

# AND HE SHALL REIGN

*NALC ADVENT DEVOTIONAL 2022*



NORTH AMERICAN  
LUTHERAN  
CHURCH

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## Foreword | *Advent: The End and the Beginning*

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The season of Advent is regarded in the Western Church as the *beginning* of the liturgical year. But Advent is first of all about the *end* of time. Because the term itself (*adventus*) means “coming” or “arrival,” and because it precedes Christmas, many have misunderstood Advent to be entirely a time to get ready to celebrate the coming of a child at Bethlehem. However, perhaps the more primary focus of Advent is on what is popularly called “the second coming.” Thus, Advent concerns the future of the Risen One, who will bring justice and prevail over every evil — it is a season of longing, anticipation and expectation of what is yet to come in fullness. Advent is the celebration of the promise that Christ will bring an end to all that is contrary to the ways of God in this world — a sign of His destruction of the powers of death. As such, the opening Sundays of Advent bring to sharp focus themes that, in many lectionaries, have been present for some weeks. For as the lectionary year closes, the Gospel readings, in particular, deal with signs of the end.<sup>1</sup>

What may seem to be an abnormality is a very important theological point: the beginning of the liturgical year takes our thinking to the very end of things. For “end” means not only the “end of time,” but the central purpose or goal (*telos*) of creation. We are not aimlessly wandering in a wilderness, even though we may be tempted to think so. Rather, history is headed somewhere and a light *has* come and *is* coming. It is necessary that the liturgical year begin with this focus in mind — otherwise the story of Jesus, which is about to be rehearsed from conception and birth to death, resurrection and ascension, may seem less than what it is: the deliberate fulfilling of divine purpose. Only this focus on the great story of God throughout history can keep the account of Jesus from falling into the superficiality and inconsequence portrayed by modern secular or cultural interpretations.

All of this leads to the otherwise puzzling design of the Advent season. We start the Advent observances with the future: “The reign of God is coming. Prepare!” We end with the past: “Messiah will be born in Bethlehem. Rejoice!” As we proceed across the four Sundays of the season both themes are sounded, but the emphasis on the future declines as the emphasis on the past increases. Apart from coming to terms with this intention, it is impossible to make sense of the fact that the Gospel readings of Advent begin with a mature Jesus teaching about the reign of God, and close with an unborn Jesus, still in Mary’s womb.

All of this is, however, a reverberation of what has been insisted on above: that the sacred story, to be understood correctly, has to be read backwards. Just as the birth and ministry of Jesus are incomprehensible until we know of the Lord’s death and resurrection, so too the whole of the past is muddled unless first we have a grasp on the nature of the future.

This year’s devotional — entitled appropriately *And He Shall Reign* — was written by sixteen members of the North American Lutheran Church (NALC) staff and based on words in Revelation 11:15 (although many of us cannot read them without hearing the great “Hallelujah” chorus of Handel’s *Messiah*). The readings each day are based upon the daily lectionary provided in the NALC *Devoted To Prayer* daily prayer

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this dialectic between the season of Advent’s focus on both past and future, see Laurence Hull Stookey, *Calendar: Christ’s Time for the Church* (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1996), 121ff; and Philip H. Pfatteicher and Carlos R. Messerli, *Manual on the Liturgy: Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1979), 21ff. See also Telford Work, *Jesus—the End and the Beginning: Tracing the Christ-Shaped Nature of Everything* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019).

and reading guide, which is also an adapted version of the daily lectionary in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*. PDF copies of this devotional booklet are available for download from the NALC website for printing for individual use or distribution in congregations. For details on how to access the devotional electronically or to receive it as a daily email or text message, please visit [thenalc.org/advent](http://thenalc.org/advent).

The season of Advent is upon us, and it is time, once again, to prepare our hearts for the coming of Jesus and His eternal reign. It is our hope that this devotional will aid and bless your personal reflections during this season.

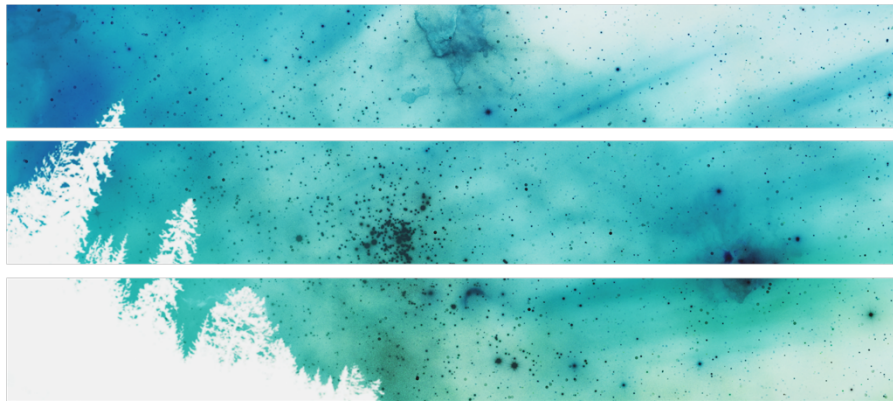
A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andrew S. Ames Fuller". The script is elegant and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

The Rev. Dcn. Andrew S. Ames Fuller, *Editor*

Director of Communications

North American Lutheran Church

# THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT



*Stir up your power, O Lord, and come.*

*Protect us by your strength and save us from the threatening dangers of our sins,  
for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

## November 27, 2022 | First Sunday in Advent

*Isaiah 1:1–9; 2 Peter 3:1–10; Matthew 25:1–13; Psalms 24 & 150 (AM); Psalms 25 & 110 (PM)*

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<sup>25:1</sup> “At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. <sup>2</sup> Five of them were foolish and five were wise. <sup>3</sup> The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. <sup>4</sup> The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps.

<sup>10</sup> But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. <sup>11</sup> Later the others also came. ‘Lord, Lord,’ they said, ‘open the door for us!’ <sup>12</sup> But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.’ <sup>13</sup> Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.”

– Matthew 25:1–4, 10–13 NIV2011



Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus. Today is the first day in the season of Advent, a time in the life of the Church when we look forward to the celebration of our Lord’s birth on Christmas, and to the second coming of our Lord when this world, as we know it, comes to a close.

This is also a time in the life of the Church when we are challenged to take a hard look at our own lives and ask ourselves whether we are ready to face our Lord when He returns.

The story of the ten virgins awaiting the bridegroom and the wedding celebration is both pointed and direct. Five of the ten were ready. When the day came, they joined in the celebration. But five of the ten were not. When they showed up late, they found the doors already closed and themselves left out.

Jesus said that the five who were ready were wise. They prepared in advance for what they knew was coming. The other five, our Lord said, were foolish. And they were foolish not because they didn’t know what was coming — but because they did, and they failed to prepare.

Today’s story is about being prepared. It’s about having your life and its affairs in order, not only for that day when our Lord returns, or that day when your life comes to an end, but for every day, whether He comes or not. Because it’s one thing, Jesus says, to know that something’s going to happen. It’s another to be prepared for it when it does. Because when that time comes, if you’re not ready, it’ll be too late. If you’re not prepared, you’ll be caught off guard and left behind.

In that sense, today’s story comes to us as both a warning and a promise. It’s a warning of what will happen to those who fail to prepare. The time will come when Jesus will return, and when He does, if you’re not ready, it’ll be too late. All of a sudden, your life on this earth will be over. And when it’s over and it’s done, there’s nothing that’ll bring it back. All of a sudden, those chances along the way to live your life as a follower of Jesus will have come and gone. If you haven’t lived them while they’re available, there might not be another chance.

Jesus says the best time to get ready for His return and for living faithfully as His followers is to do it today — through prayer, through regular worship, through spending time with God’s Word. Don’t wait any longer to prioritize the things that count. Today’s story come as a warning.

It also comes as a promise, and that's where we find our hope. The promise is that there will be a celebration and it's one to which you and I have been invited. A great banquet. A wonderful wedding feast. A day when we will all be reunited with those who have gone before us in faith, as well as with our Lord.

As we begin this Advent season, don't be foolish. You know it's coming. Our Lord will return. Now is the time to prepare.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, we thank You for coming into this world long ago to save us from our sin, and for the promise that one day You will return. Strengthen our faith. Increase our hope. Fill us with Your Holy Spirit that we might live our lives for You and thus be ready, each day, for when that final day comes. Amen.

## November 28, 2022 | Monday of the First Week in Advent

*Kamehameha IV, 1864, and Emma, 1885, King and Queen of Hawaii*

*Isaiah 1:10–20; 1 Thessalonians 1:1–10; Luke 20:1–8; Psalms 122 & 145 (AM); Psalms 40 & 67 (PM)*

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<sup>20:1</sup> One day, as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders came up <sup>2</sup> and said to him, “Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority.”

– Luke 20:1–2 ESV



“Tell us by what authority you do these things?” That’s the question of today’s Gospel reading.

In Luke 20, Jesus is in the temple in Jerusalem. He is doing radical things — announcing the coming of God’s kingdom, pointing to the inbreaking reign of God, chasing moneychangers and salespeople out of the temple, and calling people to lives of obedience. He is shaking up all that the culture and religion holds dear. And the question asked of Jesus is, “By what authority are you doing all this?”

I think that is an appropriate question to be asked of us this Advent season. We as the people of God are proclaiming and doing radical things. We are announcing that God is involved in this world and that He continues to enter the life of this planet. We proclaim that God’s own Son came to this earth in Bethlehem years ago, that He continues to come today, and that He will come in future glory. We proclaim that the deepest reality of human life is this Lord who has come, and life is to be directed towards Him.

Particularly during this Advent season we announce all of this. The rest of the world is busy with decorating and buying presents and getting ready for the holidays. We say that all is well and good, but the deeper reality is that Jesus is the reason for this season. It is God’s inbreaking that we are proclaiming.

How can we make all these incredible, earth-shaking, earth-changing proclamations? By what authority do we do these things?

The answer is, by God’s own authority. We believe that we are sharing in God’s mission to redeem this world. We speak and act in God’s authority. Oh God forgive us; we don’t do this at all perfectly. We are sinners and we fail time and again. But our work is rooted in God’s own saving grace and we point to Him.

By whose authority do we make these proclamations? By whose authority do we claim this season once again for Jesus? By God’s authority, as He comes to this world in Jesus Christ! This season is about Jesus and all that He does, and has done, for us. We are going to lift up that focus every chance we can! What a joy to know that the Savior comes for you and me!

In the midst of all the activities of this season, let us lift up Jesus Christ as the center, the reason for this season.

**Prayer:** Holy God, You come to this world in Your saving grace. Give us the wisdom and courage to bear witness to that. Remind us that we speak in Your authority and grace as we point to the Christ who comes for us all. Amen.

## November 29, 2022 | Tuesday of the First Week in Advent

*Isaiah 1:21–31; 2:1–4; 1 Thessalonians 2:1–20; Luke 20:9–26; Psalms 33 & 146 (AM); Psalms 85 & 94 (PM)*

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<sup>20:22</sup> Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' <sup>23</sup> But he perceived their craftiness and said to them, <sup>24</sup> 'Show me a denarius. Whose head and whose title does it bear?' They said, 'The emperor's.' <sup>25</sup> He said to them, 'Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.'

– Luke 20:22–25 NRSV



Tension. Perhaps an understatement, but that's what's going on with Jesus in this little test — and Jesus perceives it right away!

When I think about tension, I think about something like a rope, or wire, that connects two things, pulled tight — maybe to the point of breaking. Yes, Jesus' ministry and teachings have strained relationships, especially relationships with the religious authorities. Israel itself is in tension with an occupier that promotes a pantheon of gods. In fact, that's probably what's going on here when the scribes and chief priest pose a question about the emperor. The emperors, dead and alive, weren't just seen as modest governors, but gods. Every person in Jesus' day would have been familiar with the "emperor cult," and they were reminded of it every time they touched a Denarius with an emperor's image on it. Jewish coins, especially during Jesus' time, had no images on them in order to obey the commandment against graven image.

So, the question is a loaded one: "Who do you bow to? Who do you serve?" Likely even, "Who do you worship?" Jesus does not take the bait, but puts the tension back on the questioners; a little wise jujitsu.

Although we tend to see Jesus' answer as being "wise as a serpent," we should remember that the disciples are right there listening too. Some of His Zealot disciples may have been leaning forward to hear the answer, since they were against supporting Rome with tax money. Others were getting a foretaste of the tension they would face as they publicly proclaimed in gentile Roman cities that there is no other Son of God than Jesus. According to Church tradition, the fates of Peter, Paul, and many others, for several centuries, were connected to simply not acknowledging Caesar as a god or a son of a god.

So, this is just ancient stuff, right? After all, we don't face choices between bowing, serving, worshiping God, or something else, right? We would never make cults of political leaders, right?

I hope you are hearing the rhetorical tone in my voice.

Of course, we face this same tension today, especially as people trying to be faithful followers of Jesus. The season of Advent calls us back to readiness as we strive on in a world that puts us in tension with God's ways. It is so easy, especially during holiday seasons, to shift our bowing, our serving, even our worship to something other than God (politicians, food, drink, possessions, etc.). During this early part of Advent, some of us might even be thinking about year-end taxes, and what we must render.

But, just like the tension of taxes, the tension of turning our focus to something other than God will never leave us. And so, you'll notice that Jesus gives neither the scribes, His disciples, nor us, an answer — but leaves us with the tension to make our choice. Maybe that's the most faithful spiritual posture for Advent, to have a little tension with the world. Sounds like "readiness," doesn't it? Perhaps it is exactly our tension

with the world that frees us to give to God the things that belong to God. I hope and pray this is true for you this week!

**Prayer:** Dear God, it is not hard for us to feel or notice tension in our lives; in our relationships, and because of our obsession with this and that. What is hard is to see tension as a sign. So, use the tensions in our lives this week to guide us, so that in all our relationships and obsessions, we may be bowing to You, serving You, worshiping You; and no other. Amen.

## November 30, 2022 | Wednesday of the First Week in Advent

ST. ANDREW, APOSTLE

*Ezekiel 3:16–21; Romans 10:8b–18; John 1:35–42; Psalms 19 & 147:1–12 (AM); Psalms 53 & 17 (PM)*

<sup>1:35</sup> The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, <sup>36</sup> and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” <sup>37</sup> The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. <sup>38</sup> Jesus turned and saw them following and said to them, “What are you seeking?” And they said to him, “Rabbi” (which means Teacher), “where are you staying?” <sup>39</sup> He said to them, “Come and you will see.” So they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour. <sup>40</sup> One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. <sup>41</sup> He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which means Christ). <sup>42</sup> He brought him to Jesus.

– John 1:35–42a ESV



Saint Andrew was a disciple of John the Baptist. One day Andrew and another disciple were standing alongside John. As Jesus walked by, John looked at Jesus and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” Andrew and the other disciple followed Jesus and accepted Jesus’ invitation to spend the day with Him. As Andrew spent the day in conversation with Jesus, the Holy Spirit used Jesus’ words to grace Andrew with saving faith. Andrew now believed that this Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29).” Andrew was so moved and excited the first thing he did was go find his brother, Simon Peter, to tell him about his encounter with Jesus and to bring him to meet Jesus.

What a marvelous example for us of what it means to be a Christian. Christians are those who are so moved and excited by God’s gracious gift to them that they both tell others about Jesus and take them to meet Him.

Now you might ask, “I know I can tell others about Jesus, but how exactly do I take them to meet Jesus?” Well, think about it. Who introduced you to Jesus? In my case it was my family — especially my parents and grandma. What did they do to introduce me to Jesus? They took me to the written Word of God — the Holy Bible — and there I met the living Word of God, Jesus of Nazareth.

But they didn’t just give me a Bible and say, “Here, read this, it’s good for you.” They loved me enough to invest the time to read the Bible to me, and with me. But most importantly, they invested even more time discussing what Jesus’ teachings meant with me, and how God was calling me to apply them to my life. Of course, my parents also insisted that we faithfully participate in the teaching, preaching and ministries of our Lutheran congregation. Through weekly worship, Sunday school and VBS, youth groups, church dinners, mission trips and church camps, we met with Jesus often. These were joyous and wondrous times the Holy Spirit used to nurture and strengthen my faith in Christ.

So how do we introduce others to Jesus? Follow Andrew’s example! Tell others about Jesus, yes, but also love them enough to introduce them to Jesus yourself. How? By investing the time to meet with them weekly for Bible study, prayer and discovery of what our living Lord Jesus is saying to us today. After all, Jesus of Nazareth is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. There is no better news than this, and the advent of Jesus means this Good News is available to all!

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, faith tells me You desire that I be intentional about introducing others to You. Although You have given me many opportunities, I confess I have not always risked my relationship with others by introducing Your name into a conversation. I confess that I have not been willing to give of my time for Bible study with family or friends who don't know You in order to introduce them to You. Forgive me and reveal to me now those You want me to introduce to You. Please give me the faith, desire and confidence to commit to this. In Your name Lord Jesus, I pray. Amen.

## December 1, 2022 | Thursday of the First Week in Advent

*Nicholas Ferrar, Deacon, 1637*

*Isaiah 2:5–22; 1 Thessalonians 3:1–13; Luke 20:27–40; Psalms 18:1–20 & 147:13–21 (AM); Psalms 126 & 62 (PM)*

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<sup>18:1</sup> I love you, O Lord, my strength. <sup>2</sup> The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. <sup>3</sup> I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies.

– Psalm 18:1–3 ESV



A few months ago I came across another one of those alternative health movements called “grounding” or, if you live in the UK, “earthing” since the ground rod in your home there is called an earthing rod. The idea is that, like an appliance in your home, one needs to be grounded to the earth by going barefoot. Modern shoes, so goes the theory, insulate one from the healing effects of being actually “grounded” like an electrical appliance. Now while the science is a bit dubious, perhaps the mental health benefit has something to do with reliving those glorious childhood experiences of letting the dirt ooze through one’s toes in the backyard. Touching the earth gently can reconnect us to the awe and wonder of creation. Despite the fact that free radicals might be better addressed by eating blueberries, nevertheless we recognize that there is an almost electromagnetic pull in us to be “well-grounded”.

Today in both the morning and evening Psalms, we hear the psalmist longing to be well-grounded in the promise and power of the Lord. This often meant recalling the mountains, not only as a place away from the hustle and bustle of daily life and a return to nature, but as a place where God often met human beings with His promise and a power to sustain them in His Word.

Advent is a time for us to return to the touchstone of God’s promise and Word. To be grounded again in His promise to sustain us and all living creatures, in the promise of a Savior to save and redeem us, and in His grace and mercy that will be fully revealed in the fullness of time.

On this first day of December, as we survey all the business of the season that lies before us, and long to not be simply carried to and fro by the waves of its activities, the words of the psalmist call us to seek to be grounded in God’s good Word and promise. The psalmist’s words for this evening capture well the tone of the Advent season, “For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. He alone is my rock and my salvation ...” Although we are already a long way from Reformation Sunday, perhaps humming a few stanzas of a “Mighty Fortress” might help to remind us that the promise of God in Christ Jesus is firm ground that cannot be shaken.

1. A might - y for - tress is our God, a bul - wark nev - er fail - ing;  
 2. Did we in our own strength con - fide, our striv - ing would be los - ing,  
 3. And though this world, with dev - ils filled, should threaten to un - do us,  
 4. That Word a - bove all earth - ly pow'rs no thanks to them a - bid - eth;

our help - er He, a - mid the flood of mor - tal ills pre - vail - ing.  
 were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God's own choos - ing.  
 we will not fear, for God has willed His truth to tri - umph through us.  
 the Spir - it and the gifts are ours thro' Him who with us sid - eth.

For still our an - cient foe does seek to work us woe; his craft and pow'r are  
 You ask who that may be? Christ Je - sus, it is He; LORD Sab - a - oth His  
 The prince of dark - ness grim, we trem - ble not for him; his rage we can en -  
 Let goods and kin - dred go, this mor - tal life al - so; the bo - dy they may

great, and armed with cru - el hate, on earth is not his e - qual.  
 name, from age to age the same; and He must win the bat - tle.  
 dure, for lo! his doom is sure; one lit - tle word shall fell him.  
 kill: God's truth a - bid - eth still; His king - dom is for - ev - er.

WORDS: **Psalm 46**; Martin Luther, 1529; tr. Frederick H. Hedge, 1852

8.7.8.7.6.6.6.6.7

MUSIC: Martin Luther, 1529; harm. Johann Sebastian Bach, 18th cent.

**Prayer:** Merciful Father, the source and ground of our being, draw us in this season to rest on the unshakable promise of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Ground us in Your Word, for You alone are our rock and our salvation. Keep us firm in hope, steadfast in faith, and constant in love through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## December 2, 2022 | Friday of the First Week in Advent

*Isaiah 3:1–4:1; 1 Thessalonians 4:1–12; Luke 20:41–21:4; Psalms 102 & 148 (AM); Psalms 130 & 16 (PM)*

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<sup>20:41</sup> But he said to them, “How can they say that the Christ is David’s son? <sup>42</sup> For David himself says in the Book of Psalms, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, <sup>43</sup> until I make your enemies your footstool.”’ <sup>44</sup> David thus calls him Lord, so how is he his son?”

<sup>45</sup> And in the hearing of all the people he said to his disciples, <sup>46</sup> “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, <sup>47</sup> who devour widows’ houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

<sup>21:1</sup> Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box, <sup>2</sup> and he saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins <sup>3</sup> And he said, “Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. <sup>4</sup> For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.”

– Luke 20:41–21:4 ESV



In the not-too-distant past, Queen Elizabeth II died and Great Britain went into a time of national mourning. Who were they grieving for? Was it a woman who they saw as their queen for most of their lives? Or was it for something bigger? I think it was for something more.

Mourners waited in a line for 24 hours for a brief moment in front of her casket. As dutiful a monarch as she was, the mourners were reflecting on a greater reality, on the institution of their monarchy that goes back to the ninth century. People showed their devotion by their willingness to sacrifice.

In our passage today, Jesus is calling on the Old Testament verse that is most quoted in the New Testament, Psalm 110:1. He is not just in the royal lineage of King David as God’s Davidic covenant proclaims, but He is the one David writes about when looking forward to the promise of the Messiah (see Romans 1:2–4, Revelation 22:16).

Jesus then turns to point out that though the teachers of the law — the religious professionals of the temple — know all about the promises of God, including the coming of the Messiah who ironically stands right before them, it has no real effect on their lives. They are unwilling to sacrifice for God’s chosen people in need. They are consumed with their own status: robes, long empty prayers and places of honor. They give no thought to the true Lord who calls on His people to be merciful. The only person in the temple who is consumed by the mercy of God is the poor widow who sacrifices all she has.

The Advent season is a time to reflect on just who our Messiah is. Does He have a real impact on our life? When we see Him for who He truly is, we, like King David, see Him as the one who comes into our midst as God Himself. “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).

This Advent season, let us see what was a prophetic promise from David now as a reality. The Messiah is more than a royal from a long time ago. He is the creator of all and we bear His image as His special creation. The only crown He wore here on earth was one made of thorns. But now He wears His rightful crown of glory (Hebrews 2:7–9). He’s worth the sacrifice.

**Prayer:** Gracious Lord, Heavenly Father, Your glory abounds and Your mercy overwhelms us. Help me to see You for who You truly are and be merciful as You show mercy to me. If that requires sacrifice, strengthen me to see those in need as Your people and make me see Your face in their need. Amen.

## December 3, 2022 | Saturday of the First Week in Advent

Francis Xavier, Missionary to Asia, 1552

*Jantine Auguste Haumersen, First Ordained Female Lutheran Pastor, 1967*

*Isaiah 4:2–6; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18; Luke 21:5–19; Psalms 90 & 149 (AM); Psalms 80 & 72 (PM)*

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<sup>4:13</sup> But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers (and sisters), about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. <sup>14</sup> For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. <sup>15</sup> For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. <sup>16</sup> For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. <sup>17</sup> Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. <sup>18</sup> Therefore encourage one another with these words.

– 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 ESV



What do you hope for this Advent season? I'm not talking about what presents you want for Christmas, or whether or not the economy takes a turn for the better. I'm talking about a biblical hope. Biblical hope is more than a wish or a dream. The hope of a disciple of Christ is rooted and grounded in a profound confidence in God's promises for our present and future. Hope is deeply connected to faith — in fact, this kind of hope cannot exist without faith and trust in the redemptive acts of God in Christ Jesus.

St. Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica about this sort of hope. The Christians there were awaiting the return of Jesus, but enough time had passed that they weren't sure what to think. Their basic question was, "What happens to the dead when Christ returns?" It's the same question we often hear at the death of a loved one, "Where are they? Will I see them again? Is this the end of it all?"

Paul didn't want the Thessalonians to be ignorant or uninformed about what will happen on the last day. He wanted to assure them that God's promise of new life in Christ is trustworthy and true. "We do not grieve as those who have no hope," he wrote. We are different. We have Jesus as our Savior. He has assured us that death no longer has the last word, and that through His death and resurrection, we too will also die and rise with Him.

Death isn't the end. We will be together on the last day. In fact, those who have died in the faith will go before the living into our heavenly eternity.

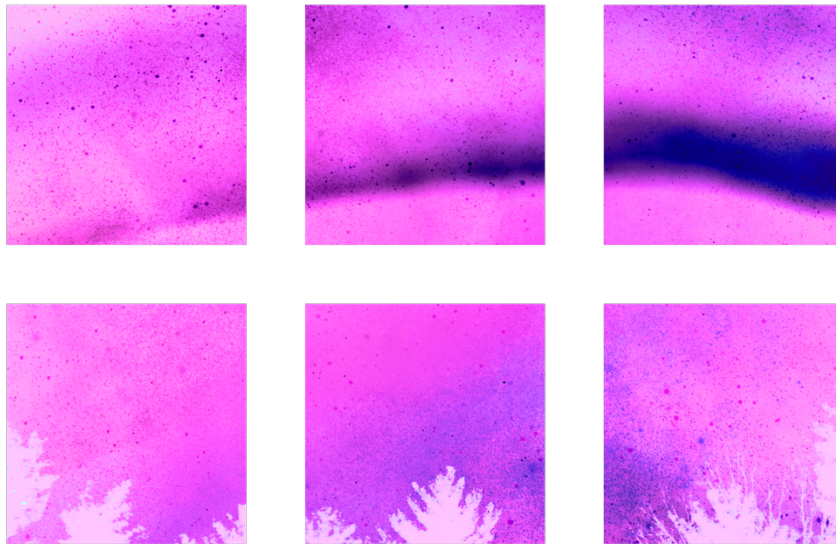
Our hope rests on a promise made to us by the One who destroyed the power of death. But, this hope involves waiting and watching. This hope has a basis to it — it's not a matter of crossing our fingers behind our back and desiring a positive outcome. I can wish for something highly improbable, like a winning lottery ticket or catching a fly ball at a Major League Baseball game. The chances of those events happening are very unlikely, but they're fun to dream about.

To truly hope is to cling to Christ's faithfulness. To hope is to depend on His love and His desire to give us what we need most — new life.

I hope that Christ will come again soon, to take us home where we belong so that we might experience the richness of His perfect love and life. What do you hope for right now?

**Prayer:** Holy Father, grant us a living hope in the One who came to earth to be one of us. Through His life, death and resurrection, grant us the promise of eternity and all peace and light. Amen.

# THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT



*Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to prepare the way for your only Son.  
By his coming give us strength in our conflicts and  
shed light on our path through the darkness of this world;  
through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord,  
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and forever. Amen.*

December 4, 2022 | Second Sunday in Advent

John of Damascus, Priest, c. 760

Isaiah 5:1–7; 2 Peter 3:11–18; Luke 7:28–35; Psalms 24 & 150 (AM); Psalms 25 & 110 (PM)

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<sup>5:1</sup> Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. <sup>2</sup> He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. <sup>3</sup> And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. <sup>4</sup> What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? <sup>5</sup> And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. <sup>6</sup> I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briars and thorns shall grow up; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. <sup>7</sup> For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry! — Isaiah 5:1–7 ESV

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Isaiah 5 is a love song. The lush vineyard described in this chapter is the Lord's gift to His beloved. He planted Jerusalem in hope that it would produce fine wine to gladden the hearts of all.

But instead of the fruit of holiness, God has found in Jerusalem the rotten fruit of injustice, of violence against the poor and the needy.

To love is to be vulnerable to betrayal, to disappointment and heartache.

This song is the Lord's lament over a world where religious people engage in hatred and unspeakable violence in His name. It's a song sung in a minor key, mourning racial tension in our communities, the brutality of African warlords and the greed of corporate Wall Street executives who choose money and power over compassion for the vulnerable.

Mourning the ruinous consequences of His beloved's choices, God allows Israel to be destroyed by the Assyrian Empire. Ten of its tribes disappear forever. Jerusalem is leveled, the people carried into exile, and the beautiful vineyard reduced to a stump. The law says, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

I'm a stump. So are you. The good news of God's unconditional love for us doesn't negate the consequences of our sin. We still suffer painful consequences for our wrong choices.

Yet while we were yet sinners and lawbreakers, Christ died for us. Jesus took our guilt upon Himself and let our violence and injustice destroy Him on the cross. This is our hope of salvation, and the promise of God's blessing for all nations.

Often it is only when our pride has been crushed by adversity that we are ready to receive God's promised grace. It is then that the song of lament changes keys to become a song of gladness!

**Prayer:** Lord God, in seasons when everything we were counting on for security, identity and hope has been stripped away, fill us again with the Holy Spirit and grant us repentant hearts, that we may receive the promised mercy and blessings that alone can turn our sorrow into joy; in Jesus' name. Amen.

## December 5, 2022 | Monday of the Second Week in Advent

*Clement of Alexandria, Priest, c. 210*

*Isaiah 5:8–17; 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11; Luke 21:20–28; Psalms 122 & 145 (AM); Psalms 40 & 67 (PM)*

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<sup>5:1</sup> Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. <sup>2</sup> For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. <sup>3</sup> While people are saying, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. <sup>4</sup> But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. <sup>5</sup> For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. <sup>6</sup> So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. <sup>7</sup> For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. <sup>8</sup> But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. <sup>9</sup> For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>10</sup> who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. <sup>11</sup> Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

– 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11 ESV



There were times during the COVID-19 pandemic when time seemed to get confused. When in “lockdown,” unable to go to work, not in a regular routine, it was easy to wonder: “What day is it?” “What month?” “What time?”

The first half of Advent can also be somewhat disorienting. Even before Halloween, we see Christmas trappings in stores, pushing us to think “shop now, plan now, for Christmas!”

But Advent isn’t Christmas. And the first half of the Advent season doesn’t direct our attention to Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus in the stable in Bethlehem — rather, our lessons focus the Church on the second coming of Christ, at the end of time, referred to as “The Day of the Lord.”

St. Paul writes of this day to the church at Thessalonica, bringing to mind the “times and seasons,” exhorting the faithful to be ready for that day and time.

By the time Jesus was born at Bethlehem, prophets had been foretelling the coming of the Messiah for centuries, but were they ready? Was the world ready for the coming of the Christ? Hardly. The world spun on, with little notice of the Word that had become flesh to dwell among us, full of grace and truth. But, Paul writes, “You have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night” (1 Thessalonians 5:1–2).

Would Paul write the same to us, living today? Are we fully aware? Do we live our lives as children of the light and of the day, ready whenever Christ returns? It is a blessing that we have these words of the apostle, writing to us 2000 years later — calling us, reminding us, exhorting us to prepare, to be fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. It encourages us to want to live our lives faithfully as disciples and followers of Jesus Christ — every day!

This, St. Paul writes, is our destiny and our call — to be awake, sober, clothed in faith and love, with the hope of salvation! For Christ died for us so that we might live with Him — encouraging one another and building one another up, as you are doing! Do you know someone who is struggling and downhearted today? Encourage them and build them up!

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, thank You for dying that we might live. Keep us ready as we wait. Amen.

## December 6, 2022 | Tuesday of the Second Week in Advent

Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, c. 342

*Isaiah 5:18–25; 1 Thessalonians 5:12–28; Luke 21:29–38; Psalms 33 & 146 (AM); Psalms 85 & 94 (PM)*

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<sup>21:29</sup> He told them this parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees. <sup>30</sup> When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. <sup>31</sup> Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near.

<sup>32</sup> “Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.

<sup>33</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. <sup>34</sup> “Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap. <sup>35</sup> For it will come on all those who live on the face of the whole earth. <sup>36</sup> Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.”

<sup>37</sup> Each day Jesus was teaching at the temple, and each evening he went out to spend the night on the hill called the Mount of Olives, <sup>38</sup> and all the people came early in the morning to hear him at the temple.

– Luke 21:29–38 NIV2011



Knowing seasons, times, and watching what is going on around us and in our day is extremely important according to this biblical truth.

Holding our Bible in one hand and always reflecting on what we see in the world from a biblical point of view is a prudent lifestyle for Christians. If we see the world through the prism of things like philosophy, anthropology, or economics, it will give us a very limited and one-sided view of the world. Therefore, we are encouraged to start and end with a biblical point of view.

In this text, Luke documents one of the famous proverbs of Jesus spoken about detecting and understanding the season in which we live. The biggest question is “What do I know?” and after that, “What do I do with what I know?” Jesus gives us three messianic instructions on how to behave as Christians of the end times.

The first one is to always live with our eyes open — meaning we have to always watch what is going on around us with a biblical point of view. Every night the television gives us different perspectives on what is happening around the world, and every morning the newspapers give us their own perspective of what is going on around the world. But we are instructed to pick up our Bibles — read through the Gospels, prophetic books, apostolic instructions and inspirational Psalms — and then look at the world through the framework of the biblical truths that are given to us. That is what it means to watch!

The second instruction Jesus gives us is to live a life of prayer. Our prayer life is the clearest statement and the clearest declaration of our total dependence on God. Our Lord wants to have an intimate relationship with us, and that relationship cannot be left out through this life of prayer. Prayer is not just bringing our petition or questions to God, but expecting to dwell in His presence, and listening to what He has to say about our life, in our time. Prayer is a two-way conversation with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ consistently.

Lastly, the Scriptures encourages us to be steadfast, unshakable and to be deeply grounded in the biblical truths and traditions of the Christian Church. Everything around us will change but there is only one thing that will never change, and that is the Word of our God. In that Word is our anchor and our foundation therefore we are encouragement instructed to stand firmly grounded on that Word.

**Prayer:** Dear God we come before You today with total humility, asking and begging You to open our eyes so that we can watch what is going on around us. We pray to watch not with our own eyes, or try to understand with our own mind, but help us to see it with the eyes of the Holy Spirit and understand it with the help of Your grace. As we do that, please help us strengthen our relationship with You through prayer, and always depend on You for everything. Help us to stay grounded, strong in these shaky and troubled times. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen!

## December 7, 2022 | Wednesday of the Second Week in Advent

Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, 397

*Isaiah 6:1–13; 2 Thessalonians 1:1–12; John 7:53–8:11; Psalms 50 & 147:1–12 (AM); Psalms 53 & 17 (PM)*

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<sup>8,2</sup> Early in the morning [Jesus] came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. <sup>3</sup> The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst <sup>4</sup> they said to him, “Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. <sup>5</sup> Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?” <sup>6</sup> This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. <sup>7</sup> And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.” <sup>8</sup> And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. <sup>9</sup> But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. <sup>10</sup> Jesus stood up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” <sup>11</sup> She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.”

– John 8:2–11 ESV



“Let him who is without sin cast the first stone” (John 8:7). Those words are proverbial. To cast stones is a figurative way of saying that we are judging someone. Jesus was not a stone caster. God did not send His Son into the world in order to condemn the world, but in order to save the world (John 3:17). Jesus came to find lost coins, lost sheep, lost sons and daughters, lost sinners, and lost scribes and Pharisees too!

You may know that the story of the woman caught in the very act of adultery is not found in the best and earliest manuscripts that we have of John’s Gospel. In some modern translations, there are usually brackets around the story in order to indicate this textual difficulty. Fortunately, the Holy Spirit guided the Church to put this remarkable story in John’s Gospel. This shouldn’t surprise us. John ends his Gospel saying that Jesus did many other things that are not recorded in his Gospel.

An adulterous woman is brought to Jesus. Of course, we wonder where the adulterous man was! She certainly didn’t commit adultery alone. But, it’s a group of men, scribes and Pharisees, who bring her to Jesus. They remind Jesus what the Bible says. The Law was clear. She should be stoned for her sin in order to rid the community of this attack on moral decency. Of course, it’s a trap. Did Jesus “really” believe the Bible? Would He uphold the Law?

Jesus kneels down and begins to write in the dirt. What did He write? No one knows for certain, but if we know Jesus, then maybe we can take a guess. Maybe He was just writing His name. After all, Jesus means “the Lord saves.” I imagine Him kneeling in the dirt and reflecting on His mission to be the Agent of God’s salvation.

Jesus’ response to the religious leaders is absolutely brilliant. To paraphrase, He says, “Okay, go ahead and stone her.” That’s what the Bible says. But, here’s the deal: “Let the person without sin throw the first stone.”

Then He kneels down and begins writing in the dirt again. The scribes and Pharisees are silent. Then, beginning with the oldest, they melt away. Jesus does not condemn anyone. That’s not why He came.

The Angel of the Lord said to Joseph: “You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). I’ve good news for you. Jesus Christ came to save all sinners — the unrighteous and the self-righteous.

The greatest gift we can ever receive is the gift of God's forgiveness. Then, by God's grace, we can put down our stones and begin to forgive as we have been forgiven.

**Prayer:** Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

## December 8, 2022 | Thursday of the Second Week in Advent

*Isaiah 7:1–9; 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12; Luke 22:1–13; Psalms 18:1–20 & 147:13–21 (AM); Psalms 126 & 62 (PM)*

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<sup>2:1</sup> Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, <sup>2</sup> not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. <sup>3</sup> Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, <sup>4</sup> who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. <sup>5</sup> Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? <sup>6</sup> And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. <sup>7</sup> For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. <sup>8</sup> And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming. <sup>9</sup> The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, <sup>10</sup> and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. <sup>11</sup> Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, <sup>12</sup> in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

– 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12 ESV



Many people stress out and worry about what the end times will look like and can get wrapped up in predicting the exact time and date. Here, Paul is describing end time events that will happen before the second coming of Jesus. An agent of Satan, the lawless one, a deceiver, will come, and have “power and false signs and wonders” (2:9). This deceiver will twist doctrine and spread false teachings, and to make things worse “the mystery of the lawlessness is already at work” (2:7). Paul is not telling the Thessalonians this to predict the future, but to give them words of comfort.

Paul is giving assurance to his fellow believers, who walk in faith, that they are already gathered with Christ and will be gathered together with Him at the second coming as well. We as believers are given that same assurance, because of what Christ did on the cross for each one of us. We are gathered together now as the Body of Christ and will be gathered together with Him when He returns to claim ultimate victory and reigns forever and ever.

What protection do we have against “false signs and wonders” (2:9)? We have God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We have God’s Word, the Holy Scriptures. We also have been given the ability to pray, hear the Word rightly preached and receive the Sacraments. At the heart of the Scriptures is God’s promise of freedom, salvation and eternal life for His fallen children — sinners like you and me. For the Word of God is a means of grace and His Word is life-giving. These are the real gifts we can celebrate in the coming of Christ for us at Christmas.

I am prompted to pray the words from the hymn *Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word*.

1. Lord, keep us stead - fast in your Word; curb those who by de - ceit or sword  
 2. Lord Je - sus Christ, your pow'r make known, for you are Lord of lords a - lone;  
 3. O Com - for - ter of price - less worth, send peace and u - ni - ty on earth;

would wrest the king - dom from your Son and bring to naught all he has done.  
 de - fend your ho - ly church, that we may sing your praise tri - um - phant - ly.  
 sup - port us in our fi - nal strife, and lead us out of death to life.

Martin Luther, 1541, 1542  
 Tr. Catherine Winkworth, 1863; alt.; mod.

ERHALT UNS, HERR L.M.  
 Joseph Klug, *Geistliche Lieder*, 1543

**Prayer:** Lord, Heavenly Father, we pray that You would keep us steadfast in Your Word. Lord, Jesus Christ, we pray You would defend Your holy Church so we may sing Your praise triumphantly. Lord, Comforter, we pray send peace and unity, support us in our final strife and lead us out of death and in to life. In His Holy Name, Amen.

## December 9, 2022 | Friday of the Second Week in Advent

*Isaiah 7:10–25; 2 Thessalonians 2:13–3:5; Luke 22:14–30; Psalms 102 & 148 (AM); Psalms 130 & 16 (PM)*

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<sup>3:1</sup> As for other matters, brothers and sisters, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you. <sup>2</sup> And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil people, for not everyone has faith. <sup>3</sup> But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one. <sup>4</sup> We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command. <sup>5</sup> May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance.

– 2 Thessalonians 3:1–5 NIV2011



My commute to work every morning at 5 a.m. provided a perfect setting for prayer time with God. Other than watching for an occasional deer or turkey fleeing across the road, I was able to enjoy the solitude on a back-country road lined by darkened forest on either side, a chapel in the woods. It was a time of prayer for my workday.

I would pray to accomplish quickly and accurately what was needed to fill orders, pray for my co-workers and their needs, pray for their hope and faith in Christ, pray a positive attitude toward work, and pray for my enemies — that together we might see Jesus' reconciling love at work between us. It was a perfect twenty minutes each morning to be praying for the Lord's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

In 2 Thessalonians, the apostle Paul is writing to the Church at Thessalonica — and he is asking for prayer on behalf of himself and his companions, Silas and Timothy.

Specifically, prayer that through the Good News message of Jesus Christ many people would come to know Him and follow Him. They ask that their work and message not be hindered by any unfaithful or evil people. They pray and ask for prayer that any evil scheme or work be thwarted.

These messengers of God do not only ask for prayers for themselves and their work — of course, we pray for our pastors, bishop and missionaries that their message would be fruitful — but they ask that the faithful people of Thessalonica may also be praying that they would be strengthened in God's love and faith in Christ to persevere in sharing Jesus with others — the hope and joy and new life they have experienced in Christ. Through their prayer team, they have a direction and a purpose for their prayers — to witness God's will done on earth as in heaven.

This is still true for us today as we pray to the Lord, and with each other, that Christ's message would be fruitful in bringing about His kingdom among us.

**Prayer:** Father God, we give You thanks that You hear our every prayer. Strengthen us in our own faith in Jesus so that we may be faithful witnesses to His mercy and grace with our co-workers, neighbors, friends and family members. We pray that Your message of salvation in Christ would not be thwarted by anyone, but that it would bring about the fruit of grace toward others. We pray in the power and perseverance of Christ, our Lord. Amen.

## December 10, 2022 | Saturday of the Second Week in Advent

*Isaiah 8:1–15; 2 Thessalonians 3:6–18; Luke 22:31–38; Psalms 90 & 149 (AM); Psalms 80 & 72 (PM)*

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<sup>3,6</sup> Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. <sup>7</sup> For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, <sup>8</sup> nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. <sup>9</sup> It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. <sup>10</sup> For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. <sup>11</sup> For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. <sup>12</sup> Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

<sup>13</sup> As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. <sup>14</sup> If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. <sup>15</sup> Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

<sup>16</sup> Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all.

<sup>17</sup> I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write. <sup>18</sup> The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

– 2 Thessalonians 3:6–18 ESV



In this passage, the apostle Paul warns about the dangers of “walking in idleness.” It is a curious turn of phrase. Walking requires movement; idleness indicates stillness. So, what might it mean to “walk in idleness”?

In his classic book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Victor Frankl, a Jewish psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor describes in vivid detail his life in a Nazi concentration camp. What is interesting about his account is that he writes from the perspective of a psychiatrist. During his time of internment, he noted that how well a prisoner endured the horrors of the camps was tied to their sense of meaning and purpose in life. Those who could envision a productive future and their place in it had a reason to live and a purpose in life.

Even amidst the horrors of Auschwitz, Frankl found the strength to endure. As a psychiatrist and scientist, he wanted to live long enough to finish a manuscript outlining his therapeutic theories. As a physician, he found purpose in caring for the sick and injured prisoners in the camp. As a husband, son and brother he was strengthened by the hope of being reuniting someday with his beloved wife and family. Frankl sadly noted, however, that the prisoners in the camp that could not find meaning or purpose in life did not usually survive. Seeing no hope for tomorrow, they saw no point in today — and eventually lost the desire to live.

As I read today's text, I was reminded of Frankl's words and wondered if Paul's use of the phrase “walking in idleness” was not so much a condemnation of laziness as it was a warning against the dangers of a life lived without meaning and purpose. In verse 15 Paul writes that we should not regard the person walking in idleness as an enemy, but rather as someone to be warned.

Victor Frankl eventually wrote his manuscript and founded a school of psychotherapy that he termed “logotherapy” from the Greek word *logos* which can be translated as “meaning” in English. The core of logotherapy is the encouraging of others to find the hidden *logos*/meaning in their lives.

As Christians, we believe that the *logos* is no longer hidden. The more common translation of the Greek word *logos* is “word.” The Gospel of John proclaims, “In the beginning was the Word/*logos*, and the *logos*

was with God, and the *logos* was God, and the *logos* 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 1:1, 14).

In Christ we have meaning, purpose and direction for our lives. In the great commandment He gives us purpose with the instructions to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” In the Great Commission, He gives us direction by sending us into the world to make disciples, baptize and teach. We do all this secure in the knowledge that Christ, the *logos* made flesh, walks with us, giving us strength for today and hope for tomorrow. Advent is a season of anticipation. It is not, however, a time of idle waiting but rather a time of joyful preparation for the coming of the One who gives meaning and purpose to our lives. Jesus Christ, the *logos* made flesh.

**Prayer:** Dear Lord Jesus, You are the Word that gives meaning to our lives. Help me to face each day with conviction rather than idleness. I pray this day that You would open my eyes to see clearly the path You have laid before me. Direct my feet to someone I might serve in Your name. Use my hands to lift someone up and my voice to give encouragement by proclaiming Your saving grace. Give me the courage to face today strengthened by the knowledge that You are by my side. In Christ’s name I pray. Amen.

# THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT



*Almighty God, you once called John the Baptist to give witness  
to the coming of your Son and to prepare his way.  
Grant us, your people, the wisdom to see your purpose today and the openness to hear your will,  
that we may witness to Christ's coming and so prepare his way;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God now and forever. Amen.*

## December 11, 2022 | Third Sunday in Advent

*Lars Olsen Skrefsrud, Missionary to India, 1910*

*Isaiah 13:1–13; Hebrews 12:18–29; John 3:22–30; Psalms 24 & 150 (AM); Psalms 25 & 110 (PM)*

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<sup>3:27</sup> John answered, “A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. <sup>28</sup> You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’ <sup>29</sup> The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. <sup>30</sup> He must increase, but I must decrease.”

– John 3:27–30 ESV



I traveled to Israel several years ago and had the opportunity to baptize an Australian in the Jordan River. What was so fascinating was that there were other Baptisms going on all around us. Differing Christian groups, nationalities, languages and songs of praise — all joined with the power of the Holy Spirit and taking place in the name of Jesus Christ.

In John 3, the disciples of John the Baptist were struggling with the fact that Jesus was also baptizing on the other side of the Jordan. They questioned His actions and His motives. But John reminded them that he himself is not the Christ, but Jesus had come as the anointed One of God. John was sent before to prepare the way. As Jesus is the bridegroom, John is the friend of the bridegroom — the one ordained to bring the bride and the bridegroom together. The one who was called to connect Jesus and Israel. John and the rest of the world would rejoice greatly at the bridegroom’s voice! That is why John knew the Lord must increase, and he must decrease.

During this Advent season, let us realize that it is not about us, but it is all about Jesus Christ of Nazareth. We ourselves have been born to make the Lord known to others in our neighborhoods, places of work and in our relationships.

We are today’s messengers of the “Good News.”

**Prayer:** Father, we thank You for sending Jesus to be the Savior of the world. Help us to realize that we are not Christ, but we’ve been born to make Jesus known to others through words and actions. Please provide us with the strength and the courage to be your daily missionaries. May others see the loving, forgiving and hope-filled Lord in us. We pray all these things in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Amen.

## December 12, 2022 | Monday of the Third Week in Advent

*Isaiah 8:16–9:1; 2 Peter 1:1–11; Luke 22:39–53; Psalms 122 & 145 (AM); Psalms 40 & 67 (PM)*

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<sup>1,3</sup> His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. <sup>4</sup> Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. <sup>5</sup> For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; <sup>6</sup> and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; <sup>7</sup> and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. <sup>8</sup> For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup> But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins. <sup>10</sup> Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble, <sup>11</sup> and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

– 2 Peter 1:3–11 NIV2011



Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus as we find ourselves mid-way through this season of Advent. It's a time in the life of the Church when we look back upon our Lord's birth at Christmas, and look forward to that day when He will return.

In between those two events is where we find ourselves today. We know the promises. We know what God has done for, and given to us, in His Son. Our life eternal with Him is secure. And yet, we're not quite there. We're still on this end of eternity. Until that day comes and God's promises are completed in us, we are called to live and to walk by faith.

The apostle Peter, in our lesson today, is writing to Christians who knew the promises of God. They were fully aware of our Lord's death and resurrection and were fully convinced that His promises were for them. But they were not yet fulfilled. They were not yet fully realized in their lives. In fact, they were being persecuted for their faith. Their faith was costing them in some real ways — and it was just beginning. It was soon to become worse. Nero was in power, and it was not going to get better.

And so, Peter is writing to them about living out their faith in this challenging culture. Some of them had lost their jobs; others had lost their homes. In worst cases, there were Christians being tortured and even being put to death.

And yet, in spite of the challenges they faced, he writes to encourage them to not lose heart. He says that God has given us “everything we need for a godly life.” We have God's “great and precious promises.” For this reason, he says, we need to “make every effort” to add the qualities in our lives that enable us to be “effective and productive” in our knowledge of and witness to Christ.

Peter then says, and here's where it gets personal, that we are to “make every effort to confirm our calling and election” in Christ. To prove that we truly belong to and are committed to Jesus, and to provide evidence of our faith by matching our lives to what we say we believe in our words.

What Peter is saying is that we confirm our faith every day by the way we live, by the actions we take, by the priorities we set, and by the place and importance in our lives we give to Christ.

In that sense, the Christian life is a commitment, it's a calling, and it requires discipline. In fact, the words disciple and discipline come from the same root. To be a disciple of Jesus takes a disciplined commitment.

Every day, in each situation we face, and with every opportunity we have to witness to our faith in Christ, we “confirm” our faith in the One who gave His life for us.

During this Advent season, we are reminded of the path Jesus walked when He entered our world. He humbled himself and became a man. He took on our human flesh and He, ultimately, carried our sin to the cross. In so doing, He confirmed His love for us, not only with His words, but in the actions of His life. Now it is our turn to live out our faith and to confirm our love for Him.

**Prayer:** Lord God, we thank You this day for the commitment You made to us in Your Son and for securing for us a place in Your kingdom through His life, death and resurrection from the dead. Help us to live each day for You, that our lives and our love for others might reflect the love You have shown to us in Jesus. Amen.

## December 13, 2022 | Tuesday of the Third Week in Advent

*Lucy, Martyr at Syracuse, c. 304*

*Isaiah 9:2–7; 2 Peter 1:12–21; Luke 22:54–69; Psalms 33 & 146 (AM); Psalms 85 & 94 (PM)*

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<sup>9:2</sup> The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.

– Isaiah 9:2 ESV



My favorite image for this Advent season is that of light breaking into the midst of darkness. That is such a hopeful and powerful image that speaks particularly to this time of year.

This is such a dark time. Days are at their shortest; it seems like I go to work in the dark and no sooner than I get home after work it is dark again. There is so much darkness. But against the darkness we add lights. We decorate our houses, we light Christmas trees. We put up candles and displays. In church we light advent wreathes and each week light more candles. We look to light in the midst of the darkness.

And that is what this season proclaims. The light of Christ is coming into the midst of our darkness. The hard fact of our lives is that they can be dark. Our world is dark with wars and floods and political unrest and hatred and anger. I watch the evening news and I can feel the darkness closing in. Whether it's suffering a loss, receiving a hard medical diagnosis, struggling with family, or addiction that overwhelms us or a loved one — there is just so much darkness.

But Advent is the promise of light. It is the promise of God's own light given in Jesus Christ. God knows our darkness, and He will not leave us in it. And so God sends Jesus as light and newness for us. Jesus as light pierces the darkness and shows us God's own hope. In Jesus we encounter the very light of God.

The beauty of light is that it always overcomes darkness. The beauty of Jesus is that He overcomes all that can befall us. Nothing will stop the light of Jesus Christ! Or as Isaiah puts it in today's reading, "those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone." We look to the celebration of God's light among us!

Look to all the emphasis on lights this time of year — house decorations, lighted Christmas trees, candles, — and let the lights remind you of the light of Christ who came for you and me.

**Prayer:** Holy God, we know too much of darkness. It overwhelms us, overpowers us. But You are light! Come to us anew in Your goodness and hope. Lead us in Your light! Amen.

## December 14, 2022 | Wednesday of the Third Week in Advent

John of the Cross, *Renewal of the Church*, 1591

*Isaiah 9:8–17; 2 Peter 2:1–10a; Mark 1:1–8; Psalms 50 & 147:1–12 (AM); Psalms 53 & 17 (PM)*

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<sup>1:1</sup> The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. <sup>2</sup> As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way; <sup>3</sup> the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,”’ <sup>4</sup> John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

– Mark 1:1–4 NRSV



Have you ever used a paring knife? Or, have you ever watched a grandparent or parent peel/pare the skin off an apple, especially around the holidays, maybe to make a pie? From the time I was young, I loved the whole idea of paring. Despite my mom’s scolding, I pared the crust off bread. Pudding was another thing that needed paring. I hated “skins” on top of cooling pudding. Fruits too! What kind of kid would ever eat that fuzzy skin on peaches along with the nice peach inside. Gag me! Paring was very useful for me as a kid, but it was also something I loved seeing my mom do, and still today, my wife. Oh the wonderful pies and goodies that are produced by paring.

Our journey through the season of Advent is about getting ourselves ready by cutting away that which is not necessary. Advent is a time to prepare to enter the true joy of Jesus. We hear this call in John the Baptizer’s words.

Preparing is about confessing, repenting, dropping the stuff that holds us down. John himself was an image of shedding; camel hair cloths and eating locust and honey. John’s ministry was one of washing — removing and paring away what holds a person down. I would like to suggest that there are at least three ways we should prepare in order to one, put Jesus at the center of our activities; two, be the joy in our relationship with others; and three, be ready to go home.

Jesus at the center. At the heart of everything we do in the next few weeks should be Jesus — the one who came for us, to save us. Jesus is the reason for the season! It may seem trite, but it’s true. And yet, we are tempted to get our eyes upon other, non-eternal, things. Other lights dazzle us. Other gifts obsess us. Other thirsts and hungers make us think we are fed. It seems that many times we set out on the journey of Advent anticipating joy, but joy diminishes with the burdens of preparation for Christmas. If you start feeling anxious and burdened in Advent, consider paring away what is *not* necessary, for our Lord Jesus wants you to be filled, not emptied. We may need to replace some of our activities in this season with Jesus if we truly want to be dazzled, graced, quenched and fed.

Be joy in relationships! Paring, in order to put Jesus at the center, leads to something wonderful. It leads to really having joy, because Jesus makes our joy complete. We celebrate radiance in Advent and Christmas. A guiding star point to Messiah, the light come into darkness. Of course, His purpose was not just to be an amusing ornament, but to make us radiant too; lights on a hill. Our joy can become radiance in our relationship with others. If not distracted, we can truly listen to others, and truly share our heart-felt relationship with the Light of the world. Without paring away some things, the temptations of the season can prevent us from operating from a place of joy.

We can shop till we drop and eat till we explode, but when we don’t operate from joy and faith in Jesus, these activities can rob us from being radiant joy in our relationships.

There are a lot of scriptural alarm bells during this season, and the one thing they all have in common is that an end will come, so be ready. We need to prepare ourselves to go to our true home with the Lord. This is where hope becomes something to cling to, and our hope in Jesus will not disappoint us. However, hope in something else will disappoint us!

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying we should withdraw and become monastic during Advent. The message of the season isn't "stop expending your energy," but "expend your energy in the right direction!"

**Prayer:** Dear Lord of heaven and earth, we thank You for Your attention to us, even though we do not deserve it. We thank You for preparing a place for us so that we can be free in this life to pare away the thing that separate us from You and each other. Open our eyes to see the things we need to get rid of so we can have and be true joy for others. Amen.

## December 15, 2022 | Thursday of the Third Week in Advent

*Isaiah 9:18–10:4; 2 Peter 2:10b–16; Matthew 3:1–12; Psalms 18:1–20 & 147:13–21 (AM); Psalms 126 & 62 (PM)*

<sup>3:1</sup> In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, <sup>2</sup> “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” <sup>3</sup> For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’”

– Matthew 3:1–3 ESV



My wife Cheryl and I have some special guests coming this Christmas. If we want their visit to be the best it can be, we will have to prepare. It's going to take time and intentional effort. We will have to make some changes in our home. Those changes will be well worth the effort, because we want our home to be ready and welcoming for our four grandsons, who by then will be ages two, three, four, and five. There are specific things we must do to prepare, like putting safety locks on doors and cabinets, adding gates to stairs, and of course, making sure we have the right foods for them. Their visit will not be the “best it can be” if we don't make these preparations.

Our celebration of Christ's coming into this world as a babe in Bethlehem is similar to the above example. It takes time and intentional effort to properly prepare for His coming. Advent is the Church season to do this. Now is the time to heed the words of John the Baptist and “prepare the way of the Lord.”

But how? What does this preparation entail? John told us in verse two, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” The way to prepare for the coming of Christ is to repent. And we are reminded that Christian repentance is not a once-in-a-lifetime action. No, true Christian repentance is a daily activity. And what exactly is repentance? It is an inner change of mind and heart that produces an outward change in our behavior. It is inspired and enabled by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit empowers us to turn away from sinful thoughts, words, and deeds, and to live our lives in such a fashion that we follow where Jesus leads.

Repentance is recognizing and believing what Revelation proclaims in our Advent series theme: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever” (Revelation 11:15). Moreover, it is not only possible each and every day, but also needed each and every day. Thus, Advent is the season we are reminded to prepare for the coming of Christ by practicing daily repentance. This means we commit to taking the time and making the intentional effort to go to Jesus in the sacred Scriptures, listening to His will for us and asking Him to stir up the Holy Spirit within us to inspire and empower the changes in our lives He is calling us to make.

**Prayer:** Almighty and ever-living God, as I continue in this Advent season, I humbly ask that You help me to make the changes in my life that You desire. Remind me to be faithful in my daily discipline of prayer, Bible reading and reflection on your Word. Inspire me and enable me to practice true repentance, to hear Your clear word for me, and empower me to make the changes to be faithful to that word. In Jesus' Name, and for the sake of His Gospel. Amen.

## December 16, 2022 | Friday of the Third Week in Advent

*Isaiah 10:5–19; 2 Peter 2:17–22; Matthew 11:2–15; Psalms 102 & 148 (AM); Psalms 130 & 16 (PM)*

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<sup>130:5</sup> I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; <sup>6</sup> my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning.

– Psalm 130:5–6 ESV



Waiting can be excruciating. Young travelers are wont to ask in this season, “Are we there yet?” Or perhaps, more seriously, we know the dire waiting for things like diagnostic results from a health care lab.

In this season, one cannot but help think of prisoners of war wondering when they will see freedom. Waiting is not only excruciating, it can be fraught with danger. The dark nights can be filled with doubt and sorrow. We in the northern hemisphere are less than a week away from the longest night of the year and, as such, Advent finds us pondering how we shall wait with the watchmen in our text. Perhaps more deeply, Advent is an opportunity to ask in those dark nights exactly what it is for which we long and wait.

While waiting can be fraught with danger, it can also be a time to ponder why it is that the Word became flesh to dwell among us in the first place. It can be a time of deep longing, or a time of lament. Why is it taking so long?

Strangely enough I am drawn to a piece of music that gives voice to the longing. It is by an Irish composer, performed by an African American baritone, and made popular by Riverdance. It is entitled, “Freedom,” and lifts the longing itself as a prayer: “Lord, where is our freedom? When will our hope begin? Lord, what of the promise you made? When will it come?”

In our Gospel reading from Matthew today, John too, languishing in prison, waits. The dark nights seem to have brought doubts since he boldly declared, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

John needs a word from his Lord to sustain him in the between-times. Not only does Jesus send a word for John to sustain him in the waiting and longing, and perhaps even the lament, but Jesus also gives us a clue about what we might do while we wait. Go and tell! See and hear how He goes about making all things new even as the kingdom comes. Bear witness to what we see and hear, embarking upon ministry, preaching the Good News. And through it all, Jesus affirms that John’s ministry — and ours — is not in vain. We just aren’t there yet.

Finally, I think of another hymn that highlights the importance of Christian community throughout these long nights. You might read, sing, or reflect upon *LBW* 355, “Through the Night of Doubt and Sorrow.”

*Through the night of doubt and sorrow  
Onward goes the pilgrim band,  
Singing songs of expectation,  
Marching to the promised land.  
Clear before us through the darkness  
Gleams and burns the guiding light;  
Pilgrim clasps the hand of pilgrim  
Stepping fearless through the night.*

*One the light of God’s own presence  
On his ransomed people shed,  
Chasing far the gloom and terror,  
Bright’ning all the path we tread.  
One the object of our journey,  
One the faith which never tires,  
One the earnest looking forward,  
One the hope our God inspires.*

*One the strain that lips of thousands  
Lift as from the heart of one;  
One the conflict, one the peril,  
One the march in God begun.  
One the gladness of rejoicing  
On the far eternal shore,  
Where the one almighty Father  
Reigns in love for evermore.*

*Onward, therefore, sisters, brothers;  
Onward, with the cross our aid.  
Bear its shame, and fight its battle  
Till we rest beneath its shade.  
Soon shall come the great awak'ning;  
Soon the rending of the tomb!  
Then the scatt'ring of all shadows,  
And the end of toil and gloom.*

**Prayer:** From the O Antiphon of the longest night O *Oriens*: “O Dayspring, splendor of light everlasting and sun of justice: Come and enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. Amen.”

## December 17, 2022 | Saturday of the Third Week in Advent

*O Sapientia/O Wisdom*

*Isaiah 10:20–27; Jude 17–25; Luke 3:1–9; Psalms 90 & 149 (AM); Psalms 80 & 72 (PM)*

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<sup>3:1</sup> In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, <sup>2</sup> during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup> And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>4</sup> As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.

<sup>5</sup> Every valley shall be filled,  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,  
and the crooked shall become straight,  
and the rough places shall become level ways,

<sup>6</sup> and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

<sup>7</sup> He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup> Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. <sup>9</sup> Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

– Luke 3:1–9 ESV



For most of our lives’ paths, we don’t get a “soft start.” We don’t start a diet with, “I think I’ll only have one quart of ice cream today instead of two.” We don’t enter into a marriage doing only what we want, intending on tightening up the relationship as we go along. Most importantly, we don’t begin our walk of faith with a “get out of jail free” card to worry about using later.

In our passage today, John the Baptist is expressing just that. Repent now! Live today with the purposes of God front of mind. The people he is speaking to act as if just being born in the line of Abraham fulfills the immediacy of the call to repentance. John warns that it is the living out of the faith now that matters. Then he cites Isaiah 40, where the prophet Isaiah calls God’s people to prepare the way for their king to return to them. In those days, armies would go along the road that their king was planned to travel on, smoothing out the ruts and bumps. Clearing out the loose stones. They would only do this if they knew that their king was coming soon.

John is calling the people to live today as if tomorrow was surely coming. The Messiah is coming. Live today with the full assurance your salvation will come. John ends giving the reason to repent and attend to God’s purposes for us. In the ominous last verse, he refers to judgement — the axe ready to cut down and burn unproductive trees. We are to be focused on today, to be diligent tomorrow, knowing when the time comes the justice of God will prevail. A somewhat harsh word from John, but he wanted to be clear.

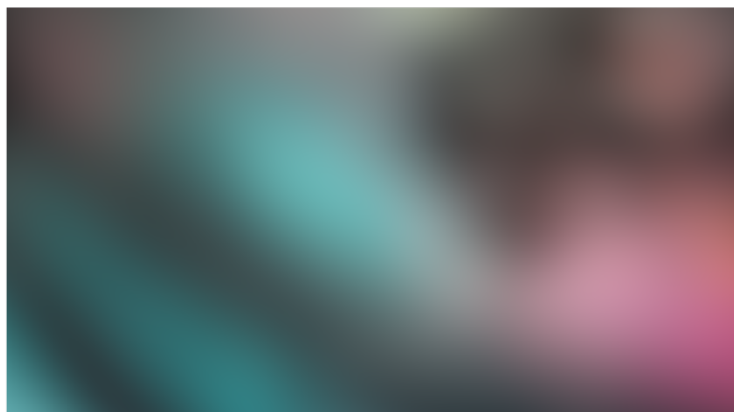
This Advent season, let us reflect on these three truths John is proclaiming.

Let us first remember to always attend to the living out of our faith today. We don't have a 'soft start' in hearing the call of our Baptism. "Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." That's today — but not just today. We walk in faith tomorrow and onward with God, disciplining others to know the Lord. We serve others as we serve God.

But the means are not the ends. The time ahead of us is not an ending cycle. We are living towards what John explicitly implies is judgement. But for those in Christ, this is joyful news. Because of the righteousness of Christ freely given to us, we have no other future judgement but to the eternal loving presence of the Lord. Let us meditate on how today we are walking with the Lord, how what we do today has an aim and a purpose in God's Kingdom, and the unfathomable future we look forward to when we return to the presence of the Lord.

**Prayer:** Lord, I pray that I may remember my Baptism every day and attend to the building up of Your kingdom. Help me to do this with of a sense of joy, knowing one day I shall return to You. Amen.

# THE FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT



*Stir up your power, O Lord, and come.  
Take away the hindrance of our sins and make us ready for the celebration of your birth,  
that we may receive you in joy and serve you always;  
for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.*

## December 18, 2022 | Fourth Sunday in Advent

*O Adonai/O Lord of Might*

*Isaiah 11:1–9; Ephesians 6:10–20; John 3:16–21; Psalms 24 & 150 (AM); Psalms 25 & 110 (PM)*

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<sup>11:5</sup> Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins.

– Isaiah 11:5 ESV

<sup>6:11</sup> Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. <sup>12</sup> For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

– Ephesians 6:10–12 ESV



Have you ever wondered what Jesus actually looked like? We've all seen beautiful paintings, mosaics and stained-glass windows depicting our Lord, but those are artistic interpretations of the Son of Man. The earliest known image of Jesus was meant to be a mockery of the crucified one. This first-century wall carving depicts Jesus on the cross with the head of a donkey. A man is looking up at the figure on the cross, and it is this man who is being made fun of for worshipping Jesus of Nazareth. The next oldest image of Jesus was found in a catacomb near Rome. In this third-century paint on plaster image of Jesus, He is healing a paralytic who then gets up and walks away. But the first image to give us any kind of sense of Jesus' face is a painting on plaster entitled, "The Good Shepherd." This one is also from the third century and has a young clean faced Jesus carrying a lamb on His shoulders.

What image of Jesus does your mind's eye create when you hear the words of Isaiah and Paul describing Christ as the one who wears righteousness as a belt or a breastplate? Yes, these are metaphorical descriptions of our Lord, but they carry an important truth for us who follow Jesus. When Paul says we are to put on the full armor of God, fastening the belt of truth around our waists, carrying a shield of faith, and putting on the helmet of salvation, he is encouraging us to trust Jesus, and wear Him like a garment, as he says in Romans 13:14, "Put on Christ." Christ is the one who is our belt of truth and shield of faith. He is our helmet of salvation and our sword of the Spirit. We need Jesus to fight our battles with sin, death, and the devil! We need the Lord to engage for us in spiritual warfare, as we cannot do it alone.

Spiritual warfare is a real thing! Perhaps you've noticed something shift in your life when you are intentionally and faithfully following Jesus. It might be an onslaught of trials, a series of attacks out of nowhere, a sense of darkness or conflict hovering over you, an awareness of confusion and lies circling around you, just to name a few examples. This may be the result of sin, our own, or someone else's that is affecting us. Or it might be the attacks of the enemy who St. Peter called "your adversary" who "prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8).

The first step in spiritual warfare is to recognize what is going on — we are in a battle with the principalities and powers of the world. When we are clinging to Christ it angers the enemy! But we have the Lord who is our strength, who, as Martin Luther wrote, "Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing, were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God's own choosing. You ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is he; Lord Sabaoth his name, from age to age the same; and he must win the battle" (*A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, v. 2, Author: Martin Luther [1529]; Translator: Frederick H. Hedge [1852]).

We know the end of the story, thankfully! That Jesus has won the battle and is victorious over sin and death and the devil. Yet there are times we find ourselves still struggling with sin and the wiles of the enemy. As

we continue our faith journey this Advent season, let us be reminded that God has chosen the right Man for us, and He is our full armor against the enemy. Amen.

**Prayer:** Holy God, You sent your Son into this world to put an end to sin, death, and the devil in our lives. “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever” (Revelation 11:15). May we always trust in Jesus who is our strength and shield, who has already won the battle. Amen.

## December 19, 2022 | Monday of the Fourth Week in Advent

*O Radix Jesse/O Root of Jesse*

*Isaiah 11:10–16; Revelation 20:1–10; John 5:30–47; Psalms 122 & 145 (AM); Psalms 40 & 67 (PM)*

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<sup>145:13</sup> Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations. [The Lord is faithful in all his words and kind in all his works.] <sup>14</sup> The Lord upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down. <sup>15</sup> The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. <sup>16</sup> You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing. <sup>17</sup> The Lord is righteous in all his ways and kind in all his works. <sup>18</sup> The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. <sup>19</sup> He fulfills the desire of those who fear him; he also hears their cry and saves them. <sup>20</sup> The Lord preserves all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy. <sup>21</sup> My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord, and let all flesh bless his holy name forever and ever.

– Psalm 145:13–21 ESV



Last night my wife Patti and I had dinner out at a restaurant. We made reservations. We didn't ask the Lord to give us a meal. Nor did the entrees drop down from heaven like manna. Our server brought them, and I paid for them with my credit card. How then does God provide the daily bread that we ask for in the Lord's prayer? Through the vocations of ordinary people!

Martin Luther would say that at dinner, God was “wearing the mask” of the hostess who seated us, the chef who prepared the shrimp risotto, and the farmer who planted the grapes that became Patti's glass of Moscato. Many hands made this dinner for two possible. Praise God for His provision! And for labor that blesses others.

Praise is the theme of Psalm 145, which extols the Lord's faithfulness to His covenant name. God redeems His people, makes them holy, provides for them, and loves them forever. Yet we daily rebel against our creator. Like Adam and Eve, we become dissatisfied with God's provision. Convinced that He is withholding something good from us, we seek more — more food and drink, more wealth and distractions and possessions. Consequently, this craving for “more” often leads to habits that hurt us and the people around us. Yet even in our rebellion, God provides for us. In Christ Jesus, our idolatrous desires, actions, and habits were nailed to the cross, so that we who were dead in trespasses and sins may be raised with Him to new life!

Each week you are invited to His table, to receive the bread of His presence and the wine of His promises. In the fullness of time, King Jesus will gather us at His banquet table to celebrate His endless provision and victory. Praise the Lord indeed!

**Prayer:** King of the universe, You show the bright glory of Your reign in acts of mercy and enduring love; raise the spirits of the downcast and restore those who have fallen away, that we may sing for ever of Your love; through Jesus Christ our Lord.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “Psalm Prayer, Psalm 145,” *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England*, The Archbishops' Council (London, UK: Church House Publishing, 2005).

## December 20, 2022 | Tuesday of the Fourth Week in Advent

*Katherina von Bora Luther, 1552; O Clavis David/O Key of David*

*Isaiah 28:9–29:24; Revelation 20:11—21:8; Luke 1:5–38; Psalms 33 & 146 (AM); Psalms 85 & 94 (PM)*

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<sup>1:26</sup> In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" <sup>29</sup> But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, <sup>33</sup> and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." <sup>34</sup> And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" <sup>35</sup> And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. <sup>36</sup> And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. <sup>37</sup> For nothing will be impossible with God." <sup>38</sup> And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

— Luke 1:26–38 ESV



As we are now in the Fourth Week of Advent, our Gospel readings are from Luke 1, bringing to us the birth narrative where we walk with Mary and Joseph to Christmas.

It is worth noting that on this day, Martin Luther's beloved wife and "rib," Katie, entered the Church triumphant. Katie lived in Wittenberg after Luther's death until 1552, when she traveled to Torgau to escape an outbreak of the Black Plague. She was thrown from her cart into a watery ditch near the city gates. She was taken into the city where she died on this date, December 20, 1552, at the age of 53. She was buried at Saint Mary's Church in Torgau. Although Luther lovingly referred to her as "My Lord Katie," it is clear there was deep love and affection between Luther and his competent and capable partner in faith and in marriage.

It is certainly fitting that on this day of Katie's commemoration we are reading of Gabriel's visit, announcing that Mary would conceive of the Holy Spirit and give birth to a son who would be Son of the Most High God — the Word become flesh to dwell among us, full of grace and truth. Next to the doctrine of our redemption — that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus' death and resurrection — Luther held the incarnation to be next in importance. For if God had not become man, there would be no forgiveness, life and salvation through Christ Jesus! No wonder Luther so loved the nativity of our Lord and celebrated the Christ-mass so devotedly!

As we celebrate the miracle of Christmas, remember the words of Gabriel: "For nothing will be impossible with God!" May that assurance guide your days this week.

Consider lighting a candle in remembrance of Katie and Martin Luther and in thanksgiving for the impossible, improbable gift of God's Son, our Savior — the Word made flesh to dwell among us!

**Prayer:** O God, we give thanks for Your servant Katie Luther, who supported the work of renewing Your Church in the light of Your Word made flesh. In Jesus' name. Amen.

## December 21, 2022 | Wednesday of the Fourth Week in Advent

ST. THOMAS, APOSTLE

*O Oriens/O Dayspring*

*Habakkuk 2:1–4; Ephesians 2:19–22; John 20:24–29; Psalms 117 & 147:1–12 (AM); Psalms 53 & 17 (PM)*

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<sup>20:24</sup> Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came.

<sup>25</sup> So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.”

<sup>26</sup> A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” <sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

<sup>28</sup> Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!” <sup>29</sup> Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

– John 20:24–29 NIV2011



This passage is one of the most remembered stories throughout the New Testament. As a result, Thomas, one of the twelve apostles, is often mentioned as an example of doubt. In this world we will always have doubters — and sometimes *we* are the doubters. If we’re honest, most of the time we lean more towards doubt than faith. That’s why the Bible challenges the disciples, and challenges us today, by saying if you have a faith as small as a mustard seed you can move mountains. How many mountain-moving, sea-dividing, miracle-working believers do we have around the world today? If we are honest with ourselves, our lifestyles can be marked with more doubt than faith much of the time.

Our Lord understands struggle. That is why He consistently helps our unbelief by relating and connecting with us through means of grace, which is Word and Sacrament. Through means of grace our Lord Jesus Christ is constantly feeding our faith and helping our life to be nurtured and plugged into the grace of God. We became believers by the grace of God and we are sustained as believers by the grace of God. Outside God’s grace, we are fallen doubters just like Thomas.

Even though the story focuses on the doubts and beliefs of Thomas, the most remarkable statement is the one that is spoken by Jesus at the end of the passage. That’s where Jesus spoke about those who believe without having any physical evidence or physical presence of Jesus next to them to prove or disprove the fact of resurrection. That’s why He speaks to Thomas by saying, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” That is the miracle of faith attained through God’s grace in our life. Our faith is not something that we have acquired through our own physical examination of the evidence around us. But our faith is something that we have received from the Word of God through the grace of God.

We have that faith given to us as a gift, and we are called to turn around and proclaim the Word of God with absolute conviction. We are called to believe that the Word that comes from the Lord through us is going to have the same impact on those who have never believed in Christ Jesus. That’s why we are consistently in mission and constantly sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all of our neighbors near and far. The miracle of coming to faith as a child, as an adult or even a senior citizens is still happening and will continue to happen until Jesus Christ comes. That faith is not something people acquire through their own efforts or by doing some kind of research like Thomas tried to do. But that faith is still happening in the minds and hearts and souls of millions and millions of people around the world as people are coming to Christ in thousands and hundreds of thousands around the world. That is a living testimony to the reality

and to the everlasting truth of those words spoken in this Gospel of John — it is also a living testimony to the living power of the Holy Spirit working in the world today.

**Prayer:** Dear God, we confess that we are often more in doubt than in faith. We also confess that we are more in fear than in faith. Please continue to send us Your grace and pull us out of our doubt and out of our fear. Bring us to that place of faith so that we can continue to boldly confess You, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, as our God and as our Lord. We are forever grateful for this gift of faith that is planted in our heart. We now pray that through the power of Your Word that faith will continue to grow in us, and we humbly ask that You continue to help us through the power of Your Holy Spirit. In Jesus name, Amen!

## December 22, 2022 | Thursday of the Fourth Week in Advent

*O Rex Gentium/O King of Nations*

*Isaiah 31:1–9; Revelation 21:22–22:5; Luke 1:39–56; Psalms 18:1–20 & 147:13–21 (AM); Psalms 126 & 62 (PM)*

<sup>1:39</sup> In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, <sup>40</sup> and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, <sup>42</sup> and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! <sup>43</sup> And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? <sup>44</sup> For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup> And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”

<sup>46</sup> And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

<sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

<sup>48</sup> for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.

For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

<sup>49</sup> for he who is mighty has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

<sup>50</sup> And his mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

<sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;

<sup>52</sup> he has brought down the mighty from their thrones

and exalted those of humble estate;

<sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things,

and the rich he has sent away empty.

<sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

<sup>55</sup> as he spoke to our fathers,

to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”

<sup>56</sup> And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.

– Luke 1:39–56 ESV



“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” With those words Elizabeth greeted Mary. Since that time, throughout all generations, Mary the Mother of our Lord is called blessed. “Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord” (Luke 1:45).

It really is unfortunate that many Protestants — perhaps from concern of wrongly honoring her — do not honor her at all. There are very few Lutheran congregations named “St. Mary’s.” Yet, without her faithful “yes” would we have Jesus?

Think of the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. There are only three people mentioned: Jesus Christ, Pontius Pilate and the Virgin Mary. These are more than historical references. Pilate is a man of and in the world. He rejects Christ in order to gain the world even if it means forfeiting his soul (Mark 8:36; Luke 9:25). Mary is open and receptive of God’s Word. She is representative of all those who by faith receive Christ, and He begins to be formed within them (Galatians 4:19).

In a Christmas sermon in 1531, Martin Luther told the congregation: “[Mary is the] highest woman and the noblest gem in Christianity after Christ ... She is nobility, wisdom, and holiness personified. We can never honor her enough. Still honor and praise must be given to her in such a way as to injure neither Christ nor the Scriptures.”

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus, let me encourage all of us to reflect more deeply on this humble handmaiden of the Lord who, by grace through faith, whispered “amen” to the angel. “Let it be to me according to your word.” With our blessed Mother, may the Holy Spirit inspire all of us to begin to whisper this prayer of faith: “Amen, come Lord Jesus Christ, be formed in me.” Consider making this your prayer for today.

**Prayer:** Amen, come Lord Jesus Christ, be formed in me.

## December 23, 2022 | Friday of the Fourth Week in Advent

*Thorlak, Bishop of Skalholt, 1193; O Emmanuel/O Come, Emmanuel*

*Isaiah 33:17–22; Revelation 22:6–11, 18–20; Luke 1:57–66; Psalms 102 & 148 (AM); Psalms 130 & 16 (PM)*

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<sup>22:6</sup> And he said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place.”

<sup>7</sup> “And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.”

<sup>8</sup> I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me, <sup>9</sup> but he said to me, “You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God.” <sup>10</sup> And he said to me, “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. <sup>11</sup> Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy.”

<sup>18</sup> I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, <sup>19</sup> and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

<sup>20</sup> He who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

– Revelation 22:6–11, 18–20 ESV



As a child, December 23 was a challenging day for me. It was almost Christmas; it was so close I could almost taste it. Decorations were up, school was out, carols were playing everywhere I went. The anticipation was real.

As an adult the only other times in my life that I felt that same level of anticipation was toward the end of a pregnancy. Being a parent of three, I can honestly say the anticipation didn’t get any easier with child number two or three.

I can imagine this is how Mary and Joseph must have felt as they awaited Jesus’ arrival. I can also imagine the anticipation the disciple John must have felt hearing the words, “Surely I am coming soon” (v. 20). Scripture teaches us that the Son of God came to us as a babe in a manger, taking on human flesh. He died on the cross and then rose again in the same substance of flesh and bones (Luke 24:39), and then ascended into heaven in that body — and He will return again to judge the living and the dead. He did all of this for the forgiveness of our sins, and so that we can live under Him and serve Him in His kingdom where “He shall reign forever and ever” (Revelation 11:15b).

Thankfully, as we wrestle with anticipation of any kind, we can rest in the sure and certain hope that Christ is coming soon. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, King of this kingdom and the next, be with us, guide us and help curb the anticipation we feel as we await Your arrival. Amen.

# THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD



*Almighty God, you made this holy night shine with the brightness of the true Light.  
Grant that here on earth we may walk in the light of Jesus' presence and  
in the last day wake to the brightness of his glory;  
through your only Son, Jesus Christ our Lord,  
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and forever. Amen.*

## December 24, 2022 | THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD: CHRISTMAS EVE

*Isaiah 35:1–10; Revelation 22:12–17, 21; Luke 1:67–80; Psalms 90 & 149 (AM); Psalms 132 & 114 (PM)*

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<sup>22:12</sup> “Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done.  
<sup>13</sup> I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” <sup>14</sup> Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates.

– Revelation 22:12–14 ESV



Shall we receive the crown or the curse from Jesus, our righteous judge? That is the question that plagues my mind as I read this passage over and over, “Behold,” says the Lord, “I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he or she has done.”

I keep looking for a loophole to get me off the hook for all the sins I have committed, things I’ve done and left undone. What will be the repayment Jesus gives to me, a poor wretched sinner that I am? I deserve nothing good — none of us do. And the law in this passage is crystal clear — our right to the tree of life does not exist. Just like Adam who forfeited his right to the tree of life when he and Eve sinned against the Lord God in Eden, so we too, through our own sin and disobedience, have been stripped of a place in God’s holy throne room.

What shall we do then? Work harder and harder to be good? To serve more? Shall we try and find a way to earn our way back into God’s good graces? It’s Christmas Eve and many of us will be in church today. Does that count for anything?

No — but that’s the good news. It’s not about what we can do for ourselves. It’s about what Jesus has done for us, beginning in the manger, walking the streets of Jerusalem, and dying on a cross at Calvary so that we might be free from that which holds us captive: sin and death. If Jesus were to repay us for what we’ve done, we would surely be lost forever. Instead, we cling to Christ’s righteousness, and His holiness becomes ours, since we are unable to be righteous on our own. We happily cling to Paul’s explanation of salvation from his letter to the Romans, “the righteousness of God (is) through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:22–24).

We deserve punishment and yet what we receive is the gift of new life. We deserve destruction and yet what we are given is pure, unconditional love and mercy. It is only by grace that our Lord Jesus doesn’t repay us for what we’ve done. Instead, through His great love, all who trust in Him, have access to the tree of life. We will wear the crown of glory rather than receive the curse due the wicked! We are promised an eternity by His side in that place where there are no more tears, no more suffering, but only joy and light and peace.

As we peek into the manger tonight, let us see the beauty of the Christ child, the One who is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last, and the One who loves us enough not to give us what we deserve, but what He wants us to have — eternal life. Amen.

**Prayer:** Loving Father, You sent Your Son Jesus into the world to bear the weight of our sin. Grant that we who kneel at the manger tonight may know and trust the gift that was given to us. Let our robes be washed white with the blood of the lamb and may we receive the crown of His glory on that last day. Amen.

## December 25, 2022 | THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD: CHRISTMAS DAY

*Zechariah 2:10–13; 1 John 4:7–16; John 3:31–36; Psalms 2 & 150 (AM); Psalms 98 & 96 (PM)*

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<sup>3:31</sup> The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all. <sup>32</sup> He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony. <sup>33</sup> Whoever has accepted it has certified that God is truthful. <sup>34</sup> For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit. <sup>35</sup> The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. <sup>36</sup> Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them.

– John 3:31–36 NIV2011



Greetings on this most holy day in the life of the Church, this most significant day in the history of our world. Without question, Christmas is the single-most important event that has ever happened. God became one of us. Jesus took on our human flesh. In so doing, He made it clear that our lives are of eternal value to Him.

As a result, people throughout the world are remembering and celebrating the birth of Christ. There is more activity on this one day, tied to the work and actions of God, in Christ, than any other day in the entire year.

Yet in spite of the many celebrations taking place, and the things we do to remember the birth of Jesus, today is a day centered not in the activities of our lives and the things we do to remember Him, but in the actions He took and the things He did in remembering us.

The passage for today comes at the close of the ministry of John the Baptist. John was the forerunner of Jesus. His calling was to prepare the way for Christ. He baptized. He taught. He called people to repent of their sin. Ultimately, his ministry was to lead people to Jesus.

As a result, his ministry came to a close as the ministry of Jesus began. From that moment on, the spotlight was on Jesus. And from that moment on, the entire biblical witness, as it had been throughout all of salvation history, was centered and focused in Christ.

John states clearly the essential difference between his own ministry and that of Jesus. “The one who is from the earth” (speaking of himself) “belongs to the earth and speaks as one from the earth”; “The one who comes from heaven” (speaking of Christ) “is above all, For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God (and) the Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands.”

In other words, this world belongs to God. God has been in control from the beginning of time. And from the beginning of time, God had planned and purposed that He would save the world in Jesus.

And so, He did, by sending His Son to become one of us. When the Christ-child was born in Bethlehem, God sent a clear and consistent message that our lives matter to God. Not for the moment. Not for a given and limited time. But for eternity.

Everything in your life matters to God. Everything in your life is known by God. All of your mistakes and misdeeds. Everything in your life that would have separated you from Him. God knows it all. He knows everything you have done. And, yet, He still loves and cares for you. And He always will.

Much of our world does not know or understand the significance of this day. Many people in our world are unaware of what this day is all about. Let it not be so with you. God came into this world for you. He has loved you from the beginning of time, from before the time when you were even born, and He always will.

May God bless you on this most holy day, and may the blessings of God, revealed to us most clearly in the person of Jesus, continue to give you strength and encouragement to live for Him.

**Prayer:** Father, we thank You for this day and for the saving work You accomplished for us in Jesus. Help us to trust in Him, not only on this day when we celebrate His birth, but each day until You call us home eternally to live with You. In His name we pray. Amen.





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