

ADVENT 2018



Devotions by Members of
First English Lutheran Church

December 2

Luke 21:25-36

BE ALERT

"Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man." (v.36)

I am outside of my home when a car drives up and a well put-together, middle-aged woman gets out. She smiles and asks me if I know what it says in the Bible. She's not thrown off when I respond that I'm a pastor, and doubles down with, "Then you know that we are living in the end times." I counter with Jesus' words that no one knows the hour or the day when Jesus will return and we are not supposed to speculate. She states that we have been given signs to prepare. I escape into the house while asserting sweetly over my shoulder the words of Jesus in this verse from Luke, "We are supposed to be alert at all times."

So what is the difference? How can we be alert to the signs that this world will someday end without either living in fear or making knowledge of the hour and the day central to our faith? We certainly see signs of the end - in the sky, in the wars, in the storms. At the same time we see incredible signs of compassion. Perhaps the difference is our focus. God calls us to participate joyfully in the renewal and healing of life here on earth. This is how we honor God's incredible gift of life and faith. Our gaze always lifts heaven-ward, knowing that our ability to recognize goodness and hope is also a gift from God. We live alert to signs of evil, and actively work for the renewal of our world until the day when we are reunited with our Lord.

Dear Lord, help us to stand up and raise our heads, and to live with joy-filled anticipation that our redemption, our Lord, is drawing near. Amen.

Pastor Mary Bauer

December 3

2 Peter 3:1-18

THY KINGDOM COME

“Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God” (v.11-12a)

I would like to situate today’s text in the theology of the Lord’s Prayer which is readily familiar with us even though its depths of treasure are unbounded. Three lines of the Lord’s Prayer are theologically and poetically parallel: *Hallowed be thy name... thy kingdom come... thy will be done.* The notion of God’s name being hallowed, or in a closer sense of the meaning, God’s name being sanctified has the further meaning that God is sanctified when we obey his commands. This is how we “let our light shine before men so that they would see their Father in heaven” and praise him. Thus it is more naturally seen how the third phrase connects, *thy will be done.*

Obedience and repentance were seen as ways to speed the coming of God’s Kingdom, whatever version of that the various Jewish sects of the time had. Jesus had a particular vision.

The term also began to become a euphemism for martyrdom amongst the Jews of the first century because it was through living lives of obedience to God that they often were met with capital punishment under Roman rule. We can begin to see that Jesus’ own death takes on a whole new nuance in how it both served as a kind of bringing of the kingdom and sanctifying the name of God through his martyrdom. Jesus is a revelation of the tender heart of the Father who suffers long as he waits for the repentance of humankind.

In Advent we await his coming, let us do so *leading lives of holiness.*

Father, begin in my heart, that I may bear fruit in keeping with repentance. Thank you that baptismal grace is the root of my salvation and my good works only the fruit. I long for your appearing, where this order of the world still caught in violence and darkness is renewed by the unquenchable fire of your love. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, through your Son Jesus Christ's name I pray, Amen.

Spencer Jordan Wentland

Source: *The Lord's Prayer: The Essence of Jesus' Model Prayer in the Context of First-century Judaism*, http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/201102/201102_088_LordsPrayer.htm.cfm

December 4

2 Samuel 7:18-29

PRAYER

"...now therefore may it please thee to bless the house of thy servant, that it may continue for ever before thee; for thou, O Lord God, hast spoken, and with thy blessing shall the house of thy servant be blessed forever." (v.29)

There are as many ways to talk to God as there are pebbles by the sea. "I love you Lord." "Praise be to God." "Thank you for Baby Jesus." Prayers of joy, adoration, gratitude; prayers wild with grief and great anguish; discovery and contemplation. Alfred Lord Tennyson said, "More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of."

This passage from 2 Samuel 7 from David came in answer to the prophet Nathan's words, traces of the expectation of the Messiah. It is the promise of continuing the kingship of descendants of David. David's house was continued "forever" before the Lord. Christ himself and all of Israel - every race which makes up his "spiritual body" are part of the "house of David." This model prayer is praise and thanksgiving for God's present grace, his gracious activity in the past and hope for God's promises in the future. David refers to himself in humility as "your servant" ten times.

In this season of Advent, as our hearts and minds are centered on "the coming," let us be strengthened by the knowledge the power of God is with us.

Heavenly Father, thank you for this season of hope. Teach us to listen, knowing prayer is a dialogue and not a monologue. Amen.

Karen F. Reeck

December 5

Psalm 25:1-10

SEEKING DIRECTIONS WHEN LOST

“Show me your ways, O Lord. Teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long.” (v.4-5)

When lost and in need of direction, do you: (a) Ask for help? (b) Consult your phone or map? (c) Find your own way?

My number one would be to consult my phone. I would simply open up my maps app, pick my starting point - usually “your location” - and pick my destination. But, what if you don’t know your destination, or you pick the wrong destination?

In these verses David is in trouble again. He is nervous about the future, because his enemies are on the attack (v.2), and regretful about his past, asking God to forget the sins of his youth (v.7). Like David, we will find ourselves in trouble. Whether they be financial, relational, emotional, or spiritual, these trials are an opportunity for us not only to ask God for directions, but also for God to remind us of the destination. Life can be so confusing. So, how are we going to find the best way, God's way, to live? We must ask God to show us. Our hope is in Him. Our peace is in Him.

Dear Lord guide us and teach us your way. Make your will our destination. Open our hearts to your truth and remind us to seek your path. Amen.

Derek Jones

December 6

Philippians 1:12-18a

CHANGE YOUR PRISONS

"...it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ" (v.13)

In this Advent season... the world around us has abruptly changed... into a life of hurry up and wait, long lines, slow traffic, inconsiderateness... wait a second, am I actually talking about myself? How is it that we subject ourselves to what almost seems like a yearly sentencing to endure busy schedules, more events than we can fit into a calendar, accommodating family and friends as their schedules almost write ours out for us, bills coming due, and a Christmas gift list that keeps getting longer and longer each year? It is in this time, we just have to survive.

In our verse we find Paul imprisoned. But his is a different route that led to his incarceration. A path that was not the status quo, and he paid a steep price for walking his life out in Christ. Yet in this imprisonment, he rejoiced... because he endured this imprisonment for Christ. It caused some to be inspired, others grew their faith... and even the soldiers who had never known Christ were now exposed to different 'imprisonment,' one that fulfills, redeems, heals, and loves.

Consider for yourself what it would be like to choose another 'prison'. Instead of doing the status quo and just trying to survive another holiday season, to take a different journey... one that inspires others with the love, compassion, and the redemptive power of Christ in our lives. Even those around you will be impacted and forever exposed to a Loving God that came to us in Christ... yes they will never be the same because of our 'imprisonment'.

Loving God, in this time that seems to be... me falling into the next day, free me from that life. I ask for Your grace and mercy as I cling to a life that shares Your love in this world, that exposes people to your compassion, and brings a sustaining joy even when we feel 'imprisoned' in our daily lives. Amen.

Rodney McComb

December 7

Philippians 1:18b-26

A GUIDING LIGHT

"... for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance." (v. 19)

While you are sitting down to read this, I would like you to look at something. Don't worry, there won't be a test. Take a few minutes and search the internet for "Georgia Guidestones" and just look at them, and think about what you see. Thank you!

Carved on them, in eight different modern languages along with four ancient languages, are instructions on how to rebuild society after a near-apocalyptic tragedy. Including the preservation of faith, respect of nature, justice for all peoples of all nations, even maintaining a diversity amongst the species.

The strangest part of the stones is that their construction was completely anonymous. However, there are some parts of that story that seem familiar - the guidelines for rebuilding society are framed in a list of ten, similar to the Ten Commandments. Remember when God sent the Holy Spirit on Pentecost and granted the disciples to speak all languages, so all people could hear them. It seems likely to me that the Guidestones could be the work of God. God inspired the designers like He has inspired so many in the past, to create a monument meant to keep humanity together in the worst of times. God wants us to thrive, even after tragedy, His will is that we can heal. God loves us so much, that He sacrificed His Son on the cross so that we could continue to enjoy all of His creation.

Dear God, thank you for caring for us in an amount we can't even fathom. Your guidance is what keeps despair from overwhelming us in hard times. Thank you, and Amen.

Alex Miles

December 8

Luke 9:1-6

OVERPACKED?

"Then he sent them out to preach the Kingdom of God and to heal the sick, after saying to them, 'Take nothing with you for the journey'" (v.2)

Are you someone who overpacks? Takes that extra pair of shoes or outfit just in case? Jesus sends his disciples off with the power to heal and cure (how cool is that?) and tells them to take NOTHING. Let that sink in for a minute.

What does it look like in today's world to REALLY trust God? In a life overflowing with blessings, I'll be honest that sometimes I get caught in independence instead of faith. Some of you know I had jaw surgery in September. Healing has been slow and I developed a complication called dysesthesia. It is nerve damage, which causes abnormal pain responses. I look ok, but inside have been struggling to get back to "me" and the roles I play as mom, wife, health advocate and volunteer. A good friend challenged me this week, asking what God is teaching me. I hadn't thought about it much. I had prayed for healing, asking God to do what I wanted, but I wasn't trusting what His plan in this might be.

I challenge you this Advent to think about where you are overpacked. What do you rely on? Your professional identity? The roles you play? Material overload this time of year? If we let it, Advent can be a beautiful time to get vulnerable and practice trusting our Lord.

Lord, help us give up control and trust you. You love and claim us. Thank you for coming to the manger to know us completely and to carry out God's plan for our benefit. You are ALL we need. Amen.

Lisa Jermain

December 9

Luke 3:1-6

FINDING GOD'S UNCONDITIONAL LOVE DAILY

"And all people will see God's Salvation" (v.6)

In the birth of a baby, God's salvation, His unconditional love, is poured out to ALL people. This is hard for me to completely comprehend. However, as we were all made in God's image, and live in His creation, I feel I can better understand His unconditional love by recognizing the small ways I experience God's love each day.

At this time of Advent I encourage all of us to take time to feel, and truly focus on, God's love throughout the day in the small things. Take time to see, hear, smell, feel, and taste God's love. Feel His love in the hug you receive from a child or grandchild, a friend or relative. Enjoy God's love as you listen to special music during worship, or in a kind word from a stranger. See God's love shared as someone waits just a couple extra seconds to hold the door for you, or as you see a store patron being patient with the parent whose child is having a meltdown. Taste the gift of God's love in your favorite holiday treat- chances are this treat was first shared with you by someone who often shares God's love with you. Smell God's love in the scent of Advent candles and a Christmas tree or wreath.

So much of the preparation for Christmas can seem rushed. During this time of Advent, I hope we are all able to calm our hearts and minds, to enjoy and recognize the simple moments in which God is with us sharing His unconditional love and salvation.

Dear God, each and every day please help us to see your salvation, your unconditional love, and the joy it brings. Amen.

Allison McGinnis

December 10

Romans 8:22-25

OUR INNER MARY

"We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (v.22)

Few things invoke the tension of hopeful waiting like childbirth. The experience is universal--we are all results of it; one need not be a pregnant woman to recognize its profundity. As Mary, exhausted, exhilarated, and yes, hopeful, waits for her child, we wait for Him as well.

We feel heavy, burdened, as Mary must have on the arduous journey to Bethlehem. We feel ourselves joining the chorus of 'groans,' struggling to remake our world, our families, ourselves into what we believe it can be--what God designed it to be.

His birth is the opening door to a new, redemptive theological vision. His death and resurrection props that door open permanently. This season of Advent reminds us of this beginning ritually, annually--and how fortunately. Because we of course identify with Mary, with her confused yet hopeful waiting. We ask ourselves, *can I do this? "This" may include such a spectrum of obstacles: influencing lives through parenting, healthcare provision, teaching; healing a struggling relationship; creating positive change in broken, toxic times.*

But still--like Mary, like every expectant nearing-labor mother, like all who crave a new beginning--we hope. We are reminded that "hope that is seen is no hope at all." The beauty of hope is its uncertain courage.

Jesus, your birth, life, and death give us courage to wait patiently, with hope, even when it seems in such short supply. Let the memory of your willingness to come to Earth into uncertain times flood our hearts and minds, bolstering us to carry on with candles of hope ever lit as we move through all our darkneses. Amen.

Katie Chicquette Adams

December 11

2 Peter 1:2-15

THERE'S NO POWER IN COMPLACENCY

"You must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge... For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ... Therefore I intend to keep on reminding you of these things, though you know them already and are established in the truth that has come to you." (v.5,8,12)

Mindless actions of going through the motions. Excitement tank empty. Creative juices dry. Isolation welcomed. Checklists completed but lacking the most important ingredient: passion. Accepting average with supplemental feelings described by the simple word/sentiment, "meh."

These are all the warning signs of complacency in my life that seep the stench of mediocrity. Clearly my mind is on auto-pilot and my heart monitor results would read: un-inspired. It seems to me that whenever I feel stuck in this place of complacency, God steps in in powerful ways, reminding me of the fruits of the spirit and all they offer to bring purpose, fulfillment, and excitement to life.

We all know of these things, yet oftentimes, it's easy to get caught up in the ways of the world and forget they're a priority. Instead of feeling the numbness of shame, God calls us to remember the importance of supporting our faith through goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, affection, and love. There's no room for complacency in such things. God doesn't call us to a life of mediocrity. Be mindful of the warning signs that keep you from being effective and fruitful in the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Lord, thank you for feeding us reminders with a serving of grace. Help us to be intentional in the ways we use your power given to us through the fruits of the spirit. Amen.

Heidi Schreiner

December 12

Isaiah 35:3-7

TO THE RESCUE

"Tell everyone who is discouraged, be strong and don't be afraid! God is coming to your rescue." (v.4)

"God is coming to your rescue"- what comforting, reassuring words those are! But as you know, we are surrounded by many things that work against us remembering those reassuring words.

I thought of a simple example from work. Our team had just been warned to be careful with spending because our project could go over budget. That very evening I received an email from a large supplier saying they were sorry, there had been an error in their quote, and they would have to increase their quote by \$100,000! This was very discouraging, and would put us over budget. After several unsuccessful attempts to resolve the problem, I asked for help from Tom, the plant manager. Tom is a skillful and tough negotiator. He and I called the supplier. Thanks to Tom, the supplier backed down and agreed to keep working at their original price.

Tom "came to my rescue." If I had remembered earlier that I could ask for Tom's assistance, the problem would not have seemed so discouraging and I would not have lost so much sleep worrying about it.

That simple example reminds me how often I forget to remember the important things.

God's plan is to come to our rescue with the birth of His Son, Jesus Christ. Advent is a time for us to remember and give special thought to what God's plan means for us. When we are discouraged and problems loom large and fearful, remembering God's plan reminds us He will not abandon us. He is coming to our rescue!

God, thank you for your plan for our rescue! Amen.

Gene Shudy

December 13

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

DIVINE RIDDLES

"As it is written, 'He who gathered much had nothing over, and he who gathered little had no lack'." (v.15)

The one who gathers much has nothing left over and the one who gathers little has no lack. WHAT! The reference here is to the manna in the wilderness. The direction was for each person to take only what they needed for the day. The shelf life of the manna was strictly one day. Take too much and it would spoil. Take too little and there would be a new supply in the morning.

Ours is a world filled with participants who choose not to believe the truth of this seeming riddle. Not trusting the divine promise of sufficiency, too many of us spend our lives gathering and building bigger storage bins. The truth of today's riddle is that when the night is over, when life is done; there will strangely be nothing left over. On the other hand those who gather little will also end life with no lack. WHAT!

In a reflection on stewardship, Martin Marty concluded that the good steward would be one whose goods and fortunes would expire at the same time as the steward. Our riddle is hopefully beginning to make some sense to us. When we lay down to sleep there will be nothing left over. It can become the dance of this Advent Season - receiving and giving - taking in and giving back. May the end of life's dance find us approaching the cross with nothing in our hands to bring as quite simply we find ourselves completed in the cross to which we cling.

Let us pray:

*Stir up our wills and let us live in the mysteries of your grace.
Amen.*

Chris Quello

December 14

Isaiah 12:2-6

FINDING COMFORT IN YOUR FAITH

“Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The Lord, the Lord himself, is my strength and my defense; he has become my salvation.” (v.2)

This verse in particular rang true to me because as a young person sometimes you are afraid. There are many things that can make you feel vulnerable whether it be problems with work, school, family or even faith. Sometimes faith can be scary it can be a lot to handle.

However when you take hold of that fear and uncover what it really means you find something much stronger - acceptance. Although we might be fearful at times, we will always know that God is faithful. You have to find the trust in God to really feel comfortable with your faith. This can be difficult as there is so much we don't know, but God does.

As we learn more throughout Advent, stay aware of the ways that God fits into everyday life. Try to find the comfort of the Holy Spirit that is always with you. Because God will always, no matter what, be your strength and salvation. This verse is a promise that you will always find comfort in Christ.

Lord though we might at times be fearful of your love, your love is what will get us through it. Help us learn from your care that we may find comfort in you always, as so many others have. Amen.

Jennifer Witt

December 15

Luke 1:57-79

JOHN THE BAPTIST IS BORN

“Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son... ‘What then will this child become?’ For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.” (v.57,66)

Although not always linked with the Advent season, John the Baptist was a very important person in setting the stage for the arrival and message of our Savior. It could be argued that John the Baptist was the last and greatest prophet to be born. In fact, Christ himself said that there was none greater born of woman than John the Baptist (Luke 7:28).

As we can see from the gospel account of Elizabeth’s unlikely pregnancy and her child’s birth, God’s hand is certainly evidence from the beginning of John the Baptist’s life. An angel had appeared to Zechariah to announce the birth of one who would be great in the sight of the Lord. Despite the age and barrenness of Zechariah’s wife, Elizabeth, a child would be born in order to help bring back many of the Israelites to the Lord God. The miracle of his birth is in the Lord taking away Elizabeth’s barrenness and in the message of the angel to Zechariah the great power and plan of God in bringing about the birth of John, which took place just six months prior to the birth of John’s cousin in a manger.

For centuries, God had prepared the world through the Israelites for mankind’s salvation. John is the last in line of these great men and women who sought to turn hearts back to the Lord. Although God’s people likely had read about a coming Messiah, John the Baptist was a man born under miraculous circumstances during their lifetime who they heard and saw in the flesh who taught about the coming of the Messiah and the need for repentance. During his ministry, John the Baptist baptized many including Christ himself, albeit in a way different than the typical Christian sacrament. His baptism prepared the world for the coming baptism and rebirth that Christ brought.

This Christmas season, I invite you put your confidence again in

the God and Savior who was faithful to Elizabeth and Mary by blessing them with children and also to all of us in the blessings their children brought to our world.

Dear Lord, As we prepare our hearts and our homes for the coming Christmas season and the remembrance of Christ's birth, we remember the voice in the wilderness calling us to "prepare the way of the Lord." Amen.

Gehrig Williamson

December 16

Luke 3:7-18

GOOD NEWS, INDEED

"John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers!'" (v.7a)

John is an amazing character, isn't he? Not what we would expect as we come up to Christmas. What if, riding atop the last float of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade, there was not a jolly old Saint Nick, but a wild-eyed John the Baptist dressed in a glorified burlap sack?

But this is no Macy's extravaganza, even though it has been a parade of sorts. People trekked out to the desert to hear this strange man. He is an astonishing preacher, we have to grant. Not many would gather the sort of crowd he did. And not many would start out the way he did, "You brood of vipers!" Wow. That should get our attention.

The crowd is equally amazing. After this insult, they must know that it is downhill from here, but they stay. "The wrath to come... repentance... trees cut down... winnowing fork... unquenchable fire." What was John trying to do? Scare the people out of their wits? Then there is the remarkable conclusion: "So, he proclaimed the good news to the people." Good news?! Yeh, right!

What do you think? Was John's preaching "good news"? I wonder. Actually, I think it was and is good news, because John, in his unique way, was saying there is hope for us, that we are not stuck with our worst selves. We can change. We can be better... better, perhaps, than we ever thought possible. And I, for one, think that is good news indeed.

Dear Jesus, give us faith that change is possible by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Pastor Jeff Tengesdal

December 17

Hebrews 13:7-17

WHY WOULD TODAY BE ANY DIFFERENT?

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. (v. 8)

The word "Advent" is derived from Latin *adventus* 'arrival,' from *advenire*, *ad-* 'to' + *venire* 'come.' The definition of Advent is the arrival of a notable person, thing, or event. This time of year, Christians prepare for the Celebration of the birth of Christ. Many may see that advent happens only once a year or maybe just once in a lifetime. Do you think that? I did. Little did I realize that there are many advents in history and in daily life. Many people awaited the "Advent of Television" There is an excitement of the advent of hunting season. Everyone experiences advents, the birth of a child, the sacrament of marriage, the beginning of a new school year. What is the one constant in all of this? These are just any other days. These days are really no different than the one before or the one after, or the day you are in. Every day is notable in its own right.

As I continue through life, there are moments that are good, bad and indifferent. During these times, I can say that I felt abandoned by Jesus. The feeling that Jesus puts this test in front of you. These are events and things that question your faith. I questioned mine when our son was diagnosed with an incurable auto-immune disease. I questioned mine when I faced an unexpected career change. I seriously questioned my faith during a car accident which resulted in the other participant making the eternal trip to meet St. Peter. Yes, these are all events that shape a person, change a person and even better a person. Every day you learn to walk with what has been given to you. My daily walk is a new adventure. I walk and grow from past experiences. One thing I know now is that on any given day, Jesus is the same. His love for us is the same. Remember, this is any given day, not just Sunday.

Whether it is the advent of the birth of Christ, or the advent of football season or summer vacation from school, Jesus is with us daily. You may not feel his presence all the time but you do know it is there. Jesus walks with us daily, and we walk with Him not

just on religious holidays, it is a nice feeling to know that the feeling someone is most likely looking over your shoulder is Jesus. Like I said, why should today be any different?

May the hand of the Holy Spirit guide us through our days. As we walk with You, we will better understand that our Faith is certain in an uncertain world. Jesus, keep us on the right path and guide us to better ourselves which will in turn, better our world. Amen.

Dave Owens

December 18

Acts 28:23-31

COULD THE WORLD BE ABOUT TO TURN?

"...and turn, and I would heal them...God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles" (v.27-28)

It is hard for me to understand, but our children have a strong disdain (i.e. embarrassment) for any attempts I make at dancing, especially in public. Similar to singing, I like to believe that the beauty lies in the effort and motivation, rather than the audible or visual outcome. And yet, any attempt I make at some extemporaneous dancing, especially this new craze of 'flossing,' usually ends with my arms pinned to my side and sometimes tackled to the ground.

Closing out the book of Acts, these verses appeal to several of our senses. Initially offered in response to the question "Whom shall I send," God urges Isaiah to tell his people to hear, to see, to understand with one's heart, ultimately leading to the outcome of TURNING to be healed...an impulsive movement of body that comes, ultimately, from the comprehension of God's gift in Jesus.

It brings to mind the Irish folk tune “The Canticle of the Turning” by Rory Cooney. Set to a rhythm that begs for an accompanying dance, the chorus sings:

*My heart shall sing of the day you bring.
Let the fires of your justice burn.
Wipe away all tears,
For the dawn draws near,
And the world is about to turn.*

Again appealing to our various senses, this reference to Mary’s song, the Magnificat, evokes visions of her breaking into joyful dance, hand-in-hand with Elizabeth, once their hearts understand. They turned.

Later this month, we are blessed to read Rudi Pakendorf’s thoughts on the first chapter of John. As we dwell on turning points, verse 14 seems to be an apt representation of the essence of the Gospel:

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” God’s turn to us. What is our response?

The Macarena, YMCA, the Charleston, the Lindy hop, Gangnam style, so many classic dances to choose from, often inviting movement that can’t be subdued. (Unless by unapproving kids that is. So sad). This advent, may our hearts be in a place of understanding such that our only natural movement is a turn toward healing through Christ.

Hearing, seeing and understanding God, guide our ears, eyes and hearts to turn towards you, and maybe even occasionally dance to the joy of your gift in Jesus. Amen.

Aaron Douglas

December 19

Isaiah 11:1-9

O COME, EMMANUEL

"A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." (v.1)

In what is perhaps the quintessential Advent hymn descended to us from the 8th century, *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*, one of the stanzas begins, "O come, O Branch of Jesse...". This hymn has an interesting story behind it. It is derived from the seven 'O Antiphons' used for Vespers on the last seven days of Advent. When looking at the first letters of the second words in each antiphon (each one being a separate name for Christ), they form an acrostic when spelled backwards, *Ero cras*, which means 'I will be tomorrow.' (And the acrostic is only completed on the last day of Advent, Dec. 23.) By reading it backwards, another idea points to a larger paradox of Christianity embodied beautifully in Advent: that God came in the past in the incarnation of Jesus, is present in word and sacrament each Sunday, and comes again in the future in everlasting life. Everything turns over upon itself.

The tree of life figures prominently in this passage. Jesse, as David's father, was the root of the tree that became King David for the Israelites. Christ is our tree of life, and we are grafted onto his branches, entering the kingdom of God through baptism. From Isaiah we hear words that inspired one of the prayers spoken at baptism: 'The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.'

This poem from Isaiah uses incredibly fanciful imagery to describe a future cosmic paradise. Let Christ lead the way that we may share in his divine kingdom.

*O come, O Branch of Jesse, free your own from Satan's tyranny;
from depths of hell your people save, and give them vict'ry o'er
the grave. Amen. (St. 4 from O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, ELW
257)*

Nathan Birkholz

December 20

Jeremiah 31:31-34

THE PROMISE OF FORGIVENESS

"...for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more." (v.34)

If you know me, you know that I work with small children (4 year-olds). Due to the impulsive nature of people this age, they often do unkind things to one another and the "victim" often seeks support from me or another adult in the classroom. While this refereeing can be tiresome, I love working with the kids to help them learn to solve these problems in ways that lead to resolution, understanding, and empathy. A few years ago, I noticed a phrase that seemed to come up over and over when a child who was the "offender" chose to apologize for a problem behavior. The "victim" would say, "That's okay." My mind would scream out, "NO! That's NOT okay."

I began to teach children that instead of saying, "it's okay," they could choose to forgive one another. I encouraged them to say, "I forgive you." It became a powerful tool to build kindness in the classroom community.

After the latest election cycle, I have begun to hear political figures on both sides say, "I'll never forgive them for..." in news stories. How wonderfully blessed we are that our God provides forgiveness for all. And not just forgiveness, but He promises to **forget** our sins. As we prepare to welcome Christ into the world this Christmas, let's remember God's new promise to forgive us through Christ, and let's spread forgiveness throughout our communities.

Holy God, you made a new promise to forgive our sins through Christ. Help us to forgive others and heal relationships as you do. One of the many ways we can spread peace. Amen.

Kathy Jo Uslabar

December 21

Hebrews 10:32-39

ENDURANCE WITH FAITH

“Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings a great reward. For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.” (v.35-36)

As a teenager, I am told to have many character traits in order to live a balanced life. Focus, determination, perseverance, confidence, honesty and many others. I get it... I know that the adult mentors in my life are just trying to prepare me for knowing what it takes to get through a future that is going to have many highs and lows. But, a trait that is important to think about is endurance and how it can be applied to our faith. The infinite ability to trust in God’s boundless love and acceptance gives us the power to manifest all of those other traits, and help us through what life has to throw at us. Without this idea of faith endurance, we may be able to endure struggles and hard times just to get by, but we may wear down mentally and damper our qualities such as compassion, tolerance, acceptance, and in some cases, love. So, just like an athlete trains to keep up their physical endurance so that they can run faster, jump higher, or swim longer, and even help them recover from injury or setbacks it is important for us as Christians to “train” or strengthen the endurance of our faith so that we don’t only use it as an escape from the hard times, but we use in all walks of life to help us grow in God’s love for ourselves and others.

Dear Lord, be the compass that guides us on the journey of our faith. Hold us in your embrace so that together, we may never lose sight of what is at the end of the tunnel. Amen.

RJ Murray

December 22

Philippians 4:4-7

JESUS TRUMPS WORRY

“Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” (v.6)

Depending on which way you look at it, I might be quite qualified, or quite unqualified, to write about this verse. I recently discovered that my worries date all the way back to preschool. I was back at my parents' house a few months ago looking through some keepsake boxes and found a note from my teacher on a parent-teacher conference type form regarding my tendency to worry and act/manipulate out of fear. After I read To Kill a Mockingbird in tenth grade, Atticus Finch's words to his daughter Scout were sometimes a mantra of mine - "It's not time to worry yet."

Paul's words in the above verse are comforting. It is utterly impossible not to worry about anything. We are human, after all, but God does not wish for us to worry. He wants us to communicate with him through prayer for everything we need- to know that in the grand scheme of things, our worry is useless because, through Jesus, we are saved by grace and this trumps all else!

God, no matter where we fall on the spectrum of worry, help us to express our fears and needs to you with thankful hearts as we await the birth of your son, our Savior. Amen.

Elisha Tapplin

December 23

Luke 1:39-55

TRUST. FAITH. COURAGE.

"[Elizabeth exclaimed:] 'Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!'" (v.45)

In verse 38, Mary's visit from the angel Gabriel (who a little more than six months earlier had called on Zechariah with some dumbfounding news) ended with Mary's answering "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."

What trust, faith and courage. She believed. She consented. And each day for the rest of her life she embraced this crazy new reality, as God's servant.

She must have wondered some days. Raising God's Son! She had to feel vulnerable some days. And no doubt she could clearly see God's hand at work some days and just be amazed and grateful.

The callings you and I receive are much less dramatic or sacrificial for the most part. But they can still require trust, faith and courage. For example, I am repeatedly called to let go of stuff - repeatedly, because I try to hang onto it! But when I've sent something on, to bless someone else perhaps, I don't miss it. In fact, I quickly forget I ever had it. It does get easier - as long as I don't pause to imagine I might need the stuff some day - and I'm blessed by the letting go.

Mary didn't hesitate. She bought in on the spot. No thinking it over or foot-dragging. Youthful naivete? Maybe. But God knows what God's doing. And if God calls us, God will show the way, day by day.

What is God calling you to do?

God, you gave young Mary one of the hardest jobs imaginable. Bless each of us with her trust, faith and courage to do the work you've set before us. Amen.

Mary Vandenberg

December 24

Luke 2:1-14

WILL THERE BE ROOM FOR YOU TONIGHT?

“And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” (v.7)

On the wondrous night of Jesus’ birth, we notice that Christmas Eve is a study of contrasts. On one hand, this is a joyous time as we celebrate the birth of our Savior and our hope for the future. On the other hand, Jesus’ birth in the manger occurred without any initial fanfare or welcome on Christmas Eve. In fact, no innkeeper was willing to make room in their inn for a young couple with a baby about to be born, so Jesus was born in a lowly stable.

The Angelus Choir recently sang a song about just this night, “To Bethlehem Two Strangers Came.” This poignant song talks about how Earth had no room for Jesus and his parents on the night he was born, and how even today poor and needy people ask for help and find no open door. We may not know the background of those we encounter, and it may be scary to offer assistance when we don’t know how it will be received, but it is so important to open our hearts to ALL people in need, without distinction, as Jesus does to each of us. We need to remember on Christmas Eve to celebrate the love surrounding Jesus’ birth with all of those around us. Jesus was deeply loved by God and his earthly parents at the time of his birth, and he was born in part to share God’s love with the world. Take some time today to go out of your way to include another person in your festivities - whether it be through a welcoming smile to a church visitor or inviting a lonely acquaintance to join your Christmas dinner. Wouldn’t that be a great gift to Jesus on his birthday? “Let love make space to spare!”

Heavenly Father, as we sing praises of Jesus’ birth tonight, help us to give him the gift of an open heart. Help us to overcome our fears and hesitations to welcome all people who are in need, as You welcome us. Amen.

Sue Bakken

December 25

John 1:1-14

HALLO, NEIGHBOR!

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (v.14)

Eugene Peterson in **The Message** paraphrases this verse, “The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.” This brings to mind the relationship Adam and Eve had with God before they wanted to BE God: in Genesis chapter 3 we read about God wanting to spend time with them “in the cool of the day”... in the neighborhood, as it were.

The apostle John draws a straight line between these two: this same Word that spoke the entire creation into existence, once again dwells among us to make us new creations. Unlike the other gospel stories, this one does not talk about a baby in a crib, angels and shepherds and the Wise Men, and the journey to Bethlehem on that first Christmas morning.

John gets right to the point: the God who by speaking the Word created everything, was angered, saddened and disappointed in our human response. To redeem us to His original plan, He takes on human form, walks on this earth, comes into our neighborhood and shows His love for everyone whom He has created. He shows His ultimate love by taking on all our sins, thus paying the price for us, and then inviting us to join Him- forgiven, unblemished - and His Father in heaven – just as God had originally intended it.

John is less interested in the birth of Jesus, as he is in our birth, our new birth as children of God. So, this is less about Jesus’ birthday, but OUR birthday. The real gift of Christmas is that each of us has a new identity, a new opportunity through God in Christ.

Thank you, God, for loving me so much that you danced when I was born. Jesus, thank you for showing me that deep grace and love - welcome into my neighborhood, and into my heart. Holy Spirit help me accept this gift and help me rejoice every day! Amen.

Rudi Pakendorf

Pastor Mary Bauer



Spencer Wentland



Karen Reeck



Derek Jones



Rodney McComb



Alex Miles



Lisa Jermain



Allison McGinnis



Katie Chicquette Adams



Heidi Schreiner



Gene Shudy



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