

# Advent 2017



Devotions by Members of  
First English Lutheran Church

## AN ADVENT ADJUSTMENT IN ATTITUDE

*"Then the Son of Man will appear, coming in the clouds with great power and glory" (v.26)*

Are you excited over the prospect of the arrival of another Season of Advent? I must confess that I am not and never really have been. The reasons are many:

- the texts are difficult for preaching;
- the hymns are somewhat haunting and certainly daunting to sing;
- the days are short and the darkness long;
- and this season of Advent often coincides with the first Arctic blasts of winter.

What I need is an Advent adjustment in attitude. When adjusted, I may be able to embrace a more positive stance even with today's difficult text. There is in this opening paragraph a word of promise. What is promised is the light of a new day. The arrival promised involves the coming of the Son of Man. This promise includes angels who will be sent throughout the earth to gather in all those belonging to God.

What the gospel writer declares is nothing short of the coming reign of God. Our season of Advent becomes our time of excitement and anticipation as we hear the promise anew. The bringer of wholeness and life is at hand. What a difference an adjustment in attitude can make or maybe that is not it at all. Maybe this change comes when those having ears to hear are able to await with eagerness the coming reign of God.

COME LORD JESUS, QUICKLY COME.

*Dear God, as You break into our lives anew this Advent time, help us to hear Your Word and sing Your praise as we listen again for the promise of angels gathering believers from east and west, north and south as we await Your reign. Amen.*

Chris Quello

## LAMENT WHEN IT IS DARKEST

*“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence” (v.1)*

There’s nothing like a good lament for getting something off your chest. Isaiah speaks the pain and disappointment of Israelites returning, from exile, to a crumbled Temple, a few vagrants, and a ruined city.

A lament first acknowledges God. “Hello, God. We are Your people. We are the work of Your hand. We look at the past; we remember the ways You’ve always been there for us; there is no God like You.”

Good laments offer candid complaints. “But what have become of Your mighty acts? Creator, You who sparked the big bang and set the stars in motion . . . You who bounce electrons around . . . tear open the heavens NOW and come down. We are a mess. Malnutrition, church shootings, and human trafficking. Threats of nuclear war, polarizing politics, and opioids. Uncertainty, anxiety, and fear. Debt, addiction, and prejudice.”

Next, there is a request for help. “God, You see all of this, don’t You!? Return to us. Open the heavens and shine Your light in our darkness once again. Heal our hurt. Forgive our transgressions. Make Your name known once again to turbulent lands and troubled souls. If we have to wait much longer, Your name will be forgotten.”

Finally, trust in God is reaffirmed. “Yet, You remain our heavenly Father. We are diamonds in the rough. Even so, we are Your people. It’s not the first time Your people have waited. When the darkness was greatest, You opened heaven’s door and the Word became flesh. So, let it be, once again.”

*Jesus our Savior, I scrutinize the darkness, awaiting Your light and trusting it will shine. Amen.*

Pastor Jeff Tengesdal

## ARE YOU LOOKING IN THE RIGHT PLACE?

*"That in every way you were enriched in him with all speech and all knowledge, so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ" (v.5,7)*

I was on my way out the door and realized I didn't have my phone. So I dropped my bag (and proceeded to watch everything fall out). Frustrated, I hurried throughout the house, tearing apart the toothbrush drawer as well as my closet. I left a mess. As I glanced at the clock, I became desperate - maybe you can relate. In a last ditch effort, I checked the refrigerator, but in order to see the shelf completely, I needed to move the eggs. To do so, I had to free up both hands, so, I set my phone down on the table...

That's right, I set my phone down on the table. I literally had it in my hand the entire time.

This scenario is familiar, particularly when I reach a season where my faith becomes thirsty. In desperation, I look relentlessly high and low for something more. I read self-help books and blogs to find guidance. Along the way I find false answers that distract, but don't satisfy. Somewhere in the havoc, I call out to Jesus for a sign. If I don't immediately feel a response, I urgently look elsewhere. I become frantic at times. I'm so caught up searching that I don't consider looking inside of me. But I should, because His birth changed everything.

Because He came, I have the combination of scripture, the Holy Spirit and the spiritual gifts He entrusted to me. 1 Corinthians 1:3-9 confirms it, I am not lacking in any spiritual gift. I have the knowledge. I am enriched by Him who lives within me.

*Lord Jesus, help me to remember that as Your child, I lack no spiritual gift necessary to fulfill Your calling in my life. It's been there the entire time, help me to use it to honor You, to get through this earthly life and to reflect You to the rest of the world. Amen.*

## GOD'S LOVE AND MERCIES CONTINUE BEYOND CHRISTMAS

*"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end" (v.22)*

I always love the excitement of the season of Advent and all the festivities associated with Christmas - baking Christmas cookies, wrapping presents, decorating the Christmas tree, spending time with family and friends, and attending and participating in Christmas concerts, especially First English's Christmas Eve service - but the day after Christmas always comes as a bit of a downer. The anticipation is over, all the presents are opened, the Christmas church services and carols are finished, and the celebration of Jesus' birth is over. Now we're on to Jesus' journey to the cross - not nearly as much fun to anticipate.

This verse from Lamentations reminds me that while the season of Advent may end, God's love and generosity will not. He will be with us, loving us always - January through December. The wonderful story of Christmas can remain in our hearts all year long. We can continue to give gifts of hospitality to friends and family, share kind words with our neighbors, open a door for a stranger whose arms are filled with packages, and exchange a smile with everyone we meet. So while we may be done with giving and receiving physical presents at Christmas, the Lord will continue to shower us with His presence, love and mercies on a daily basis and we can be so grateful for that.

*Heavenly Father, please help us feel Your love in our hearts every day. Help us to see and rejoice in all the wonderful gifts You give us each day, as we in turn share Your lovingkindness with others in thankfulness. Amen.*

Sue Bakken

**TURN, SERVE AND WAIT**

*“They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead - Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath” (v.9-10)*

Turn, serve and wait. Three words of action. It sounds like the start of a tennis match, but can have such deeper, profound relevance in our lives; a trifecta to strive for in our quest for redemption.

**Turning** to God from idols...what a daunting and overwhelming task. I am currently reading *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* with our two older children. One of the children in the story, Peter, is tempted by an enchanted treat from the White Witch called Turkish Delight. He can't get the thought of the next bite out of his mind, and it drives his (selfish, idolatrous?) decisions, endangering those around him. Idols come in all shapes and sizes, and it can be a challenge to remove our blinders to recognize them, often guided by the help of community and the Holy Spirit.

**Serving** the living and true God...a more optimistic proposition. Examples and opportunities of service abound. A Habitat build, serving at the warming shelter, a listening ear to a lonely friend. The challenge is to seek these opportunities and say yes. Children can often be role models in this regard, motivated simply by their desire to help. Even our three year old is quick to offer some love (and a stuffed animal) when someone is feeling down, her quiet method of service.

**Waiting** for His Son from Heaven...each Advent we wait with hope anew. Sometimes waiting can be unbearable - a phone call, the checkout line at the grocery store, or a child to get her shoes on 'all by myself.' The Good News of Advent is that we know the gift that awaits. By waiting in hope as we progress through Advent, we draw closer to that One who comes.

*Coming Jesus, fill us again with the Advent hope and wonder that is You. Guide our hearts and minds as we turn, serve and wait. Amen.*

Aaron Douglas

## NO EXCUSES

*“Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you, declares the Lord” (v.8)*

How many times do we immediately think of an excuse when we're asked to do something? I'm too busy. I don't know enough about it to do it. I'm not religious enough. I'm too young, too old, too not right for the role. Our mind jumps to someone else who we think could do it better. This was the case with Jeremiah. God called him to be a prophet to the nations, and he replied, "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child." He made excuses, but God told him to do it anyway. He also reminded him that He would be with him to help him along the way. What is God calling you to do? What excuses have you made? With God's help, can you overcome them?

So many of the activities I was reluctant to do ended up being ones that enriched my life and increased my faith. Needing to rely on God to guide me through the experience helped me to feel His presence more.

*Gracious Father, help us to remember that You are always with us. Help us to step out of our comfort zones to do what You have called us to do. Amen.*

Sara Van Beek

## PREPARE THE WAY FOR THE LORD

*"A voice of one calling: 'In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God'" (v.3)*

Jesus is coming! He has come, and He will come again! He comes each day into our hearts and lives.

We want to be prepared. We want to be the straight highway where nothing impedes our looking forward to the coming of the Lord. But how do we begin to raise up the low times in our lives, flatten the looming cares and concerns, straighten the crooked ways where we have chosen selfishly and differently from God's will for us?

Verses 1 and 2 call for the prophet to announce comfort to the people of God, to assure us tenderly that our sin has been paid for. And in verse 4 we are assured that "every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain."

We can't on our own prepare the way for the Lord in our hearts. We trust the word of our God, which endures forever, that the source of our comfort and hope is God's presence. We have but to daily ask for - and accept - the intervention of God's Spirit into our thoughts, words, and deeds. And when we depart from the Spirit's direction, as we all do, we can repent and change direction. And know that in our powerful Shepherd God we find everlasting peace and righteousness.

According to verse 5, "And the glory of the Lord will be revealed" - in the *advent* of the Messiah: the first time (although his flesh covered his divinity - "glory" - except when he chose to reveal it) AND in the second, when "all people will see it together."

*Lord Jesus, through Your Spirit, prepare the way in us for the coming of our Lord. Help us to reflect His glory so that others may see. Amen.*

Mary Vandenberg

## GETTING READY

*"Prepare the way for the Lord. Make straight paths for him." (v.3)*

I remember preparing for my firstborn. The hours I spent making everything for his nursery just so. Selecting coordinating fabrics for quilts, window coverings and crib bumpers. Shopping for a baby registry with all the essential items. Cleaning and painting the room that was to become the nursery. Doctor appointments and birthing classes. All excitement and joy.

I used to prepare for Christmas with mixed feelings of anticipatory excitement and anxiety about getting everything done. I would get visions of Pinterest perfection dancing in my head. I'd hurry until I'd feel like there was no "Joy to the World" to be had.

John was preparing the way for the Lord. Calling Jews to repent, or turn from sinful ways to God. Baptizing Jews as they confessed their sins and turned toward a more righteous way of life. Preparing room in their hearts for the ministry of Christ.

So, how am I preparing the way for the Lord? Yes, I have gifts to buy and wrap, food to prepare and some decorating to do, but as I do it, I will try to keep the joy of the preparing for a baby in mind. A baby that met the world not in the glittery perfection of an episode on HGTV, but in the humble surroundings of a stable. A baby wrapped in Joy to the World, then and now and forever.

*Lord, help us prepare our hearts and minds for Jesus the Christ this Advent season and always. Amen.*

Kathy Jo Uslabar

## THE PROMISE OF PEACE

*"I am listening to what the Lord God is saying;  
he promises peace to us, his own people,  
if we do not go back to our foolish ways." (v.8)*

Las Vegas. North Korea. The Iran nuclear accord. Peace? Where? Maybe you are like me and you find it easy to slip into fear instead of hearing the assuring voice of God.

David tried to get the attention of God's people, but they weren't listening. Centuries later, Jesus tried again in John 14:27, "Peace I leave with you; it is my own peace that I GIVE you. I do not give it as the world does. Do not be worried and upset; do not be afraid." Wow. Read that verse again. Are we prepared to receive the gift of peace? Seems easy, right? We love to get gifts ... but this one takes trust, surrender, and faith.

I will never truly understand the depth of God's love. As a parent, the idea of sending a child to suffering and death is something I can't fathom. But, my friends, that is what Christmas is about. We decorate, sing carols, and celebrate. But God knew the only way to bring His people back to Him was to offer His only Son as the ultimate gift of peace and reconciliation. He loves us THAT much. Jesus came to the manger - but His purpose was the cross.

I challenge all of us this Advent to FOCUS on the promise each day. No matter how many times we forget what God has done for us - He is ALWAYS there to offer peace. He is the only place we can find it.

*Lord God, thank You for promising a peace we can't even begin to imagine. Help us stay focused on YOU and be open to receiving the gift of Your promise, so that we can share peace with a world that desperately needs You. Amen.*

Lisa Jermain

## LOOKING FOR THE LIGHT

*“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness - on them light has shined” (v.2)*

This past fall, it has often seemed as though we are walking in a land of deep darkness. First came the natural disasters of hurricanes, floods, and fires. Then came racial and religious conflict resulting in genocide in Myanmar or threats chanted to those of minority races and religions in our own country. Finally, we came face to face with the senseless violence of lone shooters in both Las Vegas and Sutherland Springs, TX. It is not hard to acknowledge that we are a people in need of some light!

In 732 BCE, the kingdom of Israel, and in particular the lands of the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali were conquered by Assyria. Imagine the sense of loss and darkness as you saw your homeland first invaded, then watched as neighbors and family members lost their lives in war, and finally the ruling class was deported and their influence replaced by a puppet government, loyal to Assyria. It is into this world that these words were spoken, that this hope emerged.

And it is into our great darkness that the promise of light comes. Like people who have been told that our loved one will survive an illness if they make it through the night, we long for the first light of dawn. We wait in hope and anticipation that the light that God brought to Israel, and the light that was born in Bethlehem, would shine into all the areas of darkness in our own world.

*Lord Jesus, we look for the light of Your coming. Dispel our darkness, and help us become beacons of Your light in the world. Amen.*

Pastor Mary Bauer

## WHO DO YOU TRUST?

*“Trust in the Lord  
Have faith, do not despair  
Trust in the Lord” (v.14)*

Recently, a number of thoughts and emotions went through my head while holding my two-month-old grandson. One that struck me is the phrase “blind trust.” When I hold my grandson, his safety, comfort and well-being are my responsibility. Even though he may not be aware of it yet, my grandson has complete, blind trust in me while I am holding him.

As children grow older, we teach them how to be safe and how to do things on their own. We are teaching them how to get along in the world. We are also encouraging them to be self-reliant and to not have blind trust in everyone around them (it is a scary world out there!).

The self-reliance that we teach children as they grow up, and which we learned ourselves as we grew up, can train us to rely on our own efforts to solve problems. It gets in the way of the relationship God wants us to have with Him. We are children of God, and have to practice putting our faith in Him through prayer and patience. This bible verse reminds us to have the faith, trust and patience for the Lord to work through us.

*Lord, daily life can lull me into trusting in my own abilities. Help me to remember that my faith and trust belong in You. Amen.*

Gene Shudy

## ENROLLING IN FAITH

*"But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ" (v. 7)*

"What do you consider to be your biggest accomplishment?" the interviewer asked me. I had just dropped out of college that week and was trying to scrounge up a job in order to pay off the student loans that were surely to come pouring through the mail slot. It was at this moment that I felt lost. My mind went blank. How could I possibly come up with my biggest accomplishment when I felt like the biggest failure?

Suddenly the room I was in felt huge and I felt like a speck of dust. The tapping of the interviewer's pen echoed through my brain. Graduating college should have been the biggest accomplishment of my life so far, but now I had thrown that expectation away. What had I done thus far in my life to be deemed my 'biggest accomplishment?'

In today's scripture, Paul is in awe of Christ's righteousness. He comes to the realization that our 'good works' or accomplishments mean nothing and are garbage compared to what God did for us. He gave His only son so that we may have eternal life. There is nothing that we could do that could ever compare to what He did for us. Paul wants to know and understand Jesus' resurrection so much so that he wants to be resurrected and made anew in his faith. He feels that all he has done is rather insignificant in the light of what God has done for us.

I wish in that moment that I would have known this. I wish when the interviewer had asked me that question that I had answered, "My accomplishments don't matter because everything I do won't ever compare to what Christ did for me." I didn't say that, but what a great comeback that could have been. And although that can sound cynical, I find more comfort in that than anything. No matter what we do in our lives - accomplishments, failures, graduating college, or dropping out - in the end nothing will impact our lives in the way that Christ has impacted ours.

*Dear Lord, everything we do is incomparable to what You did for us. Teach us to be humble in our successes and to be filled with gratitude toward Your holy name. Amen.*

**BLESSED BE THE JOURNEY**

*“Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal.” (v.13-14)*

My degree in English took 26 years to complete. Beginning as a youth hoping to find myself in a new life at a small college in Pennsylvania, and finished as a wife, mom of two, at a small college in Wisconsin. I began my journey with uncontrollable excitement and finished with a tempered, wiser version of the same. There were times I took breaks, cursed the amount of expense, energy, and frustration. Many times I, and others, wondered if the pursuit was foolhardy. Yet, there were epic revelations, relationships, and continual challenges that, gently or explosively, shattered and reshaped the parameters of my worldview. It was hard but it was worth it. As my world became bigger, I became smaller and I realized how expansive and beyond my momentary understanding the universe was. Ultimately, it had been more about the journey than the destination of a degree.

My pursuit of faith has similar struggles and awe-inspiring discoveries as I work on my relationship with Christ through prayer, study, and community. Like the slog of a quarter century degree, sometimes it is tough. It challenges me to believe in profound love, reject disapproving voices, stretch my thoughts and heart to embrace the call, and hold tight to God when anger wants me to let go. Sometimes it seems like too much work and I stumble, but Philippians 3:12-16 tugs me back to what I know at my core. Even when I falter, keeping Christ at the center of my life is a journey worth the work. I may not have it all figured out yet but blessed be the journey!

*Dear God, put a fire in my heart to pursue a life in Christ. It is a worthwhile journey. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

Kirsten Owens

## WHEN SIMPLE IS NOT ALWAYS EASY

*“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (v.16-18)*

In the grief-haze of the months following my beloved mother’s death, I was utterly unable to read fiction, unable to muster the will to feel any reader’s empathy for the concerns and trials of fictional characters and their situations. I turned to nonfiction only, and most with some kind of spiritual angle, and I most remember the scaffolding provided by writer Anne Lamott.

I will never forget reading her assertion that in the end, she feels we really only *need* three simple prayers, ones she uses incessantly: *Help; Thanks; and Wow!* On the surface, this seems woefully oversimplified.

Yet reading this verse can leave a Lutheran dismayed: Rejoice *always*? Pray *continually*? How can one be expected to give thanks in *all* circumstances - even those which are distressing? How could I give thanks in the months of my mother’s terminal diagnosis? This exhortation seems simply too hard.

Luckily, God knows we need encouragement not to perfect but to increase: the gratitude we express, the prayers we cast out into the ether. Lamott’s three prayers enable even the most weary Christian to reach out in continual thanks and prayer.

In the final six months of Mom’s life, we were fortunate to have some time to process and prepare. Though it was painful, I do give thanks for that time. And when I now feel overwhelmed by the rising tide of stress, tragedy, and confusion that infuses human life, I am reminded of the Lamott interpretation of this verse: say it as often as you can: *thanks*. Reach out simply - God needs nothing esoteric or fancy: *help*. And when the wonder of miracles too hard to explain envelops us, never withhold the sacred: *wow*.

*God, giver of life and love, hear our prayers, simple or verbose; reach into our hearts and remind us You are near at all times - of sorrow, of surprise, and of joy. Amen.*

## A HUMBLE WITNESS TO CHRIST

*“What do you say about yourself? He said, ‘I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord.’” (v. 22-23)*

I'll never forget the first time I washed the feet of high school students during our last night of our mission trip in 2014. We gathered together in one big uniting circle, all 25 students and 5 chaperones, after 4 days of serving the local neighborhoods of St. Louis. The room was dimly lit and the music was soft in the background. What had once been our dining area had now turned into an atmosphere of sacred reflection.

I was a young youth director, still vulnerable to perceptions and wondering how the youth viewed me. Did they see me as someone founded in faith, someone ethically and morally sound, someone with theological intelligence, a strong follower of Christ? I panned the room full of young yearning and learning Christians and asked God to make me His vessel as I washed the feet and prayed over each individual I worked alongside that week. This night is always one of the most raw, emotional, and authentic experiences I could ever share with my brothers and sisters of Christ.

In today's scripture, John's identity was questioned with weights of pretension. The humility and hope that John exudes is one that I really admire. John knows who he is and who he is not. He is neither too much nor too little. Similar to John, I have strived to exude a deep sense of humility and hope while serving in the position I have as a youth director. I am no Elijah, I am no prophet, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, making straight the way for the Lord. I am a witness to Christ.

*Lord, help us to recognize that we are the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness, the voice that points to the light and the life of the one who both stands among us and the one who is coming. Amen.*

Heidi Schreiner

## ARMOR OF GOD

*Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace" (v. 14-15)*

I am trying to imagine the process of suiting up in full armor before battle. An experience I can call upon in order to relate, remotely, would be the grand, epic bundling of layers involved in preparing to take on the "oh so welcoming" windchill temperatures, blown in by our beloved Wisconsin winter mornings. Making sure to leave no skin exposed to the biting sting of sharp air, I carefully wrap a scarf (or two) around my face and neck. I purposefully slip my big fleece mittens on over my fists, already clenched (along with my teeth) to brace for the whoosh of blasting wind. I lace up my boots and wiggle my toes to get the blood pumping in preparation. Take a breath, and I'm ready as I'll ever be, I guess!

Whatever may be your personal battle today - be it a challenging conversation, a difficult decision, or willing yourself out of a warm bed and through the doorway to a bitter chill - you can build up your armor from the foundation which you certainly have been blessed with: Truth, righteousness, and the gospel of peace. What is the truth you strive to live out? How can you righteously promote the moral justice you believe in? Breathe in the innate peace that comes with faith and salvation, even amid the fear and dread of today's battle. Let love fill you with confidence, strength, and WARMTH.

*God, I am grateful for my armor made strong and sturdy by the presence of love, the resilience of love, and the promise of love through You. Be with me today as I deliver this love to others around me, so that they may feel the same strength and confidence. Amen.*

Megan DesRochers

## MAKE A JOYFUL NOISE

*"Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth;  
sing the glory of his name;  
give to him glorious praise.  
Say to God, 'How awesome are your deeds!  
Because of your great power, your enemies cringe before you.  
All the earth worships you,  
sing praises to your name'" (v. 1-4)*

I am the son of a church choir director. Early in my life, music (especially church music) became a constant companion, as I had heard countless hours of choir and organ music while sitting in the balcony of our family's home church. My mom would say that while taking me for walks in my stroller, she was more likely to hear her young son singing a Lutheran hymn or parts of the Hallelujah Chorus than the classic children's songs (I think I got a lot of strange looks from passers-by).

Music can be transcendent and emotional. In fact, some of history's greatest literary works are not just read, they are sung, as if the spoken word isn't enough to express the depth and emotion of its message. I believe that is what the psalmist is writing about. As we consider the awesome gift of God's grace and His love for us, how can we help but make a joyful noise and sing of His glory?

For many of us, music takes on a special meaning this time of year. In fact, I couldn't image an Advent and Christmas season without music. It seems to have a way of drawing us in and uniting us, regardless of our differences, as Christ came to save us all and we all need His grace. As we celebrate the birth of our Emanuel, a joyful noise seems a fitting response. May God bless you and your family this special time of year.

*Dear Lord, in peace and joy, tumult and strife, let me hear Your sweet hymn that hails a new creation; let my life flow on in endless song that echoes in my soul. How can I keep from singing? Thank You for the gift of music in this special season. Amen.*

Gehrig Williamson

## WAITING FOR THE DAY OF GOD

*“What sort of person ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness?” (v.11b)*

The first sentence from this passage struck me with familiarity: “with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.” As I write this, we just celebrated All Saints Sunday and sang one of the great hymns of the church, *O God, Our Help in Ages Past*: “A thousand ages in your sight are like an evening gone, short as the watch that ends the night before the rising sun. Time, like an ever-rolling stream, bears all our years away; they fly forgotten, as a dream dies at the op’ning day” (st.4-5). As we remembered the dead this week, and can’t help but contemplate our own mortality, I find this passage from 2 Peter resonating with me. His apocalyptic imagery speaks of death and rebirth, and waiting.

Time is a strange thing. Where do we situate ourselves in the vast wilderness landscape of time? Where do we situate ourselves in history? In the biblical canvas of time? And where do we go from here? ‘A thousand ages in *your* sight...,’ and when we contemplate the universe and our place in it, gosh, it can make us feel small.

But I think Peter provides some guidance as to how to deal with this mystery of time, the mystery of our mortality, and what it means as we wait. He points us to the here and now. It is the present in which we cherish, study, and learn from the past so that we may build a future and “a new earth.” So yes, we wait, but we *strive* while we wait “to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish.” (v.14b)

*In Your great mystery, O God, You came to us long ago in the birth of Your Son, come to us daily and each Sunday at the table in communion, and give us the promise and hope of a future home with all the saints in glory. Amen.*

Nathan Birkholz

## ROLE MODELS

*“And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, ‘Let all God’s angels worship him’” (v.6)*

Do you have role models as I do? They can play a huge part in shaping lives. In today’s world fear abides, guns are everywhere, threats of violence scare adults as well as children. Nowhere is safe.

How can the babe in the manger be my first role model? Easy. Begin at the beginning. The manger is the most important beginning of all. In Jesus’ life, His favorite term for Himself as he grew was “Son of Man” which was used more than 70 times in the Gospels. He belongs to the entire world as He was born and raised in the crossroads that touch Africa, Asia and Europe.

Dr. Norman Vincent Peale was once labeled a weak willy-nilly by a high school teacher in Ohio. Through his career he pushed himself angrily beyond his self-doubt. He later told his son, “The way to the human heart is through simplicity.” Fred Rogers, creator of PBS children’s program “Mister Roger’s Neighborhood” influenced countless people including me with his philosophy, “You are Special.” A framed quote in his office from The Little Prince: “What is essential is invisible to the eye” is a favorite. One more role model of mine is Dr. Albert Schweitzer of west central Africa. Known for his “Reverence for Life” philosophy, these principles are ethics for the welfare of animals and the environment. Of the Ten Commandments, he summed them up in one word: LOVE.

Perhaps you think all my role models are chosen because they are pastors and have achievements, honors, awards, and doctorates; but the key word is CHRIST! Each has a strong held belief and has carried the word of God in simple ways through work and play into life. Isn’t THAT what we all should do to find fulfillment, joy, energy, and bountiful promises? Isn’t our final goal to leave a legacy of passion, grounded in Christ’s love, beginning with the babe in the manger?

Looking to role models gives young people ideals to cling to. Everything begins in the head and is treasured in the heart. We all need “grist for the mill,” prayers unceasing, and angels reminding us what we’re really here for.

*Heavenly Father, Your babe in the manger and how He grew... Help me to keep my eyes on Him all ways...always. Amen.*

## GOD INITIATES – WE RESPOND

*“Love the Lord your God ... love your neighbor as yourself” (v.37-39)*

These words, from Matthew 22 that Jesus spoke were so well known by Him that He could repeat them very easily. Every Jewish child learned them early in life. The Jewish faithful repeated them twice daily as a part of their ritual. Check Deuteronomy 6:5, Leviticus 19:18. God told them that these words were so vital that they should *“impress them on our children, talk about them when we sit at home, and when we walk along the road, when we lie down and when we get up.”*

Wow - dear God, are these words that important?

Yes, they are God's standard for our life of faith. But what happens when we fail to keep them as we should?

Well, that's what Advent is all about. In this season, we're getting prepared for history's biggest moment - the birth of Christ.

This Christ, in His death for the sins of the world and our sins, reminds us that there is one more imperative focus than our love for Him, and that is His love for us.

Luther, in his early life, struggled mightily with trying to live up to God's laws until he realized that it was not what he did for God, but what Christ did for him that brought life and hope. We love Him, because He first loved us.

*Gracious God, in these Advent days, lead us by Your Spirit, to cherish God's gift of love in the child of Bethlehem. Amen.*

Pastor Bob Herder

## GO(O)D NEWS

*"Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you" (v.28)*

This is a remarkable moment in the Bible ... and in our relationship with God.

The angel Gabriel is one of God's two principal messengers - his last recorded appearance was to Daniel, some 500 years earlier! Here he appears **twice** to bring life-changing news - to both Zechariah and to Mary. He brings stunning news: after centuries of struggling with His stubborn, self-righteous, arrogant people on earth, God is stepping in to make a fresh start in His relationship with us.

In Genesis we read that God walked in the garden with Adam and Eve (Gen 3:8). Then they chose to turn from Him, and He banished them from the Garden of Eden. Now in Luke's Gospel we learn He chose to undo that - by taking on human form, as a baby; by walking this earth to bring hope, salvation and joy; He modeled how He wants us to have a relationship with Him, with each other and with ourselves. He took all our sins on His shoulders, and in return we get His purity, love and everlasting life. Read Genesis and then this passage: instead of being banished from His presence, He embraces us. He made this a fresh start - this is a reset, a do-over for mankind. And this is a gift! As I said - a remarkable moment!

In the Nicene Creed we pray:

*"We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
The only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God,  
Light from Light,  
True God from true God,  
Begotten, not made,  
Of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made."*

This Christmas let us celebrate not just the birth of a baby. Rather, let's celebrate the arrival of mighty Creator God, who loved each one of us so much that He couldn't stand our sinful state and chose to come down to walk among us and to save you and me from death and sadness.

*Thank You, our heavenly Father, Your great love - my best Christmas gift ever! Amen.*

Rudi Pakendorf

## JESUS CHRIST AND HIS SUPER STAR

*“When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about’” (v.15)*

It's Christmas Eve, I encourage you all to take a moment away from the devotions and pull out your phones or other internet connected device. I want you to Google image search PSR B1509. I know that sounds random, but there is some purpose to this. The image you will find is a combination of space dusts formed after a star exploded that forms a pattern known by a more common term "God's Hand." When going over the Christmas story it's hard to miss what an incredibly important role the stars play in it. After the shepherds saw the angels and had the goal of finding the baby Jesus, they still had to find Bethlehem. Compasses hadn't left China yet so that option was out the window, and hiring a guide would be unthinkable to people as poor as the shepherds were. So what did they do? They followed the stars, God led them to Jesus by shining a bright star over His location so no matter where they looked they could find Him. God moved the heavens just so He could share with the world the gift of His love in the form of Jesus. I am sure there were times along the way where the shepherds thought that they were being misled, and that what they saw and felt wasn't real.

In our lives there are moments where we feel that we are being led astray and that our faith might be misplaced. God always sends signs however, signs that He loves you and has a plan for you. The shepherds saw a star; you might see a person, or read a passage in a book, or see a certain flower that just lets you know that you are loved in every way, shape and form. This love is unconditional as evidenced by God sending His son down to Earth to remind us that we are loved by Him.

*Lord, I know there are times when we may doubt You, when we may scoff at Your name and plans for us because they scare us, but like the shepherds before us, send Your people a sign to guide us, and remind us that we are loved. Amen.*

Alex Miles

## THE HOPE OF CHRISTMAS

*“When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy” (v.4-5)*

I am reminded again this week of God's abundant grace on each one of us. It is by God's grace alone that we have the opportunity to be forgiven of our sins. That there is nothing we can do to earn salvation. God did all the work for us by sending His Son Jesus, born on Christmas morning, predestined to die on the cross to pay for our sins. Jesus is the one that makes us right with the Father.

The crazy thing is that this grace is open to anyone and everyone who repents and believes. It is through God's loving kindness that He gives this grace and mercy to any and all. He pours out overflowing grace and mercy to all people. No matter how sinful, if we only repent of our sins and trust Jesus as our Lord and Savior, salvation is guaranteed.

Today and this week, let's remember how much we have been blessed. We have been blessed by a loving and merciful God, who daily continues to show us grace. We have been blessed that we have a friend in Jesus Christ, who knows what we are going through and loved us enough to die for our sins and daily gives us the opportunity for new life. And we are blessed with the Holy Spirit who daily reminds us of these things and keeps us anchored and faithful to the call to follow Jesus.

*Creating and sustaining God - Remind us today and every day of the gift of Your Son. Born humbly in a barn, walked humbly amongst the needy, and died selflessly on the cross. Making us right with You, and granting us eternal salvation. In Your name, Amen.*

Derek Jones