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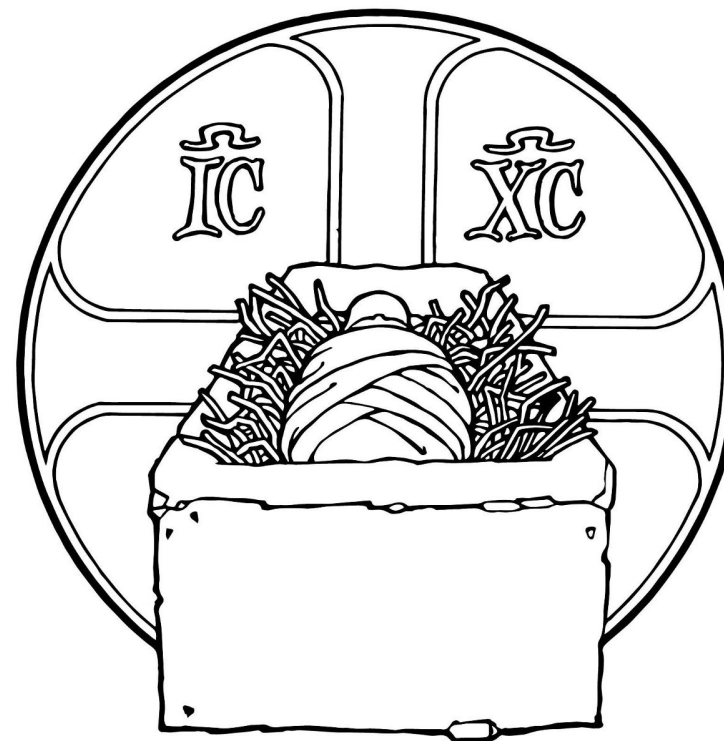
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REFLECTIONS

**Sunday the First Week in Advent -
The Epiphany of Our Lord**

December 3, 2023 - January 6, 2024



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Today's Reading: Matthew 2:1-12

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 66:1-20; Luke 3:21-38

And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. (Matthew 2:11)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. These Wise Men, cannot rely only on their own wisdom. Charts of the stars and notes on astrology would not be able to clarify what this amazing event was, and who it was about. Look where they end up: in Jerusalem, at the palace of Herod the Great.

So if they could not rely on their own wisdom, how were they to find the Lord? The answer is simple: He gave them an epiphany! "Epiphany" means "to reveal." God revealed to them the Savior of the nations.

These Magi from the east had something far greater than human wisdom to guide them. The Lord led them by a star, and He used His Word to provide godly wisdom. He gifted them with the wisdom of Christ, that they might find God become Man—the holy Baby resting on His Mother's lap.

There is the beauty of it all! These great, powerful men, on their knees, worshiping a Baby. Before the Child are laid treasures: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But the amazing thing is that this Christ Child is giving them gifts! By coming in the flesh, He is opening the treasures of God's grace and mercy, and ultimately eternal life, to these foreigners.

Christ reveals Himself as God. As He keeps God's Law, suffers, dies, and rises again, He is the Light to lighten the Gentiles. He opens the kingdom of heaven to all believers. He fulfills His Word, so that now, both Jew and Gentile can receive Him in all of His Word and Sacrament! Now you can rejoice exceedingly that the Lord does not keep you at arm's length, but welcomes you to receive His gifts, and thus receive Him!

"And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh."

Today you go into [His] house and [see] the Child – our Savior – the King of kings with His Church, and you fall down and worship Him. As you sit in the pew and hear His Gospel, and again as you kneel at His rail, opening [His] treasures, [He offers you] gifts – Baptism, Absolution, Gospel and Supper! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

O God, by the leading of a star You made known Your only-begotten Son to the Gentiles. Lead us, who know You by faith, to enjoy in heaven the fullness of Your divine presence; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Friday the Second Week of Christmas

JANUARY 5, 2024

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 65:8-25; Luke 3:1-20

"The wolf and the lamb shall graze together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and dust shall be the serpent's food. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain," says the Lord. (Isaiah 65:25)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Merry Twelfth Day of Christmas!

We send and receive Christmas cards each year. There are always the cards with the beautiful and gentle Virgin and Child. Some have a fuller image with Joseph, shepherds, animals and manger. Some have a star and the wise men. Others have Christmas trees, snow, or even Santa. But some that always stood out to me had these words from Scripture, and a lamb and lion at the manger.

Were there malevolent meat-eaters at the Messiah's manger? Were sinister snakes slithering in the stable? No. Isaiah is preaching a vision of the Kingdom of God when Christ comes, but it is all in the distance, with a view of the entire New Testament era from Jesus' birth through His return at the Last Day. So while it is a Christmas scene, if you will, it is also more.

In Isaiah's era, like now, lions were dangerous predators. They were not so populous that you would see them all the time. But they were there, in the wilderness. As a shepherd, David defended his sheep against lions and bears with his sling and staff. God gave him courage and he defeated these foes, protecting the flock.

Now, the Son of David, your Messiah and King, has gone up the holy mountain of Calvary and defeated the old evil foe. The flock is safe and sound in the care of the Good Shepherd. There at the tree of the cross, Christ defeated Satan and all his minions, and God's judgment from Genesis 3(14-15) was fulfilled. The nail-pierced foot of Jesus crushed the serpent's head, "And dust shall be the serpent's food." (Isaiah 65:25)

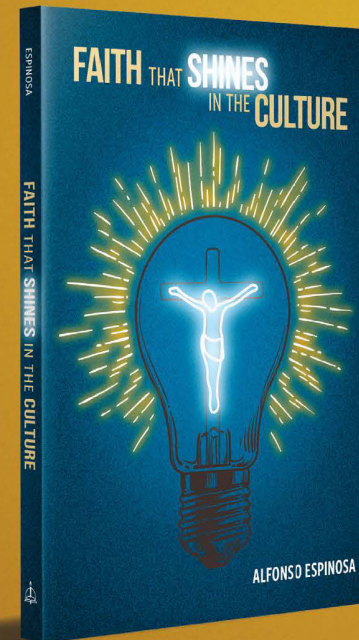
Defeating Satan is not necessarily what your friends and relatives may be thinking when they select Christmas cards. Yet is the "reason for the season," and is the "good news of great joy that will be for all the people." (Luke 2:10) The Baby in the manger is the Corpus on the Cross, and that is a great vision that you are blessed to see more fulfilled, something Isaiah longed for.

You are Jesus' little lamb, kept safe from the foes of sin, death, and the devil. Merry Christmas! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

As true as God's own Word is true, Not earth nor hell's satanic crew Against us shall prevail. Their might? A joke, a mere facade! God is with us and we with God- Our vict'ry cannot fail.

Amen, Lord Jesus, grant our prayer; Great Captain, now Things arm make bare, Fight for us once again! So shall Thy saints And martyrs raise A mighty chorus to Thy praise Forevermore. Amen. (LSB 666:3,4)

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Make the sign of the Holy Cross and say:

In the name of the Father, † Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Read the Psalm for the Day (A table of daily psalms can be found in Lutheran Service Book, page 304).

Read “Today’s Reading” if there is one listed.

Read the Daily Lectionary selections.

Read the Reflection for the Day.

Say the Apostles’ Creed.

Pray the Lord’s Prayer.

Pray one of these little prayers:

(In the Morning)

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

In the morning go to your work with joy, singing a hymn, such as the Ten Commandments, or what your devotion may suggest.

(In the Evening)

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

If it is evening, then go to sleep promptly and cheerfully.

Thursday the Second Week of Christmas

JANUARY 4, 2024

Today’s Reading: Titus 3:4-7

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 63:1-14; Luke 2:21-40

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit. (Titus 3:4-5)

In the Name † of Jesus. Amen. Merry Tenth Day of Christmas!

Merry Baptism!

You see what God does here? He’s connecting the events of Jesus’ birth and your rebirth by water and the Word. This passage from Titus 3 is typically heard in our Divine Services at Christmas, with the amazingly great Good News that “our God and Savior appeared” in the flesh. Conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, Christ is our God and Savior who appeared in the flesh and saved us.

But here we go again, all this talk of death, at a time we should be celebrating the birth of The Baby. right?! Why does death keep breaking into our celebration of Jesus’ birth?

God answers: “For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.” (Titus 3:3) Your broken and corrupt human nature is soiled with sin, and “the wages of sin is death.” (Romans 6:23) Being slaves to our passions and pleasures, we needed a holy and righteous Savior to suffer, die, and rise again. Christ Jesus was born in order to die (and rise!) for you. Thus, Christmas and its Twelve Day celebration are full of death and life, birth, rebirth, and resurrection.

The birth of Jesus publicly began His work of salvation. Later, He victoriously cried out, “It is finished,” completing that work for you at the cross. Now, the forgiveness and salvation that He already purchased and won is delivered to you in Baptism.

You and I don’t have works done in righteousness that could ever earn any salvation. We have no perfection like the Christ Child. We desperately needed the very work He did: “But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.” (Titus 3:4-5)

So you see, Jesus’ death is the connecting link between His birth and your (re-)birth – “the washing of regeneration and renewal.” He did this – for you – to join you to Him through the miracle and happy gift of Baptism. So Baptism and Christmas aren’t such an unusual pair after all.

Merry Baptism! In the Name † of Jesus. Amen.

Water, blood, and Spirit crying By their witness testifying To the One whose death defying Life has come, with life for all. Spirit, water, blood entreating, Working faith and its completing In the One whose death-defeating Life has come, with life for all. (LSB 597:1,5)

Wednesday the Second Week of Christmas

JANUARY 3, 2024

Today's Reading: Titus 3:4-7

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 63:1-14; Luke 2:21-40

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Sunday the First Week in Advent

DECEMBER 3, 2023

Today's Reading: Mark 11:1-10

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 9:8-10:11; 1 Peter 5:1-14

"If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord has need of it...'" (Mark 11:3)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Today marks the beginning of the season of Advent. Our journey over the next three weeks will eventually lead us to a manger in the city of David where an angel of the Lord announces, "for you is born this day a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11).

This little baby's life journey will take Him to a different city, Jerusalem, where He will accomplish His life's mission, "you will call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). We need Advent; I need Advent, the coming of God's Savior to save us, you and me, from our sins. Jesus knew why He was sent; His purpose was clear, and He willingly gave up all to be born to save us from our sins. "The Lord has need of it."

This simple phrase marks the life and mission of Jesus, "the Lord has need of it." What does the Lord need? A womb to be conceived in, a manger to be born in, a river to be baptized in, a donkey to ride upon, a cross to die on, a tomb to rise from. Everything must take place, just as the Lord planned, for you, to save you.

The Lord has need of it. Why? Because of the simple and plain fact that you and I cannot save ourselves. We try, don't we? We make plans to do better. We make promises to change our behavior. When we fail, we can find reasons and excuses to diminish the offense of our sins. When we have good days we are tempted to think they will somehow cover the bad ones. Advent reminds us that we cannot save ourselves – no way! We are imprisoned without any chance of escape. We owe an insurmountable debt that we honestly can never repay. We need someone to deliver us, to rescue us, to pay the price, to die our death, to bring us back into a loving relationship with God.

Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna, the cry of those who realize they need someone to save them, and the crowd that lined the road into Jerusalem knew the one riding on a donkey had come to do just that. The Lord has need of it.

Advent graciously reminds us of our need for a savior, and then proclaims to us the very Savior we need, Jesus. The Lord has need of it, your sin, your death, His cross, His tomb. Jesus is the answer to our hosannas, Lord save us, and He does. After all, that's why He came in the first place, for you. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Once He came in blessing, all our sins redressing; Came in likeness lowly, Son of God most holy; Bore the cross to save us; Hope and freedom gave us. Amen. (LSB 333:1)

Monday the First Week in Advent

DECEMBER 4, 2023

Today's Reading: Isaiah 65:1-9

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 10:12-27a, 33-34; 2 Peter 1:1-21

I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me; I was ready to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, "Here I am, here I am," to a nation that was not called by my name." (Isaiah 65:1)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. How long does God have to wait for someone to seek Him out? He's ready. How long does God have to wait for someone to actually find Him? And, if we find Him, then what? The truth is we don't want anything to do with a God who is holy and just. We certainly don't want to come to Him and have to answer for ourselves. Remember how that went for Adam and Eve when they realized they were naked and ashamed? God comes looking for them, and they bury themselves behind some bushes wrapped in fig leaves. God came to them, but they wished He hadn't, and we've been hiding from Him ever since.

The Apostle Paul lays out the truth about our hiding from the one true God, None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. (Romans 3:10-12) So, if we will never seek after God, no matter how ready He is for us to come, how in the world will we ever be welcomed by Him? If we can't cover our shame, as our first parents attempted, how can we ever be fit to be in His presence, let alone walk with Him and live with Him?

God doesn't wait for us to come to Him, and He certainly doesn't wait until we've cleaned ourselves up. No, God comes to us. He seeks us out and He finds us by sending His own Son to seek and save the lost. God comes to you in Jesus and says, "Here am I coming to be born of a woman. Here I am coming into the city that kills its prophets. Here I am, arms spread out upon a Roman cross to cover your shame. Here I am, risen from the dead, just as I said, to give you life with me. Here I am, coming once again, this time to gather all who have believed in me for life together forever".

God has sought you; He has found you. His arms are wide open for you. You are clean, you are forgiven, you belong to Him, and He will never let you go. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Come, Thou long expected Jesus, Born to set Thy people free; From our fears and sins release us; Let us find our rest in Thee. Israel's strength and consolation, Hope of all the earth Thou art, Dear desire of every nation, Joy of every longing heart. (LSB 338:1)

Tuesday the First Week After Christmas

JANUARY 2, 2024

Today's Reading: Isaiah 61:10-62:3

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 62:1-12; Luke 2:1-20

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness (Isaiah 61:10)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Merry Ninth Day of Christmas!

Did you receive a new dress, sweater, or even a new coat for Christmas? My Grandma and Grandpa usually gifted each of us eight grandchildren with some new clothes every year at our celebration on Christmas Eve. When we were little and only wanted toys, these weren't the most popular gifts, but as we matured and grew older we enjoyed them.

There are times when we might not think of Baptism as the best gift. Moments of Old Adam selfishly and shamefully saying, "I'd rather have toys." "I'd rather have all the fun promised by temptations that surround me." Your sinful flesh teams up with the devil and the world, trying to sway you from appreciating the good gifts with which the Lord covers you with His righteousness.

But God is the Giver of every good and perfect gift. He used the hands and voice of your pastor to baptize you into Christ and clothe you with Christ. "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." (Galatians 3:27) You have been clothed with Christ! Jesus IS the robe of righteousness given to you at Baptism, covering you with His salvation. And in those moments of unappreciation of His gifts, the Holy Spirit is bringing you to repentance, calling, gathering, enlightening, and sanctifying you. He keeps you under that blessed covering of Christ – the garments of salvation – robe of righteousness – Jesus Himself!

Holy Baptism is a gift that is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. You don't need to be baptized more than once. It remains. So once you have put on Christ and been clothed with Him, you can always rejoice. With the simple gift of water in and with the Word of God's name, He claims you and covers you. The Holy Spirit keeps you in that one true faith given at your Baptism, and you just can't help but rejoice and exult!

The new sweater you got from Grandma; the college sweatshirt from Mom and Dad; even the HT gear you got yourself – they are all great! But infinitely greater is the gift that in Baptism, you have put on Christ, and were clothed with salvation and covered with righteousness!

In Baptism we now put on Christ – Our shame is fully covered With All that He once sacrificed And freely for us suffered. For here the flood of His own blood Now makes us holy, right, and good Before our heav'nly Father. (LSB 596:4)

The Circumcision and Name of Jesus

JANUARY 1, 2024

Today's Reading: Luke 2:21

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 61:1-11; Luke 1:57-80

And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. (Luke 2:21)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Merry Eighth Day of Christmas!

It's still Christmas. Why all this talk of blood? The Twelve Days of Christmas have several festivals for martyrs, reminding us of bloodshed in the Church. And now, we hear about bloodshed from our Lord. But not in the typical way we speak of it.

Jesus shed His blood for you! Sure, you say, over 30 years after He was born. Yes. That is true. But there is even more to ponder and treasure up in your heart.

At the tender age of one week, Joseph and the Blessed Virgin had her Child circumcised. He was keeping the Law – and shedding His blood in order to keep that Law. He was not keeping it for Himself. He did not bleed for Himself. He did it all for you. And as He suffered that brief moment, there was a foreshadowing of how someday He would suffer and bleed and die for all.

Stop and think about that. Even as a Baby, Jesus Christ keeps the Law for you, doing all that is required. And even as a baby, Jesus Christ sheds His blood for you. He takes it all upon Himself to redeem you, having His body permanently marked, to witness God's covenant with His Church.

This was also the moment when He received His name—the most holy Name – the Name which is above every name. Jesus! The Lord saves! Imagine: every time they called out His Name, a mini-sermon was preached – “The Lord saves!”

He has come to you at your Baptism, where He brought you forgiveness, rescue, and the promise of eternal salvation. There, you were permanently marked as His own, witnessing God's covenant with His Church. There you too were marked with His most holy Name. Christ christened you as a Christian! Bathed in the cleansing water and blood from His pierced side, you were given your personal name and placed into Jesus!

It's Christmas still. Why all this talk of blood? On this Eighth Day of Christmas we are merry as we remember that God is not demanding our own blood be shed to pay for our sins, but that “Jesus shed His blood for me,” the chief of sinners. He spent His entire life on earth, and now in eternity, fulfilling His most holy name: The Lord saves! Jesus! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Chief of sinners though I be, Jesus shed His blood for me, Died that I might live on high, Lives that I might never die As the branch is to the vine, I am His and He is mine. (LSB 611:1)

Tuesday the First Week in Advent

DECEMBER 5, 2023

Today's Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 11:1-12:6; 2 Peter 2:1-22

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus. (1 Corinthians 1:4)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. The season of Advent, these days leading up to Christmas, is full of anticipation. We are invited to wait, as Israel did, for that shoot to spring out from the stump of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1). Some 800 years after Isaiah penned these words, God made good on His promise to send the one whose belt is righteousness and faithfulness (Isaiah 11:5) and upon whom the Spirit of the Lord rested upon (Isaiah 11:2). Jesus was born; the Lord has come, and He's bringing gifts for you.

The Apostle Paul reminds the Christians at Corinth how he is always giving thanks to God because of the “grace that was given you in Christ Jesus” (1 Cor. 1:4). Paul is beside himself with joyful gratitude when thinking about how gracious and giving God is for us whom he loves. God doesn't hold back; He gives it all to you and for you, all because of Jesus.

All of what? Everything you need to keep you until our Lord Jesus' second Advent, His second coming. You are not lacking any gift, Paul writes. You have all you need in Christ to live these days knowing God has your back. God is faithful! And while you live these days waiting, trusting, and living daily under God's grace, God promises to sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1:8). Seriously? What must I do? Nothing! That's why it is called grace. This is why the coming of Jesus is God's gift for you and for the world. And like the gifts we are given from those who love us, we simply stretch out our hands to receive them and say, thank you. That's what faith does with God's gifts, it simply receives and says thank you.

The Lord has come, and He will come again. Now we wait with our eyes of faith fixed on Jesus who came bearing the gifts of forgiveness and life. Now we live, with our eyes of faith fixed on Jesus who will come for you, to gather you to Himself, and present you holy and blameless, and completely guiltless – all as a gift for you. Thanks be to God! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Then when You will come again as the glorious King to reign, I with joy will see Your face, freely ransomed by Your grace. (LSB 352:1)

Wednesday the First Week in Advent

DECEMBER 6, 2023

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 14.1-23.; 2 Peter 3.1-18

But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen. (2 Peter 3:18)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Grow in grace and grow in knowledge. These are both gifts from God who wants to have a relationship with you. It is God's desire for you to know Him, and He's done everything for that to happen. Even after Adam and Eve's fall into sin, God was determined not to write them or us off. He continued to do everything, to pave the way, to restore that intimate relationship with Him that was lost.

This is what the angels were waiting for. This is what the prophets promised and foretold. This is what John the Baptizer was sent to prepare. This is why God became man; this is why Jesus was born. He was born for you, to bring you back into a loving, secure relationship with God that will stand the test of time and even withstand our sinfulness. It required a sinless life; it required an atoning death, and Jesus' empty tomb declares He has done it.

That's the grace of God. The giving of Himself that you might be brought back to Him. That's the grace we grow in, being connected to a God who has done everything and continues to do everything to keep us connected to Him. God continues to give Himself to us that we may grow in grace and knowledge of His Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. He opens our minds to understand the Scriptures; how the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise again from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name (Luke 24:46). This is Christian growth – that we grow in our realization of how much we need forgiveness, and we grow in our dependence upon all the ways God delivers His forgiveness to us as a gift all because of Jesus.

We grow in grace knowing we have a gracious God who loves us, who is for us, who comes to us and makes Himself known to us because He desires us to know Him – just as you are. Faith can't help but want to come to Him, to know God, to walk with Him and to trust Him daily with our lives. And yes, even faith is a gift from God – the soil in which we grow in grace and knowledge of our beloved Savior, Jesus. To Him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

By grace God's Son, our only Savior, Came down to earth to bear our sin. Was it because of your own merit That Jesus died your soul to win? No, it was grace, and grace alone, That brought Him from His heav'nly throne. (LSB 566:3)

The First Sunday After Christmas

DECEMBER 31, 2023

Today's Reading: Luke 2:22-40

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 60:1-22; Luke 1:39-56

My eyes have seen your salvation (Luke 2:30)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Out of the crowds in the Temple courts that day, Simeon comes forward and scoops up Baby Jesus in his arms. Simeon recognizes the mysterious truth that this Child is not just “holy to the Lord” – this Child IS the Lord!

That precious truth changes everything for Simeon. You see, this man had been promised by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before He had seen life. He would behold the Savior before He departed in peace, into Paradise to dwell with the Lord. As Mary and Joseph walk through the Temple courts, God reveals to Simeon that this is the One! This Baby is the Savior – the Redeemer – the Holy One of Israel!

That is when Simeon breaks into song, praising God and declaring that he can now die a happy man, since he has seen the Savior and witnessed God keeping His great promise. He is saying, “You can take me now, God. I've seen it all! I knew You would keep Your promise, and now it is complete! I'm ready, Lord – come and get me, for I am made holy to the Lord!”

You are holy to the Lord. St. Simeon recognizes that this is a wonderful, comforting Gospel! Try as he might, the devil cannot snatch you out of the Father's hand. Our dear, loving God is preserving you with the holy life, sacrificial death, and glorious resurrection of the Holy One of Israel.

You belong to the Lord. At Baptism, the Savior cleansed you, body and soul, and made you holy, claiming you as His own. God presented you to Himself, and gathered you into His family and kingdom.

“Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.” You were filled with sin as a baby inside your mother. You belonged to sin and death. But God changed all that. He brought you into His presence with His Word, as it was proclaimed to your expecting mother. Then, more fully and clearly, He publicly displayed that you belong to the Lord as He baptized you.

You belong to the Lord. No matter what hardships you face, no matter what sufferings you endure, no matter how tough life seems, you have the sweet comfort that you are not left alone; Christ the Savior is born, and you are His! He does not abandon you to the darkness of this world, but is the “Light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of [God's] people, Israel.” In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Saturday the Week of Christmas

DECEMBER 30, 2023

Today's Reading: Introit for Christmas 1

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 58:1-59:3, 14-21; Luke 1:26-38

The LORD reigns ; he is robed in majesty; The LORD is robed; He has put on strength as His belt. (Psalm 93:1, from the Introit for the 1st Sunday after Christmas)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Merry Sixth Day of Christmas!

In Leicester, England, a church displays a beautiful statue of the Christ Child, on His mother's lap. The Child Jesus is robed in beautiful, luxurious, dignified Eucharistic vestments – alb, stole, and chasuble, and with a gold crown on His head.

The Baby had every right as King David's royal descendent to wear such gorgeous and stately garments, yet never owned costly, royal robes. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords, who should definitely wear the most amazing crown ever crafted, but the Son of Mary was humble and poor, and did not display His rank and authority by what He wore. Yet the sculptor is taking you beyond the "swaddling cloths" in the Bethlehem manger. He is teaching through that image that even if unnoticed or unknown, "The LORD is robed."

At the Fall in the Garden, Adam and Eve first knew that they were naked. They had been robed with majesty and holiness as the crown of creation. Now they were exposed for the broken and corrupt, sinful creatures they now were. Nakedness was no longer an innocent and beautiful adornment of perfect beings, but a blunt reminder of evil and flaws within and without.

When you were born, you physically entered this world in the broken nakedness of our first parents. "[You] were brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did [your] mother conceive [you]" (Psalm 51:5.) But at Baptism, the Lord used the hands and voice of your pastor to bring you forgiveness, rescue, and salvation.

That washing of rebirth and renewal did something miraculous, that can be described in terms of clothing. "Let your priests be clothed with righteousness, and let your saints shout for joy" (Psalm 132:9.) You, the members of Christ's kingdom of baptized priests, have been clothed with Christ! "You have been clothed with the robe of Christ's righteousness that covers all your sin. So shall you stand before the judgment seat of Christ to receive the inheritance prepared for you from the foundation of the world." (LSB, p. 271)

Jesus covers you in His righteousness, making you look just like Him! You might not see the robes or crown with your eyes, but He has covered you with Himself in Baptism, robing you as His royal priests, serving Him in thanksgiving for the faith and salvation that our Newborn King gives. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

O Savior, Child of Mary, Who felt our human woe; O Savior, King of glory, Who dost our weakness know: Bring us at length we pray To the bright courts of heaven, And to the endless day. (LSB 359:4)

Thursday the First Week in Advent

DECEMBER 7, 2023

Today's Reading: Sacrament of the Altar, Question 3

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 24:1-13; 1 John 1:1-2:14

"...Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Matthew 26:27-28)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. What do you see? A piece of bread, maybe a wafer? A little wine? What do you hear? "This is my body... this is my blood." Words spoken through an ordinary voice giving you ordinary bread and wine. Then comes those words, "for the forgiveness of sins." How can this be? How can eating this bread and drinking this wine do such great things, like forgiving me of my sins?

Those words spoken into your ears over the bread and wine are not just any words, they are Jesus' words. The words of Jesus do just what they say. Luther writes in the Large Catechism, what Christ's lips say and speak, so it is (LC V 14). Thank God for faithful pastors who simply speak Jesus' words for you. Thank God for pastors who faithfully give you what Jesus has won for you through the shedding of His blood. Jesus knows what we need, and He continues to provide. He gives us His church; He gives us pastors; He gives us His Word, and that Word gives what it promises.

Our Lord knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows we struggle. He knows we are weak in faith, and that our faith is always under attack. He knows we are prone to doubt His love and forgiveness for us, especially when we are aware of our shortcomings, our giving into sin. So Jesus continues to speak the words we need to hear. He continues to give and strengthen your faith in who He is and what He has done for you. And the faith Jesus gives believes and clings to His words of promise for you. Jesus gathers you to Himself and feeds you the fruits of His cross through ordinary bread and wine. His Word does just what it says. Whoever believes these words has exactly what they say: forgiveness of sins. (SC Lord's Supper 3).

What do you see? Don't trust your eyes but trust your ears. What do you hear? Jesus' words of forgiveness, life, and salvation delivered right into your mouth. The Lord's Supper is truly Jesus for you! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Is this for me? I am forgiven and set free! I do believe that I receive His very body and His blood. O taste and see—the Lord is good. (LSB 629:5)

Friday the First Week in Advent

DECEMBER 8, 2023

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 24:14-25:12; 1 John 2:15-29

And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. (1 John 2:17)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Nothing lasts forever. That's certainly the way it seems to be in this world we live in. You purchase a new smartphone and after a year or two, you need a new one. Your favorite sport's team is hardly recognizable as players come and go. This world is not meant to last and our life experience confirms this fact.

So why is it that we continue to buy into all the various promises the world continues to make us? Let's face it, we love the world, or at least that's the temptation. Who doesn't want to feel accepted, or to have a more fulfilling life? Who doesn't need more happiness? Who doesn't feel the need to be more in control of their present and future? We grasp for these things because they give us hope, but the world is passing away along with its empty promises and false hopes.

"Do not love the world or the things of the world," John writes. The one behind all those false promises and hopes this world offers is the one who led Adam and Eve to doubt God's promises, Satan himself. He is still at it trying to lure us away from the only thing that will last forever. He's crafty. He disguises himself in this world knowing those voids in our lives that he tries to fill with fabricated promises and misplaced hopes. There is only one thing that remains forever; there is only one thing that will endure after everything else has faded away; the Word of the Lord remains forever (1 Peter 1:25).

This word that lasts forever is the Gospel that was preached to you. God's promises He makes to you in Christ endure for you, forever. The world's promises are based on lies, and that shouldn't surprise us since Satan "is a liar and the "father of lies" (John 8:44). You have been given the Spirit of God to know the truth. You have been given the gift of faith to trust in the one who will never let you down. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and whoever trusts in Him will live forever. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is the promise that He made to us – eternal life" (1 John 2:24-25). This is the will of God for you, to trust His Son, Jesus. The Word made flesh remains forever. Jesus' Gospel promises for you to endure forever, and trusting in that Word, so will you. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Lord Jesus Christ, Give us strength to fight the good fight and by faith to overcome all the temptations of Satan, the flesh, and the world so that we may finally receive the salvation of our souls. Amen.

Friday the Week of Christmas

DECEMBER 29, 2023

Today's Reading: Luther's Small Catechism, 2nd Commandment

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 55:1-13; Luke 1:1-25

You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God.

What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not curse, swear, use satanic arts, lie, or deceive by His name, but call upon it in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks. (Luther's Small Catechism)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Merry Fifth Day of Christmas!

St. Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, called upon the name of the Lord, as he walked to vespers on this date in 1170. He felt the trouble becoming greater. Several knights had entered the cathedral and demanded that he come with them and give an account to the king for his actions. (His actions denied that the earthly king is ruler of Christ's Church.) He respectfully refused to be bullied. Now these knights stormed back into the halls of the Cathedral at Canterbury and confronted St. Thomas. (SPOILER ALERT: More death during these Twelve Days of Christmas!)

These had been rough years for the Archbishop who once was a good friend of the king. But since holding this office, Thomas had held God in the highest regard, and refused to be pushed around. He went about his work, serving Christ and His Church. He lived a life of praying, praising, and giving thanks, preaching and teaching others to do the same.

He was forced into exile for a while, leaving the country so that he would not be jailed or executed for standing up to King Henry II. He returned, even while still dangerous. But he would not back down. Christ is Lord of the Church and King of kings.

Thomas had called on the name of the Lord in good times – times of peace and harmony – and in times of trouble. You do the same. You have times of prayer and meditation – spending time with God's Word and pondering it, both when life is full of good things and also when it has hardships and challenges.

Keeping the second commandment is also about truthfully proclaiming and teaching God's Word. St. Thomas did that, even when pressured and threatened by rulers and soldiers. You do that too. Sure, you don't have a thug in armor, whacking at your skull with his sword. But in the face of non-Christian classmates who make life rough, teachers who criticize your faith, and other challenges, you remain steadfast in speaking the truth of God's Word. In faith, you properly use God's name. Thanks be to God. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

The Holy Innocents, Martyrs

DECEMBER 28, 2023

Today's Reading: Matthew 2:13-18

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 52:13-54:10; Matthew 2:13-23

"A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more." (Matthew 2:18)

"The Boy who lived." In the Harry Potter novels, that is a phrase that refers to Harry. No one could withstand the evil Voldemort, and his murderous rampage. That is, until Harry. Harry's mother gave her life defending her one-year-old son, and when the murdering curse was cast, the baby miraculously survived. Harry was then placed into hiding by people who cared about him, so he could survive and one day help others.

As the story goes on, the reader discovers that this all had to take place, so that Harry could in fact, one day lay down his own life in love and courage for the protection of others, and then return to life. Sound familiar?

St. Matthew proclaims the real "Boy who lived." While King Herod orders the murder of all toddler and baby boys near Bethlehem, God sends an angel to warn St. Joseph to smuggle the Blessed Virgin and her Son to safety. God's plan would not be fulfilled had the Christ Child been killed in this way. The fullness of time would come later, after living perfectly and going to Jerusalem to lay down His life as the Lamb of God on the altar of the cross.

Today the Church recalls the infant martyrs who were slain by Herod's evil plan, but takes comfort in our loving and merciful Lord who gathered those little ones into His arms in paradise. Enduring such horrors, their mothers would be hard pressed to find any comfort. The true "Boy who lived" is no ordinary boy, but the God who created us all. He is the One victorious over death and the devil, and can give peace and comfort that surpasses understanding. Rachel refused to be comforted, because sin, death, and the devil had not yet been fully conquered. But the Christ Child grew and at the fullness of time, laid down His life for us all.

At the cross, the death of these Holy Innocents lost its comfortless horror and grief. Jesus' own death and resurrection bring the holy comfort that heals and soothes their mothers, and the whole Church. In His saving and life-giving work, we can share in the joy and bliss that the Holy Innocents have already been experiencing since the moment they departed this life, and were embraced by their Lord.

Saturday the First Week in Advent

DECEMBER 9, 2023

Today's Reading: Psalm 80:1, 8a, 9b, 7; antiphon: v. 3

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 26:1-19; 1 John 3:1-24

Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved! (Psalm 80:3)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. God delights in the prayers of His people. He loves for us to call upon His name. If we are honest, it seems like we usually pray only when we are in desperate need. When our backs are against the wall and we are at the end of our rope, we finally find ourselves crying out to God for help. And you know what? God delights in the prayers of His people.

Praying to God is faith in action, and the Lord longs for us to put our trust in Him. That's exactly what prayer does; it is faith looking to and talking to God. If you think about it, it's all a gift. Faith given, faith in action praying – all given by God. The Psalms too are a gift from God, for they are a collection of prayers driven by faith calling upon the Lord. When our prayers are joined to the Psalms, God delights in hearing His Word prayed back to Him.

Restore us, O God. The Hebrew word behind restore is the idea of returning or coming back; it is a prayer of repentance. Repent me, O God is the cry of faith. We often think of repentance as something that begins with us, something we must finally decide to do. Repentance begins with God; it is a work He begins in us. In other words, repentance is a God's gift to you.

We are prone to wander, aren't we? We often find ourselves on the wrong road either by choice or by deception, we can't help it. But our loving and gracious Father will not let us wander off to be lost forever. He seeks us out, He finds us, He returns us to Himself through his Word and Spirit and thank God He does.

Let your face shine, that we may be saved. This is where repentance leads us, to Christ, the light of the world. The light of Christ's life shone in the darkness when He hung on a Roman cross that you may be saved. Even when it seemed like His life was extinguished, three days later He radiated in resurrection glory. Christ must suffer and on the third day be raised that repentance and forgiveness of sins be preached in His name (Luke 24:46).

God delights in your prayers. He repents you, He forgives you, He saves you, all for the sake of Jesus. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

From the cross Thy wisdom shining Breaketh forth in conqu'ring might; From the cross forever beameth All Thy bright redeeming light. (LSB 578:4)

Sunday the Second Week in Advent

DECEMBER 10, 2023

Today's Reading: Mark 1:1-8

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 26:20-27:13; 1 John 4:1-21

John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (Mark 1:4)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ starts with John, not Jesus. No Christmas joy. No angel choir. No kids in bathrobes pretending to be shepherds. A preacher preaching repentance and baptizing for the forgiveness of sins. It might be better. The good news of Jesus Christ begins with the Word being given to sinners for repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

It's a reminder of how God advents today. He is where the Word is preached. Where the Sacraments are administered. This is how He is with us always, even to the end of the age. Advent is a God who shows up. The Gospel of Jesus Christ doesn't start without Him. He is being given to those who need Him. Your church works that way too. Jesus isn't at a manger we journeyed to, met by our best efforts and gifts and well rehearsed lines someone else made you memorize. He's preached to sinners in the wilderness.

When you look around your sanctuary, your home, your life, and Jesus feels far, when the people the book says listen to are weird, and when the season feels a little off like it does some years, God advents. The Word-made-flesh is preached. Your sins are forgiven.

Mark skips the pleasantries and sometimes it's good to be reminded we have permission to do it too. There are weeks that are too heavy for small talk. The bad ones where the guilt piles up. Where the things said and done since last Sunday still haunt you. Those are not the weeks for Christmas pageants and small talk after about how big the kids are getting. So you can go to church and you hear your pastor dispense with pleasantries. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Your Baptism. You confess your sins. He forgives you in Jesus' stead. You can look around and it might still feel off, but God advents there. Shows up. To meet you in the wilderness of your worst week. To forgive. To save. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Your only-begotten Son, that by His coming we may be enabled to serve You with pure minds; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

St. John, Apostle

DECEMBER 27, 2023

Today's Reading: John 21:20-25

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 51:17-52:12; Matthew 2:1-12

This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true. (John 21:24)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Merry Third Day of Christmas!

Happy Feast of St. John! John is one of the Twelve. Apostle. Evangelist. The one bearing witness about these things. Or as he originally said it in Greek, the one martyring about these things. To be a martyr is to be a witness. Normally we use that word to talk about those who bore witness to Christ by being killed for Christ and the faith that He has given. It is said that St. John is the only apostle who died a natural death; Jesus spared him the violence of being physically martyred. And yet, his life and ministry for the decades that followed Jesus' resurrection and ascension were full of a witness through John's preaching and celebrating of Christ's sacraments.

The world is full of darkness. And not just the darkness at this time of year, with later sunrises and earlier sunsets. Sin, death, and the devil are always trying to surround us and fill us with cold and darkness, doubts and fears, to keep us away from Jesus. The Beloved Disciple witnesses Christ to us, and reflects the Light of the World (John 8.) Jesus scatters the darkness, radiating His Gospel light, and the darkness has not overcome it (John 1:5.)

Christ cast the bright beams of His light by forming John and the other apostles in faith, proclaiming His Law and His life-giving Gospel. And they, in turn, witnessed. Martyred. They reflected the bright beams of Christ's light to all who heard His Word in their preaching and writing.

Daily, the devil tries pulling you back into the darkness, overwhelming you so you feel alone and cut off from the Light of the World. Like St. John in his elderly years, after the other apostles had all been martyred, you might even feel like you alone are left, and you're surrounded by those who are against Christ. But Jesus has rescued you and given you new birth from above (John 3), claiming you as His own. You are not alone. Jesus has sent the Comforter and has overcome the world for you (John 16.)

Jesus has overcome any hurt, heartache, overwhelm, and darkness. And He gives His saving Gospel to you through St. John (and the other prophets, apostles, and evangelists that He inspired.) Through the witness of St. John and these men moved by the Holy Spirit, Christ gives light to you and the world. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Merciful Lord, cast the bright beams of Your light upon Your Church that we, being instructed by the doctrine of Your blessed apostle and evangelist John, may come to the light of everlasting life; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

St. Stephen, Martyr

DECEMBER 26, 2023

Today's Reading: Matthew 23:34-39

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 49:22-26; 50:4-51:8, 12-16; Matthew 1:18-25

For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" (Matthew 23:39)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Merry Second Day of Christmas! Today is the Feast of St. Stephen, the first martyr after Jesus' resurrection, stoned to death for preaching Christ crucified. Wait. What? Christmas is a time to talk about birth. Babies. New life. What's this about death?

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." Jerusalem would not see Jesus after He prophesied this until Palm Sunday, when He triumphantly entered the city as the Son of David, the King, coming for His enthronement on the cross.

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." Even when some saw Him, like many Pharisees, Sadducees, and others, they refused to join in this cry of faith.

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." At the moment of Stephen's death, he saw the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God, and while the crowd surrounding Stephen to murder him would not exclaim the praise, Stephen could see the One who comes in the name of the Lord, ready to receive him into paradise. As this cruel and painful end crushed him, Stephen had a peace beyond understanding, as Christ Jesus gathered him to our heavenly Father.

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." We get a glimpse of Stephen's heavenly vision as we gather around Christ's altar week after week. Singing both "Holy! Holy! Holy!" with the angels around God's throne, and this quotation from the Psalms with the children of Jerusalem and the Church in every age, we feast upon the true body of Christ and drink His true blood.

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." Some day, when the Lord has brought our days to His perfect completion, He will gather us to Himself and bless us with this vision given to Stephen, seeing our Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. The bloodshed and hardships of this world will be over, and we will have joy that is merrier than any Christmas we have known. The One who has come in the name of the Lord to nourish, forgive, give life and salvation, will bring it to perfect completion at the Last Day – as He comes – for you. "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Monday the Second Week in Advent

DECEMBER 11, 2023

Today's Reading: Isaiah 40:1-11

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 24:14--25:12; 1 John 2:15-29

The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. (Isaiah 40:7)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. I actually prefer the fake Christmas trees to the real ones. It's not the mess or the cost. It's actually Isaiah. "All flesh is grass. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it. Surely the people are grass." There's something that hits a little too close about putting a dying tree in your living room as we celebrate the birth of Him who saves us from death. It's great that the Savior was born... but the grass still withers. The tree still dies. It's the thing nobody wants to think about this time of year, so just to make sure nobody thinks too hard about it, what if we took the dying tree...and put lights on it. So much of what celebrations this time of year turn into are hiding from problems nobody can fix. So much of what we look to for comfort is just trying to cover up what's wrong. Because what else do you actually say? What shall I cry? It's the question that drove Isaiah to wail before the Lord. What do you say to the grass withering in the field to make it green again? What do you say to someone that's lost everything? And the deeper question, just hinted at, "Wasn't it Your breath, Lord, that did this to them?"

Isaiah would have rather preached to a people who didn't need comfort, but only the sick need the doctor. The Lord spoke and said to Isaiah, "Tell my people that her warfare has ended, her iniquity is pardoned" Yes, your sin is real, but every sin is forgiven. You don't have to double down on it because there's no other choice. Your mistakes, your rebellion, your sin is pardoned, forgiven, forgotten. Covered by the blood of Him who died for you. All that well deserved God's anger was addressed there, for you. You don't have to dress it up as something else like lights on a dying tree. You don't have to look for comfort in hiding from what's wrong. You don't have to be afraid. Our Lord confronts the death of withering grass and dares us to see the truth about comfort.

Comfort is not measured in the lack of bad things, but in the presence of good. So God advents. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Yea, her sins our God will pardon, blotting out each dark misdeed; All that well deserved His anger He no more will see or heed. She hath suffered many_a day, Now her griefs have passed away; God will change her pining sadness into ever-springing gladness. (LSB 347:2)

Tuesday the Second Week in Advent

DECEMBER 12, 2023

Today's Reading: 2 Peter 3:8-14

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 29:1-14; Jude 1-25

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

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. The heavens will pass away with a roar. The earth and the works done on it will be exposed. So be diligent to be found by Him without spot or blemish, and at peace. And until that last word, it's all a threat. Hey everyone, Jesus is gonna show up when nobody expects Him, set everything you love on fire, and expose everything you've ever kept secret. But be at peace when it happens. This is fine.

Because the timing matters. The last day isn't a trap. He doesn't delay so that more people will be lost, but out of a desire that more would be saved. It isn't time yet because there's more preaching to do. More forgiving sinners to do. More hope to receive. Jesus isn't waiting for the right time to pull your shame out into the open so more people can see it. He already did that. He bore it on the cross. Every evil deed. Everything you'd have nobody see. All of it hung on Jesus as He bore your sins. None of it comes back down from there. You are forgiven. You are baptized. Blameless, and without spot or blemish.

So wait that way. Baptized. The promise of the last day should make you feel better, not worse. It's a harbinger of peace, not anxiety. Jesus will Advent, one last time, and then we can be rescued from the darkness that feels so overwhelming. We can stop counting the days we wish we could forget. They'll be burned up. And we'll be taken through death and unto the same resurrection that we saw in our Lord. The last day isn't one we can predict. But we don't need to run from it. We pray for it. Come, Lord Jesus. But even while we wait, we can be at peace, because we have the very things we need to sustain us until the last. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

He comes the broken heart to bind, The bleeding soul to cure, And with the treasures of His grace To enrich the humble poor. (LSB 349:3)

The Feast of the Nativity

DECEMBER 25, 2023

Today's Reading: John 1:1-14

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 49:1-18; Matthew 1:1-17

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. "Christmas just doesn't work out for me. Never has." That is the punch-you-in-the-gut moment as you get to know Billy, the sad, impoverished child picked up by the Polar Express. He is dressed in a tattered night shirt, and comes from an old, run down house "on the wrong side of the tracks." Christmas has not been a time of plenty, but of continued need. Still, there is a problem.

Billy has a hard time trusting anyone, as tough as life has been. Throughout the story, he is welcomed and befriended by two other children. And in the end, the conductor artistically punches words into the passengers' tickets. Billy's has the words: "COUNT ON." He is encouraged to count on others, to count on his new friends, to count on Santa, to count on Christmas working out for him.

Christmas is indeed a time to "count on," but not in the simplistic, earthly sense of counting on friends, family, or others. Christmas is the great festival of the Incarnation and Nativity of Our Lord! God-in-the-flesh has come and there is no one more perfect, loving, and holy to "count on."

Today you worship God Incarnate and then go about your daily life in the true Christmas Spirit. That is, the Holy Spirit, who has called you to faith and delivered the Gospel and Sacraments of the Word Made Flesh. It is not you who have the ability to count on God; it is the loving and merciful gift of the Lord that He sends His Spirit to give you faith—the gift of "counting on" Him alone. The Holy Spirit is the One who is giving you joy over Jesus' birth; God becoming Man for you!

Merry Christmas, you dear, forgiven saints! Merry Christmas, as you celebrate in the gift of faith, counting on Christ Jesus, who is delivered to you in His Gifts of Word and Sacrament! His Holy Spirit brings you to believe and understand the most profound words about Christmas, which are not even from Luke 2, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Yes, Joy to the world! The Lord is come!" And He will continue to come in His Word and His Sacraments, until He gathers you to Himself in eternity! THAT is an amazing Christmas gift that you can "count on" and "believe!" Merry Christmas! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Christmas Eve

DECEMBER 24, 2023

Today's Reading: Luke 2:1-20

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 44:21-45:13, 20-25; Revelation 12:1-17

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. (Luke 2:11-12)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Where do we find Him? The shepherds are tremendously blessed that the Gospel proclaimed by the angel and sung by the heavenly host did not simply tell them what had happened, but where. Sure, the King of kings and Lord of lords is omnipresent. He's everywhere. But He had just come right then, for them—and for you! Christ the Lord had come in the flesh, and located Himself, for our salvation.

People around us are looking for some sort of “good news” about Christmas in many places; movies, Christmas cookies, trees and decorations, a break from school, time with family, and more. Even in the Church, you can get side tracked, and focus on the Christmas carols, the children's Christmas program, decorating the church, sharing a feast with family, and just loving each other. These are all good things. They are all gifts from God. And yet, they are not the heart of the angel's message that brings the “good news of great joy.”

The best way to celebrate this holy day IS to gather with family, sing, eat, and receive a gift. However, not in the way most people would think of that. The Lord has blessed you to celebrate this holy night, gifting you to know where to find Him. He still is everywhere, but He still locates Himself for you. Christ the Lord still comes in the flesh, and locates Himself for your salvation.

Where do we find Him?

Tonight, He is no longer a newborn baby in Bethlehem, as precious and dear as that image is to us. He is not swaddled and sleeping in heavenly peace. You don't even have the challenge of coming up with airfare to Israel and making your way to the incense-filled grotto in the Church of the Nativity.

Tonight is not only for the shepherds to find Jesus. Tonight you also find the baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. You do this as you sing with the angels, hear His Gospel proclaimed by your pastor, and kneel at the altar where the body of Christ the Lord is wrapped in the swaddling cloths of Holy Communion linens. What good news of great joy that Jesus Himself is placed on the manger of your tongue. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Wednesday the Second Week in Advent

DECEMBER 13, 2023

Today's Reading: Revelations 1:1-20

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 29:15-30:14; Revelations 1:1-20

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” (Matthew 5:8)

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne. (Revelation 1:4)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. The more exciting you try to make the book of Revelation, the more boring you make the church. The more boring you allow Revelation to continue to be, the more glorious church appears. We go looking in the book of revelation for wild stuff we don't see. Like sword-mouth-Jesus. Sword-mouth-Jesus is definitely less boring than your pastor. Except they preach the same thing. Jesus died and rose again. He holds the keys to death.

But John saw a vision from heaven. With trumpets. Visions from heaven with trumpets are definitely less boring than the Bible reading in church that goes on just a little too long. Except the vision directed John to share it with the churches in a book. Like a Bible. That is trustworthy and speaks of Jesus for sinners.

The gift of Revelation is that the more boring you allow it to be, the grander church appears because for all the incredible language describing heavenly visions; all that stuff shows up in your church. The letter of Revelation was written to fledgling churches struggling with doubt and despair, false doctrine and gross sin. Jesus is there in Word and Sacrament to forgive, to comfort, to save those who don't deserve it. He calls us out of foolishness and into eternal life. You receive those very gifts every Sunday. Your pastor preaches to you. He gives you the body and blood of Jesus. He ties you to the alpha and the omega in a way that transcends space and time as you are united with the marriage feast of the lamb in His kingdom which has no end. When Revelation needs to be more than that, it always makes church feel like less, and worse, you can never actually find it no matter how many signs you see in the news. When Revelation is a book pointing to Jesus, going to church where Jesus is just gets even more impressive. I imagine sword-mouth-Jesus looks cool, but the body and blood on your altar aren't just something to imagine. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

A mighty fortress is our God, A trusty shield and weapon; He helps us free from ev'ry need That hath us now o'ertaken. The old evil foe Now means deadly woe; Deep guile and great might Are his dread arms in fight; On earth is not his equal. (LSB 656:1)

Thursday the Second Week in Advent

DECEMBER 14, 2023

Today's Reading: Luther's Small Catechism, Sacrament of the Altar, Question 4
Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 30:15-26; Revelations 2:1-29

Who receives this sacrament worthily? Fasting and bodily preparation are certainly fine outward training. But that person is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words: "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." But anyone who does not believe these words or doubts them is unworthy and unprepared, for the words "for you" require all hearts to believe.

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Our churches make a big deal about Communion. We don't let just anyone come. We believe it is exactly what Scripture says that it is. We believe that it can do great good if received correctly, and great harm if received incorrectly. Paul talked about someone dying. He seemed against it. We agree.

The problem is, the devil loves an opportunity to call someone unworthy. The evil foe will say you're unworthy because of the porn you watch. Because you cut yourself. Because you struggle not to hate your parents.

Being a sinner doesn't make you unworthy of Communion. Communion is only for sinners. If you're not a sinner, don't drink from the cup that promises forgiveness. It's not a meal for former sinners who kicked the habit. It's not a meal paid for with promises to do better next time. It's a meal for the unworthy, and everything is flipped on its head. For everything you're too ashamed to admit to everyone kneeling beside you, Jesus only promises forgiveness. Every week (cool practice, huh?).

Fasting and bodily preparation turn into something new. They don't earn your place. They simply become fine outward training. A meal that forgives everything you want to be rid of helps us to realize life would actually be better without it. So we fight against our sinful flesh. We fast. We prepare for the supper. And when we come starving and sinning anyway, we're met by the same promise. Take drink, this is the blood of Jesus, shed for you for the forgiveness of all your sins.

We still practice closed Communion. Not because we want less people to receive this great gift. But because we want to be sure that everyone who does is helped by it. So the answer to "may I take communion" is never a no. Just sometimes a not yet. We teach the faith all hearts must believe. We point to just how much is given here. The Holy Spirit works in the hearts of those who hear it. And the church is fed. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Unworthy though I am, O Savior, Because I have a sinful heart, Yet Thou Thy lamb wilt banish never, For Thou my faithful shepherd art: Lord, may Thy body and Thy blood Be for my soul the highest good! (LSB 618:3)

Saturday the Third Week in Advent

DECEMBER 23, 2023

Today's Reading: Introit for Advent 4
Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 43:25-44:20; Revelations 11:1-19

In them he has set a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy. (Psalm 19:5)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. The words of Psalm 19, are a proclamation that the very creation, created by the living and active Word of God testifies to His glory and handiwork. God's Word does not fall flat. It accomplishes what it says it will do. We find comfort, and delight in this, knowing that when God says something, it is as good as done.

The word made flesh, Christ the bridegroom comes to us, not as a strong man, but as a lowly baby. The Christ child, the Word made flesh, submits Himself under the perfect law of the Lord. The Christ child, who would not live the life of a royal king, or be known as a strong man, is known as Jesus, the one who we put to death on the cross.

It is in this weakness, that God Himself, bearing our sin is condemned under the law and receives our punishment. That being hung on the cross, dying, before the heavens and all creation it would be as the Psalmist says, "Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain down righteousness; let the earth open, that salvation and righteousness may bear fruit." It is in this weakness that God Himself works salvation for the whole world.

It is in Christ crucified for you that the heavens declare the glory of God. It is in Christ crucified for you, that all creation proclaims the handiwork of the Lord. This crucified and risen Jesus, who came to you as a lowly baby is the one who declares you innocent, and blameless. In Jesus you are acceptable to God.

The Gospel of Christ crucified, is the message that Christ commanded His church to proclaim to all parts of the world. The message that Jesus, the Son of God is the one who through the preaching of the word, and the giving of the Sacraments by your pastor, the eyes of the sinner might be opened, and salvation and righteousness would bear fruit. The Word that became flesh and dwelt among us, will come again in glory. Until that day, we rejoice that the bridegroom has emerged and will emerge again to be with His bride. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Friday the Third Week in Advent

DECEMBER 22, 2023

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 43:1-24; Revelations 9:13--10:118

*Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. (Isaiah 43:19)*

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. The Israelites in exile endured each day, and longed for when God would deliver them. God did not abandon them, or leave them without His Word. He sent men like Isaiah to remind them that God had not forgotten His promises to deliver them. God had not forgotten them, and He would be the one who would redeem them, bring them back home, and be their Savior.

We long for our suffering to end. That our struggle against our sinful flesh and its desires would cease. That the groaning of all creation would be silenced. Your God has heard your groaning, and has answered you. As we endure each day of our earthly lives in our fragile flesh, we go about each day not despairing as the world does, but full of hope and joy for what is to come. God has redeemed His creation. His Son Jesus, is the Savior of the world. In Him the one whom they have pierced flows rivers of life giving water, and blood for His chosen people to drink.

You were baptized into this life giving water, and receive the body of Christ to eat and His blood to drink. You are strengthened by this life-giving meal. Getting up each day and remember that in your Baptism you do not simply struggle against the world and your sinful flesh as a poor miserable sinner, but as a baptized redeemed child of God. These promises are for you, and all believers in Christ. Behold God has done a new thing in Christ Jesus, not just for Abraham's offspring, but for the whole world. In Christ your longing for home is ended, because in Christ you are redeemed, and declared a witness of the resurrection. In Christ you may have peace that there is a place prepared for you, and whether in death or on the day He returns God has received you as His beloved child and welcomed you into His kingdom. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

You sit in splendid glory, enthroned at God's right hand, Upholding earth and heaven by forces You command. We know that You will come as our Judge that final day, So help Your servants You have redeemed by blood, we pray; May we with saints be numbered where praises never end, In glory everlasting. Amen, O Lord, amen! (LSB 941:4)

Friday the Second Week in Advent

DECEMBER 15, 2023

Today's Reading: Revelations 3:1-22

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 30:27-31:9; Revelations. 3:1-22

And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. 'I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.'" (Revelation 3:1)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. From the whitewashed tombs of the Pharisees to the tax collectors and sinners in the Kingdom, the heavenly band isn't what we'd expect. And it leaves us plenty of opportunities to turn that on to each other. There's too much conflict in church. Especially considering that this applies to ourselves more than it does anyone else. This isn't just a warning not to trust anything too polished, to question authority, and to roll your eyes at anyone who says "we've always done it this way".

If you'll allow it, it's a chance to reflect upon the secret things that are killing you from the inside out that you hide from everyone else. They're not actually measured in the battles you lose against vice, nearly so often as they are the things you don't want to call wrong in the first place. The things you excuse yourself from, but are still too uncomfortable to talk about among the sanctified, because you tell yourself they're just not enlightened enough to understand. We hide the things that are killing us because what else do you do with the things you can't get rid of and you're not even sure you want to?

John has instructions to the walking-dead-inside. Remember. Keep. Repent. Remember what you received. Past tense. Already, before you quit the vice you won't call a vice. You are already free from it. It's drowned in the font. You received it in Baptism. Keep it. That means realize it's valuable enough to keep you. Treasure it. This isn't a battle for self control you lose. It's an identity already won on a cross for you. It's worth clinging to because it's at least honest, even if it's every bit as confusing. This is who you are. Dead to sin. Alive to God. It's called repentance. You live a life of repentance every day. You live a life of Baptism every day. Not marked in improvement, but in death. Every day you call sin what it is, even if you can't get away from it. Every day you hear God's promises. Every day you're turned back towards the one who forgave you because that Baptism you treasure is worth more than the vices you hoard. Repentance isn't what you quit. It isn't how sorry you are about what you've done. It isn't about a promise to quit you're not sure you can keep. It's what brings the dead inside back to life. It's a Spirit carried hand toward the cross that swallows up what you bury and a promise that you're already joined to the same empty tomb that Jesus burst free from. No matter how you feel inside. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Amen.

Saturday the Second Week in Advent

DECEMBER 16, 2023

Today's Reading: Introit for Advent 3

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 32:1-20; Revelations 4:1-11

Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved!

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. It's easier for me to imagine the saving face of God that saves us as something brighter than the sun. Transfigurations are always appealing, even to those who know better than to try to build tabernacles on mountains. The Good Shepherd, enthroned upon the cherubim that guarded the Ark of the Covenant seems to demand awe and wonder.

But if the cherubim guarded the real presence of God in His true glory, wouldn't they circle the cross where God-made-man came down to die? The hour for the Son of Man to be glorified left Him with no throne but a cross. The radiance of the transfiguration gave way to streaks of blood and sweat. But this is how we are saved. Don't look up the mountain for a glowing God of might. Look to the cross for the dying God of mercy. Here, we are restored. Here, we are saved. Here, all of your sins are atoned for, and you are given a shepherd that leads you through death to life again, not one who calls to you from the other side of the veil.

In fear and in danger, we want the face of the transfiguration, but God gives us the face of the cross, crowned with thorns instead. And it's a gift. Peter, confronted with a shouting sky and a glowing God, only realized what he was not, and fell down in terror. A centurion saw the same God die and realized what happened. Pray the psalms for mercy, not power, and God doesn't ever seem so far away, because we finally start to measure Him in the things that actually work to answer our prayers. Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Jesus, author of salvation, Shared in our humanity; Crowned with radiant exaltation, Now He shares His victory! From His face Shines the grace Meant for all our fallen race. (LSB 462:3)

St. Thomas, Apostle

DECEMBER 21, 2023

Today's Reading: John 20:24-29

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 42:1-25; Revelations 9:1-12

But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:30)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Thomas was faithful to his Lord in the end. Now, doubting Thomas really isn't the best construction to put on him. So let's call him "reassured" Thomas. Thomas wasn't there that night when Jesus appeared to His disciples. Thomas wanted to believe his brother disciples, but dead men don't rise.

Eight days later. Thomas was now with them, longing to be reassured by the disciples' account. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." These eleven disciples, despite ten of them having seen Jesus, are still hiding behind locked doors. Their fear, Thomas' doubt and need for bodily reassurance are present in this locked room. Despite this, Jesus came to them, He stood among them and absolved them and said, "Peace be with you".

It's not all about Thomas. It's not about the faith of the eleven. It's all about Jesus. Jesus who was crucified in front of them, bled and died in front of them. Who rose and appeared to them. This Jesus who's chosen twelve betrayed, and deserted Him, are absolved. Just as He came to them and pointed to the marks that He is Christ the crucified and risen Lord, He comes to you. He comes to you through your pastor and when you confess your doubts, your fears, and your failures, you hear just what Thomas and the ten heard. "Peace be with you." "Your sins are forgiven." Not only that, but He gives you His body to eat and His blood to drink under the simple means of bread and wine. All this He gives, just as these words were written down, "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

Thomas' faithful proclamation is your proclamation. That by faith and not by sight you have received the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation in Jesus. In Jesus your doubts are reassured, and your fears calmed. Thanks be to God, for His servant Thomas who proclaimed Christ crucified to the nations, to comfort those who doubt, and reassure them that Christ has come and will come again for you. In the Name + of Jesus. Amen.

Almighty and ever-living God, You strengthened Your apostle Thomas with firm and certain faith in the resurrection of Your Son. Grant us such faith in Jesus Christ, our Lord and our God, that we may never be found wanting in Your sight; through the same Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Wednesday the Third Week in Advent

DECEMBER 20, 2023

Today's Reading: Luther's Small Catechism, 1st commandment

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 40:18-41:10; Revelations 8:1-13

You shall have no other gods. (Exodus 20:3)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. What even is an idol? We're not exactly making golden calves or selling statues of foreign deities anymore. Dr. Luther is helpful to us in understanding the totality of the first commandment, "Now, I say, that whatever you set your heart on and put your trust in, is truly your God." (Luther, LC I., BoC, 385)

Jesus puts it another way, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve." The devil would like nothing more than to put idols in our faces, even more so to put things that don't look like idols in our lives. The explanation of Dr. Luther rings true. Whatever we fear, love, and trust more than God and His Word is an idol. Whether that's money, fitness, sports, family, technology, etc. Anything that would pull us away from God and His Word that we find trust in, is an idol.

This is the commandment that all others extend from. Our old Adam pushes back against this commandment. Since the fall, we see ourselves as the center of our own universe. Our neighbor, our daily bread that God gives us can all be used as stumbling blocks for our old Adam to latch onto and proclaim as our own doing. Our sinful flesh has no desire to be with God, because sinful man has no place before a holy and righteous God. So we set up gods that are in our own image. Who are approachable, on our terms. These gods all fall by the wayside, and ultimately no security from suffering, no peace in our despair, and no deliverance from death.

This holy, jealous, and righteous God is a loving God. Who tells Moses and His people, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." (Exodus 20:2) God has no desire to see you fall away from Him. God is a loving Father who, from the beginning has proclaimed life through His Word. This same Father through the Word incarnate Jesus Christ, His Son does what no false god can. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and endures the pains and trials of this world. The Son of God bears your sin, your false hopes in false gods, and crushes any idea of security that this world or idol could prop up. God's love, His freedom from sin, death, and the devil are yours in His Son. You shall have no other God's because there are no other gods. God Himself came down in human flesh for you, suffered and died for you, rose again and ascended into heaven for you. Your heart and mind is free to love and trust in Him, knowing that all things are done in Christ Jesus.

God, the holy, jealous, loving, and gracious God who reigns over all things, and caring for you and all creation until He will come again on the last day for you. Come Lord Jesus. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Sunday the Third Week in Advent

DECEMBER 17, 2023

Today's Reading: John 1.6-8, 19-28

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 33:1-24; Revelations 5:1-14

He [John] was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. (John 1:8)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. John the apostle gets right to work with John the Baptist in our reading today. There's no annunciation by an angel, no mute Zechariah, no leaping in Elizabeth's womb. John the prophet, the preacher, sent from God to proclaim His Word to His people.

The people of Israel, God's chosen people certainly must have felt God had forgotten them. Like they had lost their identity. Stumbling from empire to empire, wondering when God will be the God of His promises, the God who had delivered them in the past. When will He deliver them now?

We can relate to this. Often our daily lives have similar stresses, similar identity crises. When a parent or loved one becomes sick or hurt beyond recovery. When the to do list seems to never end and school work, house work, your job just continues to pile on overwhelmingly. When we see tragedies, and disasters happen at home and around the world. We feel lost, and often wonder "Where is God?", "Has He forgotten me?".

Beloved child of God, your Father in heaven has not forgotten you, just as He had not forgotten His chosen people Israel. Maybe it has been awhile since you have been in church, heard His Word. Received His gifts. Know that your Pastor, or the Pastor in your community is delighted to give them to you. Just like John the Baptist, He is not the Light, but He bears witness about the Light. Even more so your pastor is given to you by God Himself to give you Jesus. Who is the Light of the world, the Christ, the one promised and foretold by Isaiah and all of Scripture who is the fulfillment of God's promises for you. Who on the cross gave His Body and poured out His Blood for you, as the very lamb who was slain. To cover your sin, to cover your suffering, and brokenness.

So you know that you do not walk alone through the challenges of this life. Your identity is not given legitimacy by this world, that is always changing. No, your identity is yours in Christ who has washed you and united you in the waters of your Baptism, and united you to Himself in His body, and blood that you are given to eat and to drink. That is your strength, your assurance, that the one who will come whose sandal strap John the Baptist is not fit to untie". Is the one who has come, is with you now, and will come again. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Lord Jesus Christ, we implore You to hear our prayers and to lighten the darkness of our hearts by Your gracious visitation; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Monday the Third Week in Advent

DECEMBER 18, 2023

Today's Reading: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 34:1-2, 8-35:10; Revelations 6:1-17

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. (Isaiah 61:10)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. The Word given to Isaiah to proclaim to those returning from exile is truly comforting. "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor..." (Isaiah 61:1). These are the same words that Jesus reads in the synagogue of His hometown of Nazareth. Jesus proclaims that these words given to God's people of Israel through the prophet Isaiah "has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:17)

This good news, of God fulfilling His promises, to comfort and restore the poor, the broken hearted, the captives and those who are bound, is proclaimed to you by the one God has sent out to care for His offspring. Your pastor proclaims God's Word and administers the Sacraments to you because that is God has promised to be for you. You don't have to look in the world for God to reveal His comfort, or means of salvation. He tells you plainly where He can be found. While the world does not accept Jesus, and even His hometown rejects Him as the fulfillment of the words of Isaiah He is there in His Word and simple means of bread and wine, and water. Desiring nothing but the broken and those trapped in their sins to come and hear this good news.

In this Jesus who was crucified, died and buried, your sins are covered with His blood and laid in the tomb never to emerge again. It is the crucified and risen Jesus who God has fulfilled these words of Isaiah and all of His promises to His people. In your Baptism God has clothed you with the garments of salvation, and covered you with the robe of righteousness. You and all believers are Christ's bride, the church. Who are united to Christ Jesus your bridegroom, who takes you His bride and adorns you with jewels to present you to His Father as His most precious treasure.

Take comfort in these words, you are united to Christ's death and resurrection. Your sins are forgiven, all the stressors and pains of this world cannot take you away or exile you from the love of God for you in Christ Jesus. Come Lord Jesus, where the bride groom will join His bride and live together in righteousness with praise and thanksgiving forever. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Tuesday the Third Week in Advent

DECEMBER 19, 2023

Today's Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 40:1-17; Revelations 7:1-17

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Thessalonians 5:23)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. That's right, Paul is talking about Advent, the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Although he's referring to the second Advent the whole church prayerfully waits for. Yes that's right, just as God's people of old sought the first Advent of God's Messiah, His anointed one, who God has long promised would come and redeem His people. This was not just a redemption, and return from an earthly exile. Although God would certainly deliver Israel home in time. This was a redemption with eternal consequences.

But we know that story. The Advent of the Messiah who was born in Bethlehem, not as a king in a palace, but the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who came to redeem you. To end your exile of wandering in slavery to sin, and death, and to know God's love for you in the wounds of His crucified Messiah, Jesus. Only these wounds are not found in the arms of a dead man, but the wounds of your crucified, dead, and risen Savior. Who came for you, died for you, and conquered death for you.

In Jesus, the God of peace sanctifies you completely. It's all His gift, given to you through faith by the simple means of the water of your Baptism, and nourishing you weak after weak with His life giving body and blood that He gives you to eat and to drink. He does this without any merit or worthiness in you, purely out of His fatherly divine mercy, that just as His people of old wait for Him, you too may wait for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, assured of the promises of the God of Israel, the God of the church, and the God who will come and bring you out of the great tribulation, and into the life to come. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

"Comfort, Comfort ye My people, Speak ye peace," thus saith our God; "Comfort those who sit in darkness, Mourning 'neath their sorrows' load. Speak ye to Jerusalem Of the peace that waits for them; Tell her that her sins I cover And her warfare now is over." (LSB 347:1)