THE LIGHT SHINES IN THE DARKNESS

Advent 2014

Devotions by members of
First English Lutheran Church
Appleton, WI
December 23  

NO MORE SILENCE

“My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” (v. 46)

I spent a year volunteering in a church in the United Kingdom. Much of my congregation and community were immigrants from West Africa. Most of my church was extremely outspoken about their faith and devotion to God. One elder of the church, Chika, would often talk about his “mighty and glorious Savior” in everyday conversation. At first, I was surprised and almost uncomfortable. Why can’t we all be like the good Midwesterners I’m used to and not talk about religion or politics?

As the year went on, I began to realize how powerful and needed this recognition was. Chika was so completely devoted and grateful for Jesus’ sacrifice that he couldn’t keep silent. This is how I picture Mary in this verse from Luke’s gospel: she is rejoicing and glorifying God wholeheartedly. I love her beautifully chosen words. How often do we speak of God in this way—unabashedly and joyously?

Our Lord and Savior has saved us by grace. This grace is a gift (that we don’t do anything to earn) that makes all things new. God’s grace is from a place of such unconditional love and care that we cannot fully grasp it. It’s so against the systems of today’s world that it’s almost preposterous. So much so, we often struggle to accept it. We don’t have to do ANYTHING to receive it? This all-encompassing gift can only be experienced in relationship with God. This is what we should rejoice in. This is what we should glorify. This is what we should not be able to keep silent about.

Dear mighty and glorious Savior, we praise and thank you for your love. Help us to accept and understand the magnitude of your gift of grace. Amen.

Kari Swanson

November 30  

WATCH! GOD IS COMING!

“What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’” (v.37)

Soon it will be Christmas and once again we will be celebrating the birth of Christ. The Word (the revelation of God) became flesh and dwelt among us, “full of grace and truth.” Yes, God came and even today he continues to come into our lives.

He comes at the dawning of every new day when light begins to shine in the darkness.

He comes in a bowl of cereal which is a fulfillment of His promise to “satisfy the desire of every living thing in due season.”

He comes in a word of encouragement spoken at the right time. He comes in the helping hand of a friend. He comes in the greeting of a loved one who loves us for being who we are.

He comes in our daily news. (In the midst of all the tensions in our world, we soon realize our need for God’s intervention. Pray for it!)

He comes in His Word: a Bible study, a verse, a sermon, a prayer, a meditation, a thought, an inspiration.

He comes in the midst of a worship service with crying babies and coughing seniors (a gathering of believers where we support one another in our response to God’s love for us and for all people).

He comes in a piece of bread, a sip of wine, “a foretaste of the feast to come.”

He will come again and make all things new. He will live with us and we with Him in newness of life.

Dear God, come! And make us ever aware of your presence. Amen.

Pastor Dick Schroeder
ENAMORED BY GOD’S PRESENCE

“The LORD brought Abram outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ Then the LORD said to Abram, ‘So shall your descendants be.’ And Abram believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.” (v. 5-6)

There’s a Greek word for the moments in our lives that are special or set apart—kairos—and, without a doubt, one of those kairos moments was going camping in the summer with my dad and younger brother. There was always plenty of opportunity for biking, exploring hiking trails, and my favorite, swimming (that is, if the algae hadn’t overtaken the water). After a dinner over the campfire and indulging in more s’mores than I care to admit, we would always end the night stargazing. I can vividly remember feeling so overwhelmed by the number of stars in the sky. As it came time to get ready for bed, I can distinctly remember how long it took for my neck to lose its stiffness, and how much of a struggle it was to fall asleep because my mind was so busy trying to count all those stars that painted the night sky.

A clear night sky is one of many moments in which I feel God’s presence. It’s overwhelming and beautiful, and I can only imagine the night sky of my youth being but a fraction of the beauty of the night sky that the LORD shows to Abram. It’s in this moment that Abram fully trusts what God is all about—he trusts God’s promise and he takes God’s word as sufficient, powerful, and real. What are the kairos moments in your life? In what ways do they give you life? How might God be calling you to see the beauty of his creation in a new way?

God of wonders beyond our galaxy, thank you for all of the moments in our lives that show your love and reveal your presence. Be near to us as we draw closer to the coming of your Son into our world and, just as you empowered Abram to trust in your presence, so too empower us to be continually reckoned by your righteousness in thought, word, and deed. Amen.

Pastor Bryan Schmidt

SING JOYFULLY!

“In a loud voice Elizabeth exclaimed to Mary: ‘Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear.’” (v. 42)

Mary traveled long and far, on foot – “great with child” as we are told. Elizabeth was also expecting a baby (John) at a very old age. The custom in those days, which continues to the present time, is a special greeting when a long time elapses between visits with relatives. Upon hearing Mary’s greeting, the baby Elizabeth was carrying “leapt” in her womb.

Music is central to our celebration of Jesus’ birth. Our Advent hymns of patient waiting and preparation become joyful, celebratory sounds as we welcome anew our baby Jesus. Long ago, at the time of the above visit, Elizabeth said to Mary, loudly, “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear!” We can be fairly certain that as Elizabeth said those words, she had no idea they were to be carried forth for centuries and sung at many and varied occasions. Her words are the “Ave Maria!”

As Elizabeth sang out with confidence her blessing upon baby Jesus, may we pause during these last busy days of Advent and prepare our hearts to sing joyfully, enthusiastically, triumphantly that our blessed Savior has been born.

God of Advent and anticipation, we pray that you would give us cause to pause at this seemingly frenetic time to ponder the words we sing as we welcome Jesus. Amen.

Su Marotz
DON'T DOUBT ME

“For nothing will be impossible with God.”  (v. 37)

The title is a paraphrase of this verse, meaning that God might say, "Don't you humans doubt me." Another, more literal translation of this verse is, "No word from God will ever fail."

An angel spoke these words to Mary as she was told that she had been chosen by God to give birth to a baby who would become a ruler of a kingdom that would never end. Although Mary was not a doubter, she surely could have, if just briefly, thought, "What folly! Certainly this can't be true." After all, she was merely a poor peasant girl. We have the benefit of hindsight and the power of the Holy Spirit to help us believe that the Son of God was born to that peasant girl and that baby Jesus, born so long ago, lived a sin-free life and died a brutal death. Our faith tells us that Jesus rose from the dead and currently reigns over his kingdom. Indeed, the unfailing Word of God was spoken through an angel.

How many times do we have the opportunity to get a word, a nudge, a whisper from God? Are we ever still enough to give the Holy Spirit, that small, still voice within us, an opportunity to be heard? And how many times do we doubt? We doubt that we can hear God; we doubt that the voice we hear is God; we doubt that what we hear God saying is truth for us. At a recent FELC meeting begun with triad prayer, God brought forth two words within my quietness: calm and sight. As I began to share those words, I suddenly was able to connect them to a particularly upsetting situation that had happened that day and those same words were particularly appropriate as I reflected about an uncomfortable conversation I knew I was soon to have.

The words of scripture are true and no word from God will ever fail. As a faithful people, it is Jesus' delight to dwell within us, through the Holy Spirit. Find time this Advent season to spend with the one who makes all things possible and in whom we find that "no word from God will ever fail."

In our openness and our quietness, Jesus, speak your Word to us. Amen.

Cheri Dworak

A SAVING PURPOSE

"There is no Holy One like the LORD, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed."  (v. 2-3)

These words are from the Song of Hannah—a song of thanksgiving after God answers Hannah's prayer for a son. However, in return for the gift of her son Samuel, Hannah promised to bring him back to serve in the temple after he was weaned. The author is careful to let us know that this beautiful song comes after Hannah has left her only son at the temple. It surprises me that she doesn't speak of heartbreak; she doesn't ask us to sympathize; she doesn't even speak of her son at all. However, she earns the right to remind us that actions—especially those that come with a price—carry more weight than arrogant words.

For someone who is called to speak about God quite often, this reminder can be terrifying. How often are my words spoken simply to impress others with my own thoughts about God or my own agenda and desires? Do those words say anything about the Holy One, the Lord our Rock? Or are they simply the "Wah-wah-wah" spoken by every adult in every Charlie Brown TV special?

Our ability to speak at all comes as we remember another Son set apart for a purpose—a saving purpose that surely came with a price. May his sacrifice redeem our words and call each of us to action on behalf of the world He loves.

Dear Lord, help our actions to be prayers of love and praise to you this holiday season. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Pastor Mary Bauer
December 3

SEEING IT NOW

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of the sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.” (v. 18)

When I read scripture, I depict what I’m reading into scenes similar to those I’ve watched in The Ten Commandments, The Bible TV series I watched on Netflix, or other movies that do their best to give us images and scenes of what it was like to live in that time. While reading Luke 4:18, I envision the poor in raggedy clothes with blistered feet and the captives tied up in rope and forced to work. I see a bearded Jesus in his white robe heal a man from his physical blindness and lift up another man, oppressed and beaten near death.

I think it’s great to use imagery as I read, but I think it can be too easy to read this scripture and not even think about how this healing would look like in our world today. It’s simple to keep these types of “vintage visions” within a story in a book, rather than interpreting and recognizing this happening now. Jesus is still reaching the poor, delivering the captives, healing the blind, and freeing the oppressed.

After acknowledging my lack of modernized imagery, the things I envision are Jesus counseling a marriage poor in spirit, relieving a student from the anguish of mental illness, bringing light to those blinded by ignorance, and empowering women for equality in the workplace. Here, as we read what Jesus says in his first sermon, I encourage you to read it and envision the different possibilities of what his words mean to you in the here and now.

Dear God, thank you for sending Jesus to preach to the poor, release the captives, heal the blind, and free the oppressed. Help us to serve those suffering the way Jesus did with love and compassion. Amen.

Heidi Schreiner

December 20

MY WORDS WILL BE FULFILLED IN THEIR TIME

“But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer is heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.’” (v. 13)

A friend invited me to join the Early Risers Bible Study this fall. It’s the first time I’ve attended a weekly bible study as an adult. I find myself looking forward to the time each week although getting out of bed at 4:30 in the morning is a bit daunting. We are using a study of Thessalonians by Beth Moore. One sentence in the first lesson really struck me— “God’s timing is impeccable”. It is a daily struggle to trust God’s timing. Oftentimes, it is only through the benefit of hindsight that I have faith in His plan for me.

God’s timing is impeccable. He made sure a doctor experienced in twin-to-twin transfusion, the condition our daughters were born with, was on duty when I went into early labor. God’s timing is impeccable. He made sure my sister, a nurse, was in town visiting when they were born. She helped us navigate a critical and complicated health crisis. God’s timing is impeccable. He made sure we found a wonderful child care provider for our daughters through a conversation with another friend from church.

Although Zechariah remained a faithful servant, he questioned God’s timing. How many years had he prayed for a child? It seemed impossible that God would bless Elizabeth and Zechariah with a son at their age. And yet, God’s words were fulfilled in their time. God’s timing does not mean that things will work out when and how we want, especially when our free will gets in the way. It is a work of faith to listen for God’s call and trust His timing—day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute.

Lord, provide me the faith to trust your timing. Give me the strength to wait patiently as your plan for me unfolds. Help me hear and heed your call for my life. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Julie Newhouse
December 19

ADVENT LIGHT AND HOPE

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government
will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (v. 6)

This has always been one of my favorite Old Testament passages.
It begins with, “The people walking in darkness have seen a great
light…” Advent has always been a season of light in preparation of
Christ’s birth as the days get shorter and the nights get longer. Did
these people have any idea or understanding of what this “light”
would become? Do we today? Do we embrace this light and let it
live within us?

These Old Testament people lived in uncertain times. Whether
famines or plagues, false prophets or mythical gods, corrupt leaders
or hypocritical priests—these truly were confusing times. It’s no
wonder that hope was in short supply! Has anything changed in
2,000 plus years? We may face different adversities, but we still live
in uncertain times. People are starving, suffering, being persecuted,
and dying. Heroes lie, leaders steal, and politicians are corrupt.
One could argue that hope is still in short supply.

One thing that has remained constant the past 20 centuries is the
Light and Hope that Jesus Christ provides. He wants to have a
personal relationship with each one of us. His amazing grace is in
abundant supply and overflows if we just accept Him and let Him
live within us. This Light and Hope are what we truly celebrate next
week! Christ is the same—yesterday, today and tomorrow—a
constant and unwavering force. What greater assurance can we
ask for in these uncertain times? The best part is that it’s totally
FREE. Nothing to return. No incorrect sizes. No credit card bills
arriving in January. No expiration date. Thanks be to God!

This Christmas season, remember the reason for the season. Live
in the moment. Treasure others. Share Jesus with someone. Let
us worship our Savior and King!

All Powerful God, as we celebrate the birth of your Son and glorify
Him as Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace, let us remember those who don’t know Him and
help us work towards helping them to know Him. Amen.

Lance Schmidt

December 4

LOVE FOUND A WAY

“…in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son.” (v. 1)

A story is told of a grandfather who found his grandson
crying at the top of his voice in a playpen. When little
Johnnie saw his grandfather, he reached up his little hands
and said, “Out, Gramp, out.” It was only natural for Gramp
to want to pick up the little guy, but the boy’s mother
stepped up and said, “No, Johnnie, you must stay in your
playpen for awhile.”

The grandfather was at a loss to know what to do. The
child’s tears and chubby hands reached deep into his
heart, but the mother’s discipline could not be taken lightly.
Here was a problem of love versus law, but love found a
way. The grandfather could not take the youngster out of
the playpen, so he crawled in with him.

God did not spare Paul and Silas from suffering, but
instead joined them in the prison. God did not keep three
out of a fiery furnace, but instead climbed into the furnace
with them.

God did not yet pluck us up from troubles and heartaches,
bu instead crawled into a manger. Love found a way for
every situation of our lives.

“...The Son is a reflection of God's glory and the exact
imprint of God's very being.” (v.3)

Jesus, Son of God, Son of Mary, deepen my
understanding of the mystery of your incarnation. Make
my heart a manger for your love. Amen.

Pastor Jeff Tengesdal
December 5

II Peter 3:8-15a

DIRE PREDICTIONS

“The Lord is not being slow to carry out his promises….but he is being patient with you all, wanting nobody to be lost and everybody to be brought to change his ways.” (v. 9)

I find the writings in II Peter to be troublesome…filled with dire predictions and dangerous possibilities. The first generation of Jesus-followers has died and the “Day of the Lord” (i.e., the Final Judgment and destruction of the earth) has not arrived as predicted and expected. Skeptics are asking, “Why not?” Believers are being asked to “toe the line” until the Final Judgment does arrive.

As I read it, the author of II Peter is rather unconvincingly defending the long delay of the Second Coming. However, in his defense he credits the Lord for “wanting nobody to be lost”. I share the author’s belief in God’s desire for “all to be saved” and “nobody to be lost.”

In my opinion, there is one God-creating and God-ordained universe (or multiverses), and we are each a part of it. No one is excluded. Jesus’ love has no borders or boundaries.

God of gods and Lord of lords, thank you for including me in your family of love. Help me…each day…to be one more channel of caring and concern for my brothers and sisters on planet Earth. Amen.

Pastor Nolan Gnewuch

December 18

THE PERFECT PRESENT

“Every good gift and every perfect present comes from heaven. It comes down from God, the creator of the heavenly lights.” (v. 17a)

Christmas continues to be all about presents. In six or seven days, eyes will brighten with anticipation as carefully wrapped presents will be handled, perhaps even torn at the corner in hopes of confirming expectation. Is the coveted Xbox under the tree the good gift and perfect present being referred to in the verse above? When we match the gifts under the tree with the premise that every good gift and every perfect present comes from heaven, this sense of perfection over the gifts we exchange evaporates.

The writer of this epistle clarifies the nature of every good gift and every perfect present as that which comes from God. That which encapsulates perfection is the Word of God. Our days of Advent are intent on preparing us in a manner that will allow us to recognize the source of this good gift offered from above. The gospel reading for Christmas Day reminds us: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” This good gift, this perfect present comes from above and takes the form of one of us. The infant Jesus comes into our world of present time with a promised gift, God’s life-generating Word of Truth.

In our English grammar, ‘has been coming’ marks the present perfect tense. This perfect present from above ‘has been coming’ anew each and every day as well as each and every Christmas; our cherished gift, our perfect present—heaven’s realized Word of Truth.

Word of God, come down on earth,  
Living rain from heav’n descending;  
Touch our hearts and bring to birth,  
Faith, hope and love unending.  
Word almighty, we revere you,  
Word made flesh, we long to hear you. Amen.

Pastor Chris Quello

(Prayer text by James Quinn)
December 17
Isaiah 60:1-5

DARKNESS, BE GONE!

“For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples.” (v. 2)

There is no denying that winter nights can seem unbearably long. Waking up in the dark, going to work in the dark, coming home in the dark—sometimes we can forget there even is a sun. The annual lack of natural light affects different people in different ways; for some the increasing darkness means a chance to break out the cinnamon candles, while others suffer from seasonal affective disorder, or the winter blues.

Isaiah probably experienced longer nights in the winter, too, but in this verse the prophet is more concerned with metaphorical darkness, or sin. Sin does cover the earth and all peoples. As hard as we may try, no one can say he or she has no sin, and therefore no one is free of darkness. We are all under a thick darkness and a million cinnamon candles cannot dispel it.

But the verse continues: “but the Lord will arise upon you and his glory will appear over you.” And in verse 1, we heard that our “light has come.” There is a light that can overcome the darkness! Jesus, the light of the world, is the one who can scatter the dark. He takes all our sin from us and leaves us radiant. And because of his light, we shine too. We show the world what he has done for us and for all. Darkness doesn’t stand a chance.

Lord, in this dark time of year especially, we thank you for sending your son to break through the darkness of our sin. Help us also be a light to others. Amen.

Kirsten Hash

December 6
Malachi 3:1-2

THE BABE JESUS

“Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me.” (v. 1)

Determined…THAT’s the word! Resolved! Thoughts already on a mission. Never mind that we had just progressed from selling our home of thirty-four years, sifting through layers of accumulated goods, packing, unpacking, moving to an apartment, moving again as our new condo was completed, organizing, sweating, grunt work, phone calls and…, and… We were plumb tuckered out. Now, Marlin had one vital detail on his mind.

“Karen, do you realize Advent is right around the corner? Mary, Joseph and the babe Jesus would complete our family and grace our front porch.” How could I argue with him? Not only was he right, his statement was perfect.

We scoured ads, stores, scanned catalogues and the Internet. Led by His Spirit, we found the Nativity scene of just the right size, natural facial expressions, within our budget. The crèche is far more than a decoration for our porch. The spotlight on Mary, Joseph and the babe Jesus signals that the Reeck home welcomes the Christ child and begins in the manger.

Our prayer is that whenever people walk by in the first hours of morning, the quiet hours of twilight, or when darkness overtakes the day, the babe will remind people, even for an instant, the true reason for the season. His Holy Spirit speaks through all times of stress, challenges, and brokenness. Even a glance by a jogger may trigger a surprised response within of unexpected wonder and peace at a moment most needed.

Heavenly Father, this Advent season, may your light in our lives begin with the love in the manger. Amen.

Karen F Reeck
PREPARE THE WAY...

“A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’” (v. 3)

Our family thoroughly enjoys the outdoors. A couple years ago, we endeavored to take our children on their first backcountry camping experience in the Sylvania Wilderness of Upper Michigan. The nightly excitement of hanging the bear bag seemed to mitigate, slightly, the onslaught of mosquitoes we endured!

Early one morning, I snuck out of the tent for a run on some of the surrounding trails. After surveying the map, the route seemed straightforward enough, without significant cause for concern of veering off course. However, at what seemed to be the farthest point from our site, I became horribly lost. Trails weren’t marked, and those that seemed to head in the correct direction were dead ends. I retraced my steps looking to see if I had missed a turn. I ventured farther and farther hoping to happen upon an intersection that never came. It was a hopeless, futile feeling of being lost. A straight path back to camp, prepared by others who came before me, would have been a welcome sight!

Isaiah writes of a voice calling to prepare straight paths for the One to come. This voice ultimately comes from John the Baptist (an outdoorsman himself...eating locusts!), whose ministry of forgiveness through repentance and the waters of baptism would soon be replaced by One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.

How are we to prepare the way this Advent season, making straight paths for our coming Lord? In the wilderness of our daily lives, we too often stray on the deceiving, unmarked trails of sin. What solace rests in the comfort of the coming Messiah. May we prepare the way for straight paths through faith, love, and service in our hearts and minds this season.

Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for the gift of your Son. Grant us the tools and confidence to prepare the way for you to enter our lives anew this Advent season. In the name of our coming Savior, Amen.

Aaron Douglas

THE BETHLEHEM BABE BRINGS LIFE

“We have a man here whose name is Branch.” (v. 12)

Did you know that the Scriptures share almost two hundred names or titles for Christ, the Messiah? Lord, Savior, Rabbi, Prince of Peace, Good Shepherd, and Master are just a few. If you are gathered around the dining room table, can you recall some more?

Zechariah, in our Bible reading for today, adds one more name. He speaks of the one whose name is Branch, as he tells us of the One who comes to meet each of us in this Advent season. Not only Zechariah, but the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah use the same name for the Messiah. The Hebrew word for “branch” also means “sprout”, something life-giving. What a great name for Jesus, the Life-Giver.

Six centuries later, Jesus used the same idea when he said, “I am the Vine” and “I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly.”

In his day, Zechariah was encouraging the rebuilding of the temple. Saint Paul, centuries later, reminds us that our body is the “temple of God,” that our Lord is taking residence in our lives. Cradle Him in your hearts in this sacred season. He alone brings life in all of its fullness.

Phillips Brooks’ prayerful hymn verse shares that so meaningfully:

O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell; oh, come to us, abide with us, our Lord Immanuel! Amen.

Pastor Bob Herder
OUR JESUS LIVES TODAY

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” (v. 14)

After my father died, I was gifted with my mother’s nativity set that she had made in a ceramics class before I was born. I was thrilled to receive this treasure (and the envy of my other eight siblings)! The statues are about 6 to 8 inches tall and fired in ivory and green. The stable, which my father built, is quite large and holds many of the animals, shepherds, and of course, the Holy Family.

Our childhood living room, my mother’s quiet sanctuary, was where this treasured heirloom rested each Advent season. It lay beneath her Christmas tree, which was beautifully adorned with delicate ornaments, sparkling amongst the white lights. I can still hear the Christmas music from the old Firestone albums playing softly in the background. It’s a memory I will cherish always.

Before bedtime, I would quietly creep in and lie beneath the tree and wait with the animals for Jesus’ arrival. You see, my mother kept the baby Jesus statue behind the stable until Christmas Eve, the night our Savior was born. As a young child, I was certain that the angel above the stable had brought Jesus each year. It was there that my love for Jesus was born, and a strong yearning to know Him started to grow.

I still lie under the twinkling Christmas tree each year, waiting for Jesus to come, again, listening to soft music, in awe, gratitude, and love. But in our home, Jesus, is placed in the center of the nativity scene from the first day of the Advent season. My Jesus lives now. Our Jesus lives today! Thank God He lives today!

On Christmas Eve, a lit candle adorns a birthday cake and we celebrate Christ’s birthday. Happy Birthday, Jesus! As Amy Grant so sweetly sings, “My precious Savior is more than an heirloom to me.”

Lord, while we await your arrival in Bethlehem, remind us that you live today and forever. Amen.

Polly Heitpas

THE GENTLE LEADER

“He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.” (v. 11)

Think for a moment about a person who has led you successfully at some point in your life. You trusted this person to see you through to a positive outcome even when times were dark and difficult. Was it a parent, a boss, a doctor, a clergy person? Now listen in your mind for the sound of his or her voice; visualize his or her body language. I would be surprised if many picture a rallying radical, boisterous jokester, or stony-faced authoritarian. I am struck by how often the leaders and guides who have seen me through the most difficult challenges were not noisy, bombastic personalities. They were not “motivational speaker” types, who lectured me enthusiastically—or even chidingly—into a better state. They were not hard, with stiff, inflexible visages and postures, keeping my brokenness at arm’s length, apart and unfeeling.

Isaiah 40: 9-10 triumphantly reminds the reader that a new leader is coming with a “strong hand” to rule and reward. The connotation brings to mind trumpets, bunting, and raised fists. But verse 11 shifts weightlessly to the image of the shepherd caring for the weakest of his flock. This series of verses reminds me of my own life’s leaders: they were caregivers, providing succor, not sentencing. While strong and secure in their values and philosophies, they met me with the gentlest of touches at my most brittle and fragile.

The beautiful irony of waiting for Messiah is that we light candles for him, not launch ships or have parades and that the God we wait for will arrive with “healing in his wings,” not unfeeling detachment.

Mothering God, open my heart to the reminder of Your shepherd sent to gather us all to His bosom. May we walk gently among the broken, emulating Christ-like love in our own worlds and ways. Amen.

Katie Chicquette Adams
December 9

Isaiah 11:1-9

OUR SOON AND COMING KING

“His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.” (v. 3a)

In Advent, we typically celebrate the coming of Christ in three ways. First off, we celebrate the first coming of Christ, the incarnation where the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. Secondly, we celebrate the mystical coming of Christ. That is, we celebrate how Christ has come to each one of us in the mystery of holy baptism and subsequently in some profound experience of metanoia, or repentance, as we grow into a confirmation of our baptismal reality and identity—that we are cleansed of our sins because of the cross, that we are marked with that cross, and that the grace of God has set up camp in our lives. The third and too often overlooked coming is the second coming of Christ. That is the second physical and literal coming of him who is now seated at the right hand of the Father. As we confess in the creed, “He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.” Jesus is our soon and coming King.

In today’s passage, two important realities are described—the messianic figure and his kingdom. But let’s focus on the one prophesied to come. Of this one “from the stump of Jesse” it is said that “His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.” This was certainly true of Jesus who taught his followers not to fear men but God (Luke 12:4–5) and who himself was fearless before men as he laid down his life in reverential obedience to the Father.

Are you remembering that Christ is indeed coming again and that he could come at any hour, or have the cares of this world and the long years of this age burned up the oil in your lamp? Do we fear other people or do we fear God? Interestingly, the fear of God frees us from the fear of man.

Jesus, our soon and coming King, let your delight become my delight as I trust in you that I may fear and love the Lord God with a burning passion as I seek the fulfillment of your coming kingdom. Amen.

Spencer Wentland

December 14

John 1:6-8, 19-28

WITNESS TO THE LIGHT

“He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.” (v. 7)

John the Baptist was sent by God to testify to the light and point the way to Jesus. When priests and Levites asked John who he was, John emphasized that he had come to prepare the way for the Lord. His work was to reflect the way to Jesus. John’s reply, “I am not,” stands in contrast to Jesus’ words, “I am the light of the world,” and “I am the resurrection and the life.”

Since childhood, the image of Jesus as the light of the world helped me believe that Jesus is the Messiah. In worship services as a child, I remember squinting my eyes to see the altar candles reflect a halo of light, and I always loved to sing “This Little Light of Mine.” These reflections of the Christ’s glory and light have strengthened my faith.

May the image of Christ as the light of the world continue to draw all to faith in Jesus, the Messiah. As we watch and wait this Advent season, prepare our hearts, our lives, and our words to reflect the story of God’s love to our neighbors, friends, family, and anyone we meet.

Dear Lord, may the Holy Spirit direct our words and lives so they reflect that you are the light of the world. May all come to believe in your saving power. In your name we pray, Amen.

Anita Damon
December 13

John 1:1-5

FROM THE BEGINNING

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (v. 1)

While the other three gospels focus on the miracles and ministry of Jesus, John’s gospel focuses more on whom this “Jesus” was. In this passage, John lets the people know that it is written for Jews and Gentiles alike, because “the Word” or “Logos” held very special meaning to both groups.

"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever.” (Isaiah 40:8) "As for God, His way is perfect; the word of the Lord is proven." (Psalm 18:30). Time and again, the prophets would state the authority of their message by saying, "Hear now the word of the Lord," (e.g., Jeremiah 42:15). For the Jew, the word had identity and power.

But for the non-Jew, or Gentile, the Word also had deep meaning. Nearly 600 years before Christ, a Greek philosophy developed which said that the world was in a constant state of change. And the only thing which kept the world from running completely out of control was the Logos of God. Though the early Greeks did not know the God of the Bible, they were in awe of the Logos which John now identifies as being with God and at the same time being God.

In the very first verse John has brought two groups together. Next we see Jesus being referred to as life and light, there with God the creator from the very beginning.

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Creating and sustaining God, help us to see the light and life of your Son in the people we meet. Not just on Christmas day, but always. Amen.

Derek Jones

December 10

Isaiah 40:1-5

THE POWER OF ANTICIPATION

“Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.” (v. 4)

Have you ever been SO very excited for an upcoming party or other event that you felt like you could just fly apart at the seams with the anticipation of it? Sometimes in such a state, we wonder how the rest of the world can just seem to glide on while we are vibrating with our excitement. Why doesn't everyone just stop what they are doing and share this breath-holding time with you?!

The prophet Isaiah knew such anticipation when he gave us this powerful passage. Can't you just see the valleys and mountains heaving and pitching while the rough land is being leveled? If watching a wild storm can fill us with awe, imagine experiencing such a show of nature as the prophet describes here.

We have lived only in a time after Christ came to Earth. Imagine, if you can, how our ancestors churned and craved the day when God would become flesh. Their anticipation must have known no bounds of Earth!

Father, stir in us again the kind of anticipation that Isaiah described, that we felt as children, and that you have kindled in us before, so that we may see your Light clearly once again! Amen.

JeanMarie Hinds
December 11

Micah 5:2-4

JESUS FEEDS HIS SHEEP

“And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth.” (v. 4)

The pastures of England are dotted with sheep. They forage contentedly—and nonstop, it appears—rarely raising their heads to look about. The grass is green and plentiful, and the shepherd farmer sees to it that the sheep are moved to another area if the pasture becomes overgrazed.

The pastures are divided by dry stone walls with gated openings to allow passage at the wisdom of the farmer. So if the sheep wait on the farmer’s wisdom, all is well.

But sometimes an animal will wander through a chink in the wall in pursuit of green grass on the other side. The farmers, knowing this will happen, mark their sheep. A farmer chooses a color of paint different from his neighbors’ and paints a large circle on the back of each sheep. When one animal wanders away, it’s clear to whom it belongs.

Jesus provides all that we need—we, whose feeding is much more complex than that of sheep. And when we wander away, still it is clear to whom we are; and Jesus seeks to bring us back.

Micah prophesied that the one who is to rule in Israel would come forth out of Bethlehem, “one of the little clans of Judah.” (v.2) That is the Christmas message, certainly. But Jesus, the shepherd and feeder, is for every moment of every day of our lives.

Lord Jesus, you feed and keep us. Help us turn to you for every need—and allow you to bring us back when we stray. In your name we pray, Amen.

Mary Vandenberg

December 12

Isaiah 52:7-10

GOOD NEWS?

“How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’” (v. 7)

In a world panicked by Ebola, bitter about midterm elections, and buried in economic stress, where is the good news? In a typical newscast, how much is about anything good? Isn’t that why CNN stands for Constantly Negative News?

You may have heard that what we focus on expands. We have a CHOICE of whether to be positive or negative, and, with it, a tremendous ability to impact people around us. How often do we simply make eye contact, say hello, and smile at strangers? Do we peel back the layers and truly get to know people, what they care about and what their goals and dreams are? Do we show love with the gift of our time and compassion?

We can choose to complain and focus on the negative. When we do, our health suffers, things tend to get worse, and Satan celebrates. But, when we focus on blessings and good news, possibilities expand, stress is reduced, and life is just more joy-filled and fun. Try it as a family this Advent. Watch your TV less and read your Bible more. Spend time each night talking about gratitude and the positive things from the day. Jesus came to bring peace and life in abundance. We reject those gifts by hanging on to all the negative things the world throws at us. But, the BEST news is that our Lord is there with open arms in the manger, always inviting us back.

Dear Lord, thank you for the amazing gift you gave us in Jesus. Just as He brought light into the darkness, help us be the light our world so desperately needs today. Amen.

Lisa Jermain
**December 11**

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JeanMarie Hinds
December 9

Isaiah 11:1-9

OUR SOON AND COMING KING

“His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.” (v. 3a)

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December 14

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Dear Lord, may the Holy Spirit direct our words and lives so they reflect that you are the light of the world. May all come to believe in your saving power. In your name we pray, Amen.

Anita Damon
**December 15**

**OUR JESUS LIVES TODAY**

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” (v. 14)

After my father died, I was gifted with my mother’s nativity set that she had made in a ceramics class before I was born. I was thrilled to receive this treasure (and the envy of my other eight siblings)! The statues are about 6 to 8 inches tall and fired in ivory and green. The stable, which my father built, is quite large and holds many of the animals, shepherds, and of course, the Holy Family.

Our childhood living room, my mother’s quiet sanctuary, was where this treasured heirloom rested each Advent season. It lay beneath her Christmas tree, which was beautifully adorned with delicate ornaments, sparkling amongst the white lights. I can still hear the Christmas music from the old Firestone albums playing softly in the background. It’s a memory I will cherish always.

Before bedtime, I would quietly creep in and lie beneath the tree and wait with the animals for Jesus’ arrival. You see, my mother kept the baby Jesus statue behind the stable until Christmas Eve, the night our Savior was born. As a young child, I was certain that the angel above the stable had brought Jesus each year. It was there that my love for Jesus was born, and a strong yearning to know Him started to grow.

I still lie under the twinkling Christmas tree each year, waiting for Jesus to come, again, listening to soft music, in awe, gratitude, and love. But in our home, Jesus, is placed in the center of the nativity scene from the first day of the Advent season. My Jesus lives now. Our Jesus lives today! Thank God He lives today!

On Christmas Eve, a lit candle adorns a birthday cake and we celebrate Christ’s birthday. Happy Birthday, Jesus! As Amy Grant so sweetly sings, “My precious Savior is more than an heirloom to me.”

*Lord, while we await your arrival in Bethlehem, remind us that you live today and forever.* Amen.

Polly Heitpas

**December 8**

**THE GENTLE LEADER**

“He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.” (v. 11)

Think for a moment about a person who has led you successfully at some point in your life. You trusted this person to see you through to a positive outcome even when times were dark and difficult. Was it a parent, a boss, a doctor, a clergy person? Now listen in your mind for the sound of his or her voice; visualize his or her body language. I would be surprised if many picture a rallying radical, boisterous jokester, or stony-faced authoritarian. I am struck by how often the leaders and guides who have seen me through the most difficult challenges were not noisy, bombastic personalities. They were not “motivational speaker” types, who lectured me enthusiastically—or even chidingly—into a better state. They were not hard, with stiff, inflexible visages and postures, keeping my brokenness at arm’s length, apart and unfeeling.

Isaiah 40:9-10 triumphantly reminds the reader that a new leader is coming with a “strong hand” to rule and reward. The connotation brings to mind trumpets, bunting, and raised fists. But verse 11 shifts weightlessly to the image of the shepherd caring for the weakest of his flock. This series of verses reminds me of my own life’s leaders: they were caregivers, providing succor, not sentencing. While strong and secure in their values and philosophies, they met me with the gentlest of touches at my most brittle and fragile.

The beautiful irony of waiting for Messiah is that we light candles for him, not launch ships or have parades and that the God we wait for will arrive with “healing in his wings,” not unfeeling detachment.

*Mothering God, open my heart to the reminder of Your shepherd sent to gather us all to His bosom. May we walk gently among the broken, emulating Christ-like love in our own worlds and ways.* Amen.

Katie Chicquette Adams
PREPARE THE WAY…

“A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’” (v. 3)

Our family thoroughly enjoys the outdoors. A couple years ago, we endeavored to take our children on their first backcountry camping experience in the Sylvania Wilderness of Upper Michigan. The nightly excitement of hanging the bear bag seemed to mitigate, slightly, the onslaught of mosquitoes we endured!

Early one morning, I snuck out of the tent for a run on some of the surrounding trails. After surveying the map, the route seemed straightforward enough, without significant cause for concern of veering off course. However, at what seemed to be the farthest point from our site, I became horribly lost. Trails weren’t marked, and those that seemed to head in the correct direction were dead ends. I retraced my steps looking to see if I had missed a turn. I ventured farther and farther hoping to happen upon an intersection that never came. It was a hopeless, futile feeling of being lost. A straight path back to camp, prepared by others who came before me, would have been a welcome sight!

Isaiah writes of a voice calling to prepare straight paths for the One to come. This voice ultimately comes from John the Baptist (an outdoorsman himself...eating locusts!), whose ministry of forgiveness through repentance and the waters of baptism would soon be replaced by One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.

How are we to prepare the way this Advent season, making straight paths for our coming Lord? In the wilderness of our daily lives, we too often stray on the deceiving, unmarked trails of sin. What solace rests in the comfort of the coming Messiah. May we prepare the way for straight paths through faith, love, and service in our hearts and minds this season.

Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for the gift of your Son. Grant us the tools and confidence to prepare the way for you to enter our lives anew this Advent season. In the name of our coming Savior, Amen.

Aaron Douglas

THE BETHLEHEM BABE BRINGS LIFE

“We have a man here whose name is Branch.” (v. 12)

Did you know that the Scriptures share almost two hundred names or titles for Christ, the Messiah? Lord, Savior, Rabbi, Prince of Peace, Good Shepherd, and Master are just a few. If you are gathered around the dining room table, can you recall some more?

Zechariah, in our Bible reading for today, adds one more name. He speaks of the one whose name is Branch, as he tells us of the One who comes to meet each of us in this Advent season. Not only Zechariah, but the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah use the same name for the Messiah. The Hebrew word for “branch” also means “sprout”, something life-giving. What a great name for Jesus, the Life-Giver.

Six centuries later, Jesus used the same idea when he said, “I am the Vine” and “I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly.”

In his day, Zechariah was encouraging the rebuilding of the temple. Saint Paul, centuries later, reminds us that our body is the “temple of God,” that our Lord is taking residence in our lives. Cradle Him in your hearts in this sacred season. He alone brings life in all of its fullness.

Phillips Brooks’ prayerful hymn verse shares that so meaningfully:

O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;
oh, come to us, abide with us, our Lord Immanuel!

Amen.

Pastor Bob Herder
December 17 Isaiah 60:1-5

DARKNESS, BE GONE!

“For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples.” (v. 2)

There is no denying that winter nights can seem unbearably long. Waking up in the dark, going to work in the dark, coming home in the dark—sometimes we can forget there even is a sun. The annual lack of natural light affects different people in different ways; for some the increasing darkness means a chance to break out the cinnamon candles, while others suffer from seasonal affective disorder, or the winter blues.

Isaiah probably experienced longer nights in the winter, too, but in this verse the prophet is more concerned with metaphorical darkness, or sin. Sin does cover the earth and all peoples. As hard as we may try, no one can say he or she has no sin, and therefore no one is free of darkness. We are all under a thick darkness and a million cinnamon candles cannot dispel it.

But the verse continues: “but the Lord will arise upon you and his glory will appear over you.” And in verse 1, we heard that our “light has come.” There is a light that can overcome the darkness! Jesus, the light of the world, is the one who can scatter the dark. He takes all our sin from us and leaves us radiant. And because of his light, we shine too. We show the world what he has done for us and for all. Darkness doesn’t stand a chance.

Lord, in this dark time of year especially, we thank you for sending your son to break through the darkness of our sin. Help us also be a light to others. Amen.

Kirsten Hash

December 6 Malachi 3:1-2

THE BABE JESUS

“Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me.” (v. 1)

Determined...THAT’s the word! Resolved! Thoughts already on a mission. Never mind that we had just progressed from selling our home of thirty-four years, sifting through layers of accumulated goods, packing, unpacking, moving to an apartment, moving again as our new condo was completed, organizing, sweating, grunt work, phone calls and..., and... We were plumb tuckered out. Now, Marlin had one vital detail on his mind.

“Karen, do you realize Advent is right around the corner? Mary, Joseph and the babe Jesus would complete our family and grace our front porch.” How could I argue with him? Not only was he right, his statement was perfect.

We scoured ads, stores, scanned catalogues and the Internet. Led by His Spirit, we found the Nativity scene of just the right size, natural facial expressions, within our budget. The crèche is far more than a decoration for our porch. The spotlight on Mary, Joseph and the babe Jesus signals that the Reeck home welcomes the Christ child and begins in the manger.

Our prayer is that whenever people walk by in the first hours of morning, the quiet hours of twilight, or when darkness overtakes the day, the babe will remind people, even for an instant, the true reason for the season. His Holy Spirit speaks through all times of stress, challenges, and brokenness. Even a glance by a jogger may trigger a surprised response within of unexpected wonder and peace at a moment most needed.

Heavenly Father, this Advent season, may your light in our lives begin with the love in the manger. Amen.

Karen F Reeck
December 5

II Peter 3:8-15a

DIRE PREDICTIONS

“The Lord is not being slow to carry out his promises....but he is being patient with you all, wanting nobody to be lost and everybody to be brought to change his ways.” (v. 9)

I find the writings in II Peter to be troublesome...filled with dire predictions and dangerous possibilities. The first generation of Jesus-followers has died and the “Day of the Lord” (i.e., the Final Judgment and destruction of the earth) has not arrived as predicted and expected. Skeptics are asking, “Why not?” Believers are being asked to “toe the line” until the Final Judgment does arrive.

As I read it, the author of II Peter is rather unconvincingly defending the long delay of the Second Coming. However, in his defense he credits the Lord for “wanting nobody to be lost”. I share the author’s belief in God’s desire for “all to be saved” and “nobody to be lost.”

In my opinion, there is one God-creating and God-ordained universe (or multiverses), and we are each a part of it. No one is excluded. Jesus’ love has no borders or boundaries.

God of gods and Lord of lords, thank you for including me in your family of love. Help me...each day...to be one more channel of caring and concern for my brothers and sisters on planet Earth. Amen.

Pastor Nolan Gnewuch

December 18

James 1:17-18

THE PERFECT PRESENT

“Every good gift and every perfect present comes from heaven. It comes down from God, the creator of the heavenly lights.” (v. 17a)

Christmas continues to be all about presents. In six or seven days, eyes will brighten with anticipation as carefully wrapped presents will be handled, perhaps even torn at the corner in hopes of confirming expectation. Is the coveted Xbox under the tree the good gift and perfect present being referred to in the verse above? When we match the gifts under the tree with the premise that every good gift and every perfect present comes from heaven, this sense of perfection over the gifts we exchange evaporates.

The writer of this epistle clarifies the nature of every good gift and every perfect present as that which comes from God. That which encapsulates perfection is the Word of God. Our days of Advent are intent on preparing us in a manner that will allow us to recognize the source of this good gift offered from above. The gospel reading for Christmas Day reminds us: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” This good gift, this perfect present comes from above and takes the form of one of us. The infant Jesus comes into our world of present time with a promised gift, God’s life-generating Word of Truth.

In our English grammar, ‘has been coming’ marks the present perfect tense. This perfect present from above ‘has been coming’ anew each and every day as well as each and every Christmas; our cherished gift, our perfect present—heaven’s realized Word of Truth.

Word of God, come down on earth, Living rain from heav’n descending; Touch our hearts and bring to birth, Faith, hope and love unending. Word almighty, we revere you, Word made flesh, we long to hear you. Amen.

Pastor Chris Quello

(Prayer text by James Quinn)
December 19

**ADVENT LIGHT AND HOPE**

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (v. 6)

This has always been one of my favorite Old Testament passages. It begins with, “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light...” Advent has always been a season of light in preparation of Christ’s birth as the days get shorter and the nights get longer. Did these people have any idea or understanding of what this “light” would become? Do we today? Do we embrace this light and let it live within us?

These Old Testament people lived in uncertain times. Whether famines or plagues, false prophets or mythical gods, corrupt leaders or hypocritical priests—these truly were confusing times. It’s no wonder that hope was in short supply! Has anything changed in 2,000 plus years? We may face different adversities, but we still live in uncertain times. People are starving, suffering, being persecuted, and dying. Heroes lie, leaders steal, and politicians are corrupt. One could argue that hope is still in short supply.

One thing that has remained constant the past 20 centuries is the Light and Hope that Jesus Christ provides. He wants to have a personal relationship with each one of us. His amazing grace is in abundant supply and overflows if we just accept Him and let Him live within us. This Light and Hope are what we truly celebrate next week! Christ is the same—yesterday, today and tomorrow—a constant and unwavering force. What greater assurance can we ask for in these uncertain times? The best part is that it’s totally FREE. Nothing to return. No incorrect sizes. No credit card bills arriving in January. No expiration date. Thanks be to God!

This Christmas season, remember the reason for the season. Live in the moment. Treasure others. Share Jesus with someone. Let us worship our Savior and King!

All Powerful God, as we celebrate the birth of your Son and glorify Him as Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, let us remember those who don’t know Him and help us work towards helping them to know Him. Amen.

Lance Schmidt

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December 4

**LOVE FOUND A WAY**

“...in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son.” (v.1)

A story is told of a grandfather who found his grandson crying at the top of his voice in a playpen. When little Johnnie saw his grandfather, he reached up his little hands and said, “Out, Gramp, out.” It was only natural for Gramp to want to pick up the little guy, but the boy’s mother stepped up and said, “No, Johnnie, you must stay in your playpen for awhile.”

The grandfather was at a loss to know what to do. The child’s tears and chubby hands reached deep into his heart, but the mother’s discipline could not be taken lightly. Here was a problem of love versus law, but love found a way. The grandfather could not take the youngster out of the playpen, so he crawled in with him.

God did not spare Paul and Silas from suffering, but instead joined them in the prison. God did not keep three out of a fiery furnace, but instead climbed into the furnace with them.

God did not yet pluck us up from troubles and heartaches, but instead crawled into a manger. Love found a way for every situation of our lives.

“...Jesus, Son of God, Son of Mary, deepen my understanding of the mystery of your incarnation. Make my heart a manger for your love. Amen.

Pastor Jeff Tengesdal
December 3

**SEEING IT NOW**

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of the sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.” (v. 18)

When I read scripture, I depict what I’m reading into scenes similar to those I’ve watched in The Ten Commandments, The Bible TV series I watched on Netflix, or other movies that do their best to give us images and scenes of what it was like to live in that time. While reading Luke 4:18, I envision the poor in raggedy clothes with blistered feet and the captives tied up in rope and forced to work. I see a bearded Jesus in his white robe heal a man from his physical blindness and lift up another man, oppressed and beaten near death.

I think it’s great to use imagery as I read, but I think it can be too easy to read this scripture and not even think about how this healing would look like in our world today. It’s simple to keep these types of “vintage visions” within a story in a book, rather than interpreting and recognizing this happening now. Jesus is still reaching the poor, delivering the captives, healing the blind, and freeing the oppressed.

After acknowledging my lack of modernized imagery, the things I envision are Jesus counseling a marriage poor in spirit, relieving a student from the anguish of mental illness, bringing light to those blinded by ignorance, and empowering women for equality in the workplace. Here, as we read what Jesus says in his first sermon, I encourage you to read it and envision the different possibilities of what his words mean to you in the here and now.

Dear God, thank you for sending Jesus to preach to the poor, release the captives, heal the blind, and free the oppressed. Help us to serve those suffering the way Jesus did with love and compassion. Amen.

Heidi Schreiner

December 20

**MY WORDS WILL BE FULFILLED IN THEIR TIME**

“But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer is heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.’” (v. 13)

A friend invited me to join the Early Risers Bible Study this fall. It’s the first time I’ve attended a weekly bible study as an adult. I find myself looking forward to the time each week although getting out of bed at 4:30 in the morning is a bit daunting. We are using a study of Thessalonians by Beth Moore. One sentence in the first lesson really struck me— “God’s timing is impeccable”. It is a daily struggle to trust God’s timing. Oftentimes, it is only through the benefit of hindsight that I have faith in His plan for me.

God’s timing is impeccable. He made sure a doctor experienced in twin-to-twin transfusion, the condition our daughters were born with, was on duty when I went into early labor. God’s timing is impeccable. He made sure my sister, a nurse, was in town visiting when they were born. She helped us navigate a critical and complicated health crisis. God’s timing is impeccable. He made sure we found a wonderful child care provider for our daughters through a conversation with another friend from church.

Although Zechariah remained a faithful servant, he questioned God’s timing. How many years had he prayed for a child? It seemed impossible that God would bless Elizabeth and Zechariah with a son at their age. And yet, God’s words were fulfilled in their time. God’s timing does not mean that things will work out when and how we want, especially when our free will gets in the way. It is a work of faith to listen for God’s call and trust His timing—day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute.

Lord, provide me the faith to trust your timing. Give me the strength to wait patiently as your plan for me unfolds. Help me hear and heed your call for my life. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Julie Newhouse
DON'T DOUBT ME

“For nothing will be impossible with God.” (v. 37)

The title is a paraphrase of this verse, meaning that God might say, “Don’t you humans doubt me.” Another, more literal translation of this verse is, “No word from God will ever fail.”

An angel spoke these words to Mary as she was told that she had been chosen by God to give birth to a baby who would become a ruler of a kingdom that would never end. Although Mary was not a doubter, she surely could have, if just briefly, thought, “What folly! Certainly this can’t be true.” After all, she was merely a poor peasant girl. We have the benefit of hindsight and the power of the Holy Spirit to help us believe that the Son of God was born to that peasant girl and that baby Jesus, born so long ago, lived a sin-free life and died a brutal death. Our faith tells us that Jesus rose from the dead and currently reigns over his kingdom. Indeed, the unfailing Word of God was spoken through an angel.

How many times do we have the opportunity to get a word, a nudge, a whisper from God? Are we ever still enough to give the Holy Spirit, that small, still voice within us, an opportunity to be heard? And how many times do we doubt? We doubt that we can hear God; we doubt that the voice we hear is God; we doubt that what we hear God saying is truth for us. At a recent FELC meeting begun with triad prayer, God brought forth two words within my quietness: calm and sight. As I began to share those words, I suddenly was able to connect them to a particularly upsetting situation that had happened that day and those same words were particularly appropriate as I reflected about an uncomfortable conversation I knew I was soon to have.

The words of scripture are true and no word from God will ever fail. As a faithful people, it is Jesus’ delight to dwell within us, through the Holy Spirit. Find time this Advent season to spend with the one who makes all things possible and in whom we find that “no word from God will ever fail.”

In our openness and our quietness, Jesus, speak your Word to us. Amen.

Cheri Dworak

A SAVING PURPOSE

“There is no Holy One like the LORD, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed.” (v. 2-3)

These words are from the Song of Hannah—a song of thanksgiving after God answers Hannah’s prayer for a son. However, in return for the gift of her son Samuel, Hannah promised to bring him back to serve in the temple after he was weaned. The author is careful to let us know that this beautiful song comes after Hannah has left her only son at the temple. It surprises me that she doesn’t speak of heartbreak; she doesn’t ask us to sympathize; she doesn’t even speak of her son at all. However, she earns the right to remind us that actions – especially those that come with a price – carry more weight than arrogant words.

For someone who is called to speak about God quite often, this reminder can be terrifying. How often are my words spoken simply to impress others with my own thoughts about God or my own agenda and desires? Do those words say anything about the Holy One, the Lord our Rock? Or are they simply the “Wah-wah-wah” spoken by every adult in every Charlie Brown TV special?

Our ability to speak at all comes as we remember another Son set apart for a purpose—a saving purpose that surely came with a price. May his sacrifice redeem our words and call each of us to action on behalf of the world He loves.

Dear Lord, help our actions to be prayers of love and praise to you this holiday season. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Pastor Mary Bauer
ENAMORED BY GOD’S PRESENCE

“The LORD brought Abram outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ Then the LORD said to Abram, ‘So shall your descendants be.’ And Abram believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.” (v. 5-6)

There’s a Greek word for the moments in our lives that are special or set apart—kairos—and, without a doubt, one of those kairos moments was going camping in the summer with my dad and younger brother. There was always plenty of opportunity for biking, exploring hiking trails, and my favorite, swimming (that is, if the algae hadn’t overtaken the water). After a dinner over the campfire and indulging in more s’mores than I care to admit, we would always end the night stargazing. I can vividly remember feeling so overwhelmed by the number of stars in the sky. As it came time to get ready for bed, I can distinctly remember how long it took for my neck to lose its stiffness, and how much of a struggle it was to fall asleep because my mind was so busy trying to count all those stars that painted the night sky.

A clear night sky is one of many moments in which I feel God’s presence. It’s overwhelming and beautiful, and I can only imagine the night sky of my youth being but a fraction of the beauty of the night sky that the LORD shows to Abram. It’s in this moment that Abram fully trusts what God is all about—he trusts God’s promise and he takes God’s word as sufficient, powerful, and real. What are the kairos moments in your life? In what ways do they give you life? How might God be calling you to see the beauty of his creation in a new way?

God of wonders beyond our galaxy, thank you for all of the moments in our lives that show your love and reveal your presence. Be near to us as we draw closer to the coming of your Son into our world and, just as you empowered Abram to trust in your presence, so too empower us to be continually reckoned by your righteousness in thought, word, and deed. Amen.

Pastor Bryan Schmidt

SING JOYFULLY!

“In a loud voice Elizabeth exclaimed to Mary: ‘Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear.’” (v. 42)

Mary traveled long and far, on foot – “great with child” as we are told. Elizabeth was also expecting a baby (John) at a very old age. The custom in those days, which continues to the present time, is a special greeting when a long time elapses between visits with relatives. Upon hearing Mary’s greeting, the baby Elizabeth was carrying “leapt” in her womb.

Music is central to our celebration of Jesus’ birth. Our Advent hymns of patient waiting and preparation become joyful, celebratory sounds as we welcome anew our baby Jesus. Long ago, at the time of the above visit, Elizabeth said to Mary, loudly, “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear!” We can be fairly certain that as Elizabeth said those words, she had no idea they were to be carried forth for centuries and sung at many and varied occasions. Her words are the “Ave Maria!”

As Elizabeth sang out with confidence her blessing upon baby Jesus, may we pause during these last busy days of Advent and prepare our hearts to sing joyfully, enthusiastically, triumphantly that our blessed Savior has been born.

God of Advent and anticipation, we pray that you would give us cause to pause at this seemingly frenetic time to ponder the words we sing as we welcome Jesus. Amen.

Su Marotz
December 23

Luke 1:46-55

NO MORE SILENCE

“My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” (v. 46)

I spent a year volunteering in a church in the United Kingdom. Much of my congregation and community were immigrants from West Africa. Most of my church was extremely outspoken about their faith and devotion to God. One elder of the church, Chika, would often talk about his “mighty and glorious Savior” in everyday conversation. At first, I was surprised and almost uncomfortable. Why can’t we all be like the good Midwesterners I’m used to and not talk about religion or politics?

As the year went on, I began to realize how powerful and needed this recognition was. Chika was so completely devoted and grateful for Jesus’ sacrifice that he couldn’t keep silent. This is how I picture Mary in this verse from Luke’s gospel: she is rejoicing and glorifying God wholeheartedly. I love her beautifully chosen words. How often do we speak of God in this way—unabashedly and joyously?

Our Lord and Savior has saved us by grace. This grace is a gift (that we don’t do anything to earn) that makes all things new. God’s grace is from a place of such unconditional love and care that we cannot fully grasp it. It’s so against the systems of today’s world that it’s almost preposterous. So much so, we often struggle to accept it. We don’t have to do ANYTHING to receive it? This all-encompassing gift can only be experienced in relationship with God. This is what we should rejoice in. This is what we should glorify. This is what we should not be able to keep silent about.

Dear mighty and glorious Savior, we praise and thank you for your love. Help us to accept and understand the magnitude of your gift of grace. Amen.

Kari Swanson

November 30

Mark 13:32-37

WATCH! GOD IS COMING!

“What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’” (v.37)

Soon it will be Christmas and once again we will be celebrating the birth of Christ. The Word (the revelation of God) became flesh and dwelt among us, “full of grace and truth.” Yes, God came and even today he continues to come into our lives.

He comes at the dawning of every new day when light begins to shine in the darkness.

He comes in a bowl of cereal which is a fulfillment of His promise to “satisfy the desire of every living thing in due season.”

He comes in a word of encouragement spoken at the right time. He comes in the helping hand of a friend. He comes in the greeting of a loved one who loves us for being who we are.

He comes in our daily news. (In the midst of all the tensions in our world, we soon realize our need for God’s intervention. Pray for it!)

He comes in His Word: a Bible study, a verse, a sermon, a prayer, a meditation, a thought, an inspiration.

He comes in the midst of a worship service with crying babies and coughing seniors (a gathering of believers where we support one another in our response to God’s love for us and for all people).

He comes in a piece of bread, a sip of wine, “a foretaste of the feast to come.”

He will come again and make all things new. He will live with us and we with Him in newness of life.

Dear God, come! And make us ever aware of your presence. Amen.

Pastor Dick Schroeder
"Unto you is born this day....a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."
(v. 11)

What a remarkable, great, and joyful event! Why? Jesus came this day to die your and my death, so that we will be assured of God's forgiveness and live with Him forever.

Luke uses the term "today" and "salvation" a lot (see Luke 2:11, 4:21, 19:10, and 23:43). He also is the only gospel writer who tells us the Christmas story as we know it (shepherds, manger) and the only one who tells about the ascension of Jesus. It is as if he wanted to say, “See, Jesus came to end all those centuries of uncertainty between God and His people.” He came to show God in action. Through Him, God says: “Here's what I have been trying to get you to understand all these years—look, listen, see—and believe. I will remove all your transgressions by taking them on myself, and in return will give you my freedom—BECAUSE I LOVE YOU!”

Throughout His ministry, we see Jesus enter into personal relationships with people. He calls the disciples one by one. He heals. He raises the dead. He talks to the man hanging on the cross next to Him. He is concerned about people being hungry, lonely, sick, uncertain, filled with fear and unbelief. He who created us loved us enough to die for each of us. He rose to heaven to await our arrival. He calls you and me into a personal relationship today.

Is it any wonder we are told by Luke that the angel making the announcement was joined by a huge angelic choir who sang God's praises?

Gracious and loving God, I join the angels in praising you today for coming to this earth to show me that you love me and want to walk with me today and forever. Help me live a life so that others who see my joy will want that joy also. Amen.

Rudi Pakendorf