to you even now. He does not come because you are joyful or gentle or thankful. He comes because you're sinful, and He has grace for you. He forgives you for your failure to keep these commands; and where life is so dark as to prevent you from joy and thankfulness, the Lord is joyful and thankful for you. Furthermore, He promises that when He comes again, He will deliver you from all those things that afflict you now.

And then, all that is left for you is joy and gentleness, thankfulness and peace.

*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: Wednesday**Read: Zephaniah 3:14-20**

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

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 1:2-11**

...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 3: Tuesday**Read: Zephaniah 3:14-20**

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: Monday**Read: Psalm 85***"Mercy and truth have met together; Righteousness and peace have kissed."*

(Psalm 85:10)

Righteousness and peace are friends. Luther quotes St. Augustine to that effect many times. The one who is not righteous should not expect to find peace; and, I suppose, the one who inflicts strife is far from righteous. Righteousness and peace are friends: that's what it means when the Psalm says that righteousness and peace have kissed each other. They go together.

And what of mercy and truth? They have met together, like two good companions walking down the road. The one who is merciful can expect to love truth. The one who is true can expect to receive mercy. All four are fast friends.

All are qualities of the Lord, in whom there is no contradiction.

And you? Not so much.

Mercy and truth don't meet together naturally in you: the truth is that, because of your sin, you don't deserve God's mercy. Instead, you deserve His judgment.

Righteousness and peace don't form their friendship in you by nature: by nature, you're not righteous. Therefore, declares the Lord in His Law, you don't deserve His peace. Instead, along with His judgment, you deserve His wrath. Wrath and judgment go together, and they meet in you unless this curse of sin can be removed.

That is why, as you prepare for the coming of Christmas, both the Incarnation and the crucifixion of Jesus are so important. When Jesus is born, the angels declare to the shepherds that He brings peace and goodwill to men. If He brings peace to men, then He brings righteousness to men, too. How? He brings it by speaking the Truth, by *being* the Truth: the Truth that God has willed to be merciful upon you through His Son, Jesus Christ.

So that you might receive God's mercy, peace and righteousness, God expends His wrath and judgment for sin on His Son on the cross. At Calvary, look where the cross-beam intersects with the post: that is where you find your Savior. And because He suffers God's wrath in your place, that is where God's mercy, truth, righteousness and peace meet together for you.

For the sake of Jesus Christ—incarnate, crucified and risen, the truth about you is this: God has mercy on you and declares you righteous for Jesus' sake. Thus, no matter what torment the devil throws at you, you have peace with God and eternal life is yours. You know so because of your Lord on the cross—the same who brings you mercy and truth, righteousness and peace in His Word and Sacraments today.

*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 2: Friday**Read: Luke 3:1-20***And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins...*

(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 2: Saturday**Read: Luke 3:1-20**

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, 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 3: Sunday**Read: Psalm 85**

Restore us, O God of our salvation, And cause Your anger toward us to cease.
(Psalm 85:4)

"Will You be angry with us forever?" That's one of the questions of Psalm 85. The Lord was angry because of the peoples' sin: how long would He be angry with them?

Now, in any other situation with any other god, you'd expect an answer like this: "God will stop being angry with you when you shape up and start keeping His commandments. When you start doing what He's commanded you to do, then you can expect Him to cut you a little slack." That makes sense: you can probably imagine yourself saying to someone, "I'll stop being angry when you stop provoking me so."

But when it comes to God's wrath, it will never work. For one thing, you can't keep God's law well enough to appease His wrath (Romans 3:19-20); in other words, you're unable to shape up. But it gets worse than that: as long as God deals with us only by His Law, that Law will cause us to sin more (Romans 4:15)! It's not that the Law is at fault. Rather, the Old Adam inside of us will make us act like a little child whose parents have just said, "Don't touch." As long as we're sinful, we're going to do precisely what angers God. That's what the Bible says.

So how will God's anger cease? Not by dealing with us by His Law, but by dealing with us by His Gospel. Born sinless, Jesus obeyed God's Law. On the cross, He suffered God's wrath for our sin. God took out His anger for you upon His Son, so that He might deliver you from sin and wrath.

Thus we pray in this psalm, "Restore us, O God of our salvation, and cause Your anger toward us to cease." The import of those words is this: "O Lord, do not deal with us according to Your holy Law, because our sin will only invite Your wrath. Instead, deal with us in mercy for Jesus' sake. You have caused Your anger to cease on Calvary, expending it all on Your Son at the cross. Therefore, restore us to holiness—not because of our person or works, but because of Your Son and the work He has done for our salvation.

And so we pray in the words of this psalm, "Show us Your mercy, LORD, And grant us Your salvation." The Lord does exactly that. He shows His mercy by placing His Word into your ears, declaring, "I forgive you all of your sins." He shows you to His table and says, "Take and eat, this is My body and blood for the forgiveness of sins."

We give thanks that, when we gather in worship, we do not gather around God's Law alone—to do so would be only to invite God's wrath. No, we gather with this very Good News: God isn't angry with us anymore. For Jesus' sake, He is the God of our salvation.

*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)*