



REFLECTIONS

The First Sunday in Advent -
The Second Saturday After Christmas
December 1, 2024 - January 11, 2025



DECEMBER 1 - JANUARY 11

This season's Reflections were written by

*Rev. Joel Shaltanis, pastor of Lord of Life Lutheran Church
in Plano, TX*

Rev. Harrison Goodman, Content Executive for Higher Things

*Rev. Thomas Eggold, pastor of Emmanuel Lutheran Church
in Fort Wayne, IN*

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A Short Form for Daily Reflection

ADAPTED FROM LUTHERAN SERVICE BOOK

Make the sign of the Holy Cross and say:

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

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

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

Read the Daily Lectionary selections.

Read the Reflection for the Day.

Say the Apostles’ Creed.

Pray the Lord’s Prayer.

Pray one of these little prayers:

(In the Morning)

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

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

(In the Evening)

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

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

The First Sunday in Advent

DECEMBER 1, 2024

Today's Reading: Luke 19:28-40

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 7:10-8:8; 1 Peter 3:1-22

"...Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! (Luke 19:38a)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Advent = "The coming or arrival of something or someone that is important or worthy of note." (The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, 5th Edition)

If you were in charge of preparing a celebration for the grand arrival of a VIP, that is, "someone that is important or worthy of note," how would you do it? Would you go for classy or flashy? Would it be tuxedos and gowns with symphonic music or a DJ with heavy thumping bass, flashing lights, and smoke machines? Depending on the celebrity and the occasion, I guess you could make the case for either one. But isn't it interesting that when Jesus, the Son of God, shows up to Jerusalem and makes His grand entrance, it was nothing like either of those things? In fact, it isn't what you would expect at all.

Jesus rode into town on a colt, the foal of a donkey. His disciples spread their cloaks on the ground before Him, and some waved palm branches. Then, some cried out the words of a familiar hymn (Psalm 118:26). This is neither classy nor flashy. This doesn't project power or grandeur. By the world's standards, this is just plain and unimpressive. Yet this in itself says something about Jesus.

Jesus is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He is almighty and one with the Father. He has all power and is worthy of all glory. When He arrived on earth in His first advent, He did not come with power and glory. He came in humility. He came as a servant. When people tried to make Him a king, He refused. He didn't come to rule. He came to love and to give, to heal and redeem. He came to give life to a world overcome with death. He came for all people: the high and the low, the influencers and people everyone is talking about, as well as the ones who think no one knows they exist. Jesus knows and loves us all and came in all humility for us and for our salvation.

Our Lord's coming into Jerusalem is like His advent to the world itself. Christ's poor little parade into Jerusalem sets the tone for the entire story of this great Savior who humbled Himself for our salvation. No, these are not the ways or ideas of men, but it is the way that God has dealt with us in Christ. From a position of all glory and honor, He humbled Himself to be nothing more than a servant so that those faithful servants who humbly trust in Him may one day partake in His glory. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come, that by Your protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Your mighty deliverance; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The First Monday in Advent

DECEMBER 2, 2024

Today's Reading: Jeremiah 33:14-16

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 8:9-9:7; 1 Peter 4:1-1

"Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made... (Jeremiah 33:14)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Every single one of us needs encouragement, especially when things aren't going well. When life is tough, it's easy to fall into despair and anxiety, as though all is lost and there is no hope. Sadly, this is part of the human condition: instead of trusting in God's providence, we worry. That's how things were for God's people in the days of Jeremiah.

The once great nation of Israel was struggling through dark days. The rulers were corrupt, the nation was weak, and the Babylonians were threatening. God's people were on the cusp of catastrophe, and before Jeremiah's life ended, the nation fell, and many were forced into exile. Understandably, some wondered whether the Lord had abandoned them.

Jeremiah's words were spoken to encourage people in dark times. The Lord wanted His people to know that He had not forgotten them. These words not only helped the faithful remnant of Jeremiah's day, but they have continued to encourage the faithful to this very day. What's so encouraging about these words?

Jeremiah's God-given words remind us that God keeps His promises. If God says He will do something, then it is as good as done. The promise Jeremiah wanted the people to recall was God's promise to send a Messiah from the line of David. Jeremiah tells them this "righteous branch" would "execute justice and righteousness in the land," and the result would be salvation and security.

Jeremiah pointed ahead to Christ. Several centuries after this prophecy, God indeed sent His Son, the promised Righteous Branch, the Son of David. Christ executed justice and righteousness by being righteous for us. Jesus kept Himself from all sin and then reconciled sinful mankind to our Heavenly Father by dying for our sins on the cross and rising again in victory over the grave. Today, we can look back and see how God kept His promise and how Jeremiah's words were fulfilled.

In the same way, when life is overwhelming us with frustrations, failures, and loss, we don't have to despair because we know God keeps His promises. We can see that looking back in history, but like the faithful in Jeremiah's day, we can also look ahead to what's to come. Jesus also spoke encouraging promises of what He will do: He will rescue us from death and raise us on the Last Day. He assures us that because He lives, we, too, will live. And even now, Jesus promises He will give rest from burdens and true joy to all who follow Him. So take heart and be of good cheer because when Jesus promises something, it's as good as done! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

The First Tuesday in Advent

DECEMBER 3, 2024

Today's Reading: 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

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

...May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you (1 Thessalonians 3:12)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Advent has been called a season dedicated to waiting. We wait to celebrate the humble birth of Christ at Bethlehem, and we wait to experience Christ's glorious return at the Last Day. With a dual focus on Christ's first coming and His second, we devote this time of the year to waiting. Waiting reminds us that there is nothing we can do to hasten Christ's second coming, just as men did nothing to hasten His first. We can only do what the people of old did before Christ was born at Bethlehem; we can simply wait for Him to arrive.

The Thessalonians had to experience waiting. Paul and Silas started the congregation but were soon forced to leave. (See Acts 17.) The people were without a pastor and had only briefly heard the Gospel of Jesus proclaimed. So, Paul was eager to get back to them and "supply what is lacking in [their] faith," namely, more instruction in the Word.

The Thessalonians were waiting for Paul and Silas to return to their city, and, like all Christians, they were waiting for Jesus to return to His earth. That they might be ready for Christ's return, Saint Paul wrote to them about some specific things they ought to do as they waited.

"... may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all ... so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints." Waiting is not simply sitting back and doing nothing. No, in this case, waiting means we prepare for the coming of the One who loves us by loving others. First, our fellow Christians, but also everyone else. Just as Christ's love extends to all, so too for the Christian. This is preparation for the coming of Jesus, which is to say, we prepare for the coming of the Holy One by being holy.

Notice that St. Paul prays for the Thessalonians not that they will do something in order to be ready but rather that God will do something to them to make them ready. It is God who increases our faith, God who builds us up, God who makes us blameless and holy and ready. Therefore, as we eagerly await His return, we should seek Him where He has promised to come to us in the meantime: in His Word and in His sacraments. There, He is at work forgiving our sins, building us up, and increasing His love in us so that we might in turn increase our love toward others. There, He is making us holy and preparing us to receive Him when He returns.

It is good to remember each year that as Christ came in humility, He will come again in glory. Advent reminds us that that same Jesus who was born at Bethlehem will return as the Lord of Lords. Together, let us join with so many others in waiting. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

The First Wednesday in Advent

DECEMBER 4, 2024

Today's Reading: 2 Peter 1:1-21

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

"For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty." (2 Peter 1:16)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Do you like The Lord of the Rings or The Chronicles of Narnia? These classic 20th-century books were both written by devout Christian men in the style of a grand epic or myth set in a fantasy world. While these inspiring stories are not based in reality, they do teach us a lot about things that are very real, for example: evil, courage, hope, and perseverance.

In St. Peter's day and for centuries before, "cleverly devised myths" were the only religion some people knew. The gods of the ancient Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, and Persians were nothing more than elaborate legends of how the gods interacted with men. They were artful tales trying to explain why the world is the way it is.

Christianity is not that kind of religion. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not just a moving (but untrue) story meant to inspire good behavior. The four gospels are not four versions of an inspiring (but made-up) hero's life. On the contrary, the books written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John record the testimony of eyewitnesses concerning the amazing life of Jesus. St. Peter makes this clear: miraculous things happened around the person of Jesus Christ, and Peter and others were 'eyewitnesses of His majesty.'

The Good News of Jesus Christ told by St. Peter and others, is the very real story of the one and only true God interacting with man in real time (for example, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea) and in real places (like Bethlehem, Galilee and Jerusalem.) The story revealed in the Holy Scriptures is the only story that truly explains why the world is the way it is (namely, man fell into sin), and most importantly, the Scriptures tell us that God sent His Son Jesus into the world to pay for sin and defeat death. Through Jesus, we are forgiven, restored, and found in God's Kingdom.

The one true God is still interacting with people to save them, not in the physical presence of the incarnate Jesus, but through His living and active Word, "to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place." God's Word is truth and it is able to make you wise unto salvation. We don't read the Scriptures to escape reality like we might with a novel or a myth, rather we read them to reveal to us the ultimate reality and to lead us to the one true God. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning, grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of Thy Holy Word we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life which Thou hast given us in our Savior Jesus Christ, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

The First Thursday in Advent

DECEMBER 5, 2024

Today's Reading: Catechism: Table of Duties - To Widows (1 Timothy 5:5-6)
Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 11:1-12:6; 2 Peter 2:1-22

"She ... has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers..." (1 Timothy 5:5)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. In America, we talk a lot about rights and what everyone is owed. Rarely do we talk about our responsibilities and what we owe others, but that is what Luther's Table of Duties is. It is a list of Scripture passages that remind Christians in various callings of their responsibilities.

The passage Luther provides for widows is 1 Timothy 5:5-6. These words are not so much a command, but a description. St. Paul says a "true widow" who is all alone without a family to care for her, sets her hope in God and prays night and day. Alternatively, one who lives for pleasure is not really alive but dead. So what does this imply for widows? They are to be the hope-filled and praying kind, and not the self-indulgent kind. Everyone, not only widows, can learn from St. Paul's words.

'Widow' is not a vocation one chooses, but is something a woman (young or old) becomes against her will. You may not have lost a spouse, but all of us have felt abandoned and have found ourselves in unpleasant and difficult situations that we did not choose. For example, when your best friend moved away, your parents divorced, or a dear loved one died. In such desperate and difficult times, it is easy to feel sorry for yourself and indulge in selfish behavior. Drugs, alcohol, and pleasures of the flesh only dull the pain and distract you for a while. But in reality, Paul says that kind of living isn't living at all, but rather it is headed for death.

Instead of self-pity and indulgence the Christian who finds herself in a painful and unchosen situation does far better to reach out to God in prayer. God doesn't grant our every desire in prayer as if we are His master and He only exists to serve us. No! He is our Lord and we are His servants. But He is a loving Lord and He hears us when we pray and He cares. He knows how cruel and unfair this life can be, and He isn't content to let it be that way forever. Our Lord Jesus cares so much that He willingly endured painful cruelty and innocent suffering and death in order to set us free from it all. Eventually, this world will end and a perfect one will take its place. There, in the Kingdom, God will wipe every tear from our eyes.

The self-indulgent life may thrill you for a time, but it may also keep you from the new life God has already provided for you. Far better is the way of lasting peace that is to be found in hope-filled and continual prayer. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

The First Friday in Advent

DECEMBER 6, 2024

Today's Reading: 2 Peter 3:1-18

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 14:1-23, 2 Peter 3:1-18

What sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness? (2 Peter 3:11)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Someone once said, "Live each day as though Christ died yesterday, rose today, and is coming back tomorrow." A version of this quote is attributed to Martin Luther, but the same sentiment was already expressed in 2 Peter 3.

Peter mentions that people are scoffing at Christians, specifically, for their claims that Christ would return and judge the world. Early Christians spoke about the return of Christ as though it was certain to happen at any moment. 2,000 years later, we do not live with the same urgency, so to keep from being complacent, we remind ourselves during Advent and as often as we confess the creeds, that He shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead.

St. Peter assures his readers that the end is imminent. After all, what is time to the Lord? To the eternal and timeless God, a day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years is as a day. By that logic, it's only been a couple of days since Christ died, rose, and ascended into heaven!

Still, why hasn't the Lord returned? What is He waiting for? Peter explains that the Lord is not slow; He is gracious, patiently giving time for more to repent and not perish. Nevertheless, when He comes, it will be sudden and unexpected, like a thief, and then the earth and the heavenly bodies will be destroyed, and the works done on them will be exposed.

In light of this inevitable judgment, St. Peter asks: "What sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness?" The answer is that Christians are to hope in the promise of Christ and await the new heavens and new earth in which righteousness dwells. That is, in light of Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection victory, and His promise to raise us up on the Last Day, we are to be hopeful, looking forward to His return.

The problems on this earth and the lack of righteousness are not just a problem for scoffers, it is our problem as well. None of us could withstand the coming judgment apart from Christ. So, thanks be to God that Christ has conquered sin and death for us! He has promised forgiveness and salvation to all who believe. On account of His cross and empty tomb, we can look ahead to a time and place "in which righteousness dwells."

One day Christians will live in perfect peace with God and one another. When Christ comes again and makes all things new, then, at last, we will be what we were created to be: holy and righteous, without spot or blemish. Until then, we can practice holiness and godliness and "...grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen."

The First Saturday in Advent

DECEMBER 7, 2024

Today's Reading: Introit for Advent 2 - Psalm 81:8, 10-11, 13; antiphon: Luke 3:4b
Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 24:1-13; 1 John 1:1-2:14

"Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it." (Psalm 81:10)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. December 7th is a day that will live in infamy. So said President Roosevelt referring to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, but long before that, December 7th was acknowledged by Christians as the feast day of Saint Ambrose.

Ambrose of Milan (340-397), a popular bishop and gifted theologian, is called the "Father of Western Hymnody" because he wrote liturgies and hymns. His most popular is "Savior of the Nations, Come." Martin Luther translated this hymn into German in the 1520s, and it has been sung by Lutherans ever since. It has also been called the Advent hymn par excellence.

God's people have always sung praises to Him. It's simply not enough to speak His praises, but our God's amazing grace and mercy necessitates that we must sing. In Old Testament times, the hymns believers sang were the Psalms. The importance of the Psalms and our hymns is not that they have a catchy melody (though it's nice when they do!) rather, the main thing is what they say. What do they teach us? How do they honor Jesus Christ and direct our thoughts toward Him and how He has rescued us from sin?

The Introit for the second Sunday in Advent is from Psalm 81. The antiphon recalls John the Baptist's role in preparing people to receive the Lord. He is the forerunner crying out and urging people to repent of crooked ways. The Psalm verses urge God's people to listen to the Lord and lament that they did not listen and submit to Him.

Many voices compete for our attention and keep us from listening to God. For example, as I write this reflection, I have been interrupted by text messages six times! It is difficult to find uninterrupted time to listen to the Lord. That is why we must be intentional about it.

You are reading a devotion that invites you to listen and reflect upon God's Word. -That's a great start! You also have the opportunity to listen to the Word each week in worship. Also consider this: how much of the hymnody and liturgy do you really listen to? It's easy to get stuck on 'auto-pilot' and just go through the motions without any consideration of the words that are coming out of your mouth! (Don't ask me how I know.)

Most of our liturgy is straight out of Scripture, and our hymns are likewise founded in the Word of God. For that reason alone, we do well to pay attention to the words we say and sing in worship. Psalm 81 records God saying to His people: "Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it." That's what happens when we listen to God's Word and respond to Him with our songs of praise that are based on His revealed Word. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Savior of the nations, come, Virgin's Son, make here Your home! Marvel now, O heav'n and earth, That the Lord chose such a birth. (332:1)

The Second Sunday in Advent

DECEMBER 8, 2024

Today's Reading: Luke 3:1-14 (15-20)

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 24:14-25:12; Obadiah 1-21; 1 John 2:15-29

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. (Luke 3:4b)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. You've probably heard this before, but it won't hurt to hear it again: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us..." Simply put, if we can't admit we are sinners, we aren't being honest. Sadly, that describes a lot of people.

It's easy to make excuses for sin as if the things you do or fail to do aren't really your fault. It's easy to compare yourself to someone really bad and say: I'm so much better than them! But God isn't fooled, and He isn't interested in arrogant, dishonest people who deny their sins. Rather, He wants genuine sinners who are sick of their sins and want to do better. These are the ones He can help, and indeed, He does more than help; He forgives them, saves them, and gives them life without end.

In Jesus' day, there were many in Israel who denied that they were sinners. They thought that because they were children of Abraham, sin wasn't a problem. Some of the most religious people of all (the Pharisees) were so impressed with themselves that they could only see the sins of others. Jesus had a hard time with people like this, not because He was unwilling to bless them, but because they had no use for Him. And here is the simple truth: until you admit you are a sinner, you won't have much use for a savior from sin.

In order to prepare people to receive the one and only savior from sin, God sent the forerunner to tell people the truth. He would tell people they needed to repent. John was the one who fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy about the voice of one crying in the wilderness. He prepared the way of the Lord by urging people to receive a Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He called a lot of people sinners, and with colorful images, he reminded them of the consequences of sin: "The axe is already at the root of the trees and every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire!"

John's goal was not just to scare people but to alert them to the reality that we all need a savior. John also pointed to the Savior Jesus, saying, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

John the Baptist reminds us that we won't really get Jesus until we see how badly we need Him. But once you are convinced of your need, you'll never want to be without Him. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry Announces that the Lord is nigh; Awake and hearken, for he brings Glad tidings of the King of Kings! (LSB 344:1)

The Second Monday in Advent

DECEMBER 9, 2024

Today's Reading: Malachi 3:1-7b

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

*"Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me..."
(Malachi 3:1a)*

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. The prophet Malachi holds a special place in the history of salvation: he was the last to prophesy in the Old Testament period. After God spoke through Malachi, the voice of the prophets was silent for nearly 400 years, until John the Baptist.

Through Malachi, God revealed His plan to send John the Baptist, saying, "Behold, I will send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me." Look closely, and you will see how this text shows that Jesus is truly God. The prophet says the messenger will not come before Jesus, but before me, which identifies Jesus with the one inspiring these words, namely, the Lord Almighty.

Malachi also reveals the coming of a second messenger, "And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, he is coming," says the Lord of hosts." This second messenger is identified as the Lord Himself. He is called "The Messenger of the Covenant," and He will go to the Lord's temple. "The Messenger of the Covenant" is none other than Jesus Christ.

Malachi describes Jesus' work as a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. John the Baptist also spoke of Him this way: He would baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit, separate the wheat from the chaff, and burn up those who did not produce fruit. Jesus worked this way because His job was to purify sinners. He worked like a launderer's soap because He washed away the sins of sinners.

God would be justified in doing more to sinners than simply refining and washing them; He would be perfectly justified if He chose to destroy them. But the Lord is gracious. He does not delight in the death of the wicked but rather that they turn from their ways and live. (Ezekiel 18:23) In the same way, He prefers to refine His people rather than destroy them.

Christ is still refining His Church. His Word still confronts us and bids us to repent and rid ourselves of harmful sins that would destroy us. Sometimes, He even allows us to go through painful and difficult situations—not to harm us but to help us by cleaning us up and burning off some impurities.

Christ is truly God, and He has purchased you with His own precious blood. He has paid for all your sins. He loves you and desires only your good. He intends for you to spend eternity with Him. None of that changes no matter what you are going through, but it's especially good to keep those things in mind when times are tough. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

When through fiery trials your pathway will lie, My grace, all-sufficient, will be your supply. The flames will not hurt you; I only design Your dross to consume and your gold to refine. (LSB 728:4)

The Second Tuesday in Advent

DECEMBER 10, 2024

Today's Reading: Philippians 1:2-11

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

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. (Philippians 1:6)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. During the season of Advent, we remember both that Christ once came in humility and that He will come again in glory. In our text, St. Paul has in mind Christ's return in glory, which he calls "the day of Jesus Christ." Paul is thinking about his life and the lives of the Philippians in terms of the Last Day, and he is praying for them and encouraging them to remain faithful until that day when all people must give an account.

The Day of Judgment is a frightening concept for many people, but not for Paul. In fact, Paul speaks with great confidence about the faith and salvation of the Philippians, writing: "I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." Paul can speak with such certainty because his confidence is not in the people and their ability to save themselves but in our Lord, who began faith in them and continues that faith in them. What Paul does in this single sentence is dispel a false belief that many Christians have.

Too many Christians think (and worry!) as though Christ and His work of dying and rising only makes salvation possible for us. You see, in addition to what Christ has done, they think there is still work we must do in order to get to heaven. But that is not what the Bible says. Jesus does not merely start something that we have to finish; salvation is God's work from beginning to completion.

God the Father sent His Son into the world. Christ offered Himself up as an atoning sacrifice so our sins are not counted against us. It is only through faith in Jesus that anyone can be saved. But this faith is also God's work. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, who calls, gathers, and enlightens His people by breathing new life in us and causing us to trust in Christ for salvation. By the working of the Holy Spirit, we are united with Christ, and He keeps us in the one true faith until the Last Day.

Wherever the Good News of Jesus is proclaimed in truth, and The Sacraments are administered according to Christ's instruction, there you find the Spirit at work among the people of God. There, you find people abiding in Christ and He in them. There, you find people being kept safe by the working of the Spirit until the day of Jesus Christ. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

So, when next He comes in glory And the world is wrapped in fear, He will shield us with His mercy And with words of love draw near. (LSB 345:4)

The Second Wednesday in Advent

DECEMBER 11, 2024

Today's Reading: 1 John 5:1-21

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 28:14-29; 1 John 5:1-21; 2 John 1-13, 3 John 1-15

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life. (1 John 5:13)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. In the closing words of St. John's first epistle, he makes it clear why he has written: he wants all who believe in Jesus to know they have eternal life. What great words of encouragement! He also assures Christians that eternal life through Jesus is the Gift of God and that all who believe have been born of God. The action is from Him to us. Salvation is not something we accomplish or deserve. God gives it freely because He wants us to share in the eternal life won for us by Jesus Christ, who died for the sins of the world. Alleluia!

With bold and beautiful words, John says: "Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life." While every Christian happily agrees with the first part of that statement, a lot of people chafe at the second part. "Too exclusive," they say. "That might offend people." Indeed, it will. It always has.

A lot of people today don't like this kind of talk. It bothers them to think that some people will not have life. "How can John say that people who do not have Jesus do not have life? What fault is it of theirs that they don't know Jesus?" They would accuse Christians of being intolerant. But John is not writing to offend; he is merely stating a fact.

Think of it this way (and this analogy is not original): Suppose the building you are in is engulfed in flames, and your life is in imminent danger. Fortunately, you know the way to the front door, so you call out to everyone else, "Follow me! I know how to get out of here." To this, someone responds, "You go ahead; I'm going out the back door." But you just came from that way, and you know that no one can get out the back. So you insist, "Please! We don't have much time. We've got to make it to the front!"

In that situation, you are not insisting on your way because you are arrogant; you are insisting because you know the other people are in trouble and you want to help.

Jesus is the only way to the Father. By God's grace, you have Him as your Savior. By man's stubbornness, some resist Him and insist on another way even though God wants them to be saved. Those who resist need our prayers and our loving concern. They do not need an unclear message that says one way is as good as another. Jesus is still the only way. Thank God we have been given life in Him. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

You are the way, the truth, the life; Grant us that way to know, That truth to keep, that life to win Whose joys eternal flow. (LSB 526:4)

The Second Thursday in Advent

DECEMBER 12, 2024

Today's Reading: Catechism: Table of Duties - To Everyone

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

"The commandments ... are summed up in this one rule: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Romans 13:9)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Luther's Table of Duties concludes with a general instruction of what every Christian owes everyone else, and the answer is not surprising: we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. Along the same lines, Luther also cites a passage reminding us that one way we express our love for others is by praying for them.

"Love your neighbor as yourself." It's amazing how many ethical dilemmas can be resolved by appealing to this simple direction. If you find yourself in a situation where you don't know what to do, just ask yourself: If I were in their shoes, how would I want to be treated?

So, for example, if you have acted badly, would you want people to be patient with you and give you another chance? Then, you should be patient with your neighbor who has acted badly and give him another chance. If you were truly in need and asked someone for help, would you want them to help you? Then you should help the person who is asking you.

This is simple enough to understand. The hard part isn't knowing how your neighbor would want to be treated but actually putting love into action and treating them that way. It's easier to do if your neighbor is a friend and someone you love. After all, we genuinely want to see our friends do well. But how do you love as yourself the person you just met, or the person you know and don't like? How do you act for the good of someone who isn't interested in your own good?

In every situation, but especially when you are dealing with someone who is 'tough to love,' it is good to remember that you are loved with an incredible and undeserved love. Our Lord Jesus didn't lay down His life for you because you deserved it; rather, He served you this way because He loves you. That's remarkable because we know we aren't always so loveable. All of us are selfish and naturally put ourselves first. We have all treated others badly and hurt them. If God only dealt with us on the basis of how we have dealt with others, we would be in big trouble. But our Father in Heaven deals with us in love, and He sent Jesus to save us because He loves us. Jesus, in His great compassion, saw our need and went willingly to the cross in order to help us with what we needed most: forgiveness of sins and a new and everlasting life in His name.

With His love in our hearts, we can begin to be less selfish and learn to love others as ourselves and as He has first loved us. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Love in Christ is strong and living, Binding faithful hearts in one; Love in Christ is true and giving, May His will in us be done. (LSB 706:1)

The Second Friday in Advent

DECEMBER 13, 2024

Today's Reading: Revelation 1:1-20

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 29:15-30:14, Revelation 1:1-20

"To Him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood..." (Revelation 1:5b)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. A man in my congregation was a renowned high school basketball coach and the son of a Lutheran pastor. He had a collection of wise sayings, and one of my favorites was this: "There are some things in the Bible I can't understand, but there are many things I can't misunderstand." That's a great saying to keep in mind when reading the last book of the Bible.

The book of Revelation is notoriously difficult to interpret. Bible scholars and churchmen throughout the ages disagree on what every last symbol or image refers to. That can be frustrating when you really want to know what every word means. But even though some details elude us, there are many things you "can't misunderstand."

For example, in the first chapter, it is clear that John was given a prophecy from God, and all who read it and take it to heart will be blessed. It is also unmistakably clear that John is living with the expectation that Christ's return in glory is imminent, and he wants Christians to be prepared for that day. He also wants them to know how great and glorious our Lord Jesus is, and this is perhaps the best part of this book, namely, what it tells us about Jesus.

In this introduction, we learn that Jesus is the firstborn of the dead, the ruler of the kings on earth. He loves us, He has set us free from our sins by His blood, and at His coming, every eye will see Him. He is eternal and almighty, the Alpha and Omega, who was and is and is to come. And John's description of Jesus' appearance is striking! He is powerful, glorious, and terrifying. No wonder John fell at his feet as though dead when he saw Him.

In the four gospels, we read of the great mercy that Jesus shows and demonstrates to those desperately in need, while in Revelation, Jesus is described as an all-powerful judge. But the two are one and the same. The Almighty and eternal Son of Man is the one who loves us and humbled Himself for us. The timeless one without beginning or end entered into time and was born of the Virgin Mary. No one less than the King of Heaven came down and died for us to free us from our sins. The All-Powerful judge who holds the keys of Death and Hades is, for us, a suffering servant who opens heaven to all who believe.

I may not fully understand a number of things about the Lord Jesus Christ, but when it comes to His love for us, I cannot misunderstand. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Ev'ry eye shall now behold Him Robed in glorious majesty; Those who set at naught and sold Him, Pierced and nailed Him to the tree, Deeply wailing, deeply wailing, deeply wailing, Shall their true Messiah see. (LSB 336:2)

The Second Saturday in Advent

DECEMBER 14, 2024

Today's Reading: Introit for Advent 3 - Psalm 146:5-8; antiphon: Philippians 4:4
Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 30:15-26; Revelation 2:1-29

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice." (Philippians 4:4)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Modern Advent wreaths have four blue candles. Each Sunday in Advent, another candle is lit, reminding us that Jesus, "the true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world." (John 1:9). Traditionally, Advent wreaths had three violet candles and one rose candle. The rose, or pink-colored, candle was lit on the third Sunday in Advent. Why pink? Why that Sunday? Because of the introit for that Sunday which is known as Gaudete Sunday.

The first word of the introit for this Sunday is "Rejoice" (which, in Latin, is Gaudete.) This word of gladness marks a change in tone from the rest of the season, which is a more somber time of repentance and preparation for the Lord's return in judgment. The main part of the introit is Psalm 146, but the antiphonal verse with the opening line is from Philippians 4. In that passage, St. Paul also has the end of days in mind, writing, "The Lord is at hand." But he is not writing about this as a warning to the people but rather as a comfort. "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." (Phil. 4:6)

Like everyone else, Christians get anxious and worry about the future. (We shouldn't, but we do.) When anxiety comes, prayer, in which we make our requests known to God, is a welcome relief. So is recalling your blessings. Yes, even in the midst of worrying over what may be ahead, it is still possible and very beneficial to look back and recall what the Lord has done. This is what the Psalmist does in Psalm 146. He recalls that the Lord is the author of all creation, and He remains forever faithful. He remembers various ways in which God helps those in need and lifts up the humble.

If you ever need help recalling how blessed you are, just read the Psalms. You will find that they are filled with praises to God for what He has done. But chief among our blessings is the forgiveness won for us by Jesus. His Gift of forgiveness sets us free from sin and the guilt and shame that comes with it. His work of salvation gives hope that whatever the future holds, the end is certain. In the end, all who are in Him will be raised and lifted up forever in His everlasting kingdom.

With this end in mind, you can truly "Rejoice in the Lord always," no matter your present circumstances. And when you do, "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 4:7) In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

The Saints, who here in patience Their cross and suff'rings bore, Shall live and reign forever When sorrow is no more. Around the throne of glory The Lamb they shall behold; In triumph cast before Him Their diadems of gold. (LSB 515:3)

The Third Sunday in Advent

DECEMBER 15, 2024

Today's Reading: Luke 7:18-28, 29-35

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

...And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” (Luke 7:23)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. It's easy to overlook just how hard it is for most people to come out and say what they're feeling. I hurt. I doubt. I'm dying here. We can bury an awful lot before it finally bubbles over into some kind of truth. "Are you the one who is to come, or should I look for another?"

John is in prison, doubting and trying to find the words because Jesus is the one who's supposed to give sight to the blind, make the lame walk, cleanse the lepers, and free the prisoners... and John's in prison, wondering where his help is. He did what he was supposed to. A voice cried in the wilderness to prepare the way of the LORD, but John's still in prison.

Is this not the guy? Is any of this stuff even real? More than a prophet, John still struggles. But we're afraid to. I don't know how long it took John to finally send his disciples for an answer to his doubt or how often you grasp for the right words and come up short, but I know why it's happening. Things don't look like they're supposed to here. You're not the only one struggling for the right words.

Jesus pierces through what we mean to say and speaks peace—not just with signs and wonders but with the sure and certain word and promise of God. The poor have Good News preached to them. This can endure the poor still being poor, even when some of the blind can't see yet and not all the lame can walk. John isn't called to find comfort in the signs themselves but in the word and promises of God. Jesus saves sinners.

He bears the cross for those struggling and doubting and dying. Blessed is the one who is not offended by Me. Not by how He saves. Or who. Or what it looks like while He does it. You're allowed to struggle with it. The poor need the Good News preached to them because they need Good News.

Doubt isn't good, but if we cannot by our own reason or strength believe in this stuff, then this is something that has to be answered. So Christ sends preachers. Even John's doubt in prison prepares the way of the Lord to answer it. This Word of the Lord unites our voices and gives us the words we can't quite find. The Good News preached to you. God became everything we wish we weren't. Lowly. Sinful. Alone. Afraid. Dead. And in doing so, He saved you. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

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

The Third Monday in Advent

DECEMBER 16, 2024

Today's Reading: Zephaniah 3:14-20

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

The LORD has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil. (Zephaniah 3:15)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Zephaniah writes three chapters to a church convinced they are above reproach. Which, before you roll your eyes at them, feels great. If you're above reproach simply on account of your membership, that means everything wrong is someone else's fault. God is mad at them, not you. It's not surprising people like that are whiney. Nothing's their fault, and nothing's their responsibility. They just heap blame on the world and wait for God to punish wrongdoers and fix it. Did I say them? I meant us. Me. You. See how easy the language shifts?

Captivity comes not for the unbelievers but for Israel, and if that's just a punishment for other people's sin, there's no hope while there are still sinners, and worse things for the world mean better things for you. The only hope is a world without them. And hatred festers.

Zephaniah preaches woe that doesn't just whine. He promises captivity and calamity as condemnation for incredulity, but here, he leaves Israel with hope. Even after promising terrifying things for Israel, who thinks they're above reproach, He promises to advent. The mark of hope is not measured in the state of the world but the presence of the LORD, who created, redeems, and cares for it. Is God present or not? There are signs of His presence. Zephaniah tells you what to measure. Don't start with the world. Start with you. Are your judgments being taken away? Are you being saved? Are you given something to hold onto that removes even fear?

If hope is measured in a perfect world, all we have is whining about why it isn't perfect yet and blame for what we're unable to fix ourselves. If hope is measured in a present God, it might be worthwhile to see what He does when He shows up. He dies. Jesus comes to Israel, captive to sin and fear, ego and death, and frees us. You. Me. He dies for our sins. Yours. Mine. This is why the language matters. Christ shows up and feeds sinners. His Body and Blood are for you. They save you, strengthen you, forgive you, and grant you hope not just for a world with no problems but for a God present in the midst of them to bring you through them to the last great day when all the world will look as it ought. Resurrected. The last great day will come, but even now, God gathers the outcasts and the captives alike and turns the shame of all we can't fix into the praise of all He's conquered in His death and resurrection. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Where the paschal blood is poured, Death's dread angel sheathes the sword; Israel's hosts triumphant go Through the wave that drowns the foe. Alleluia! (LSB 633:3)

The Third Tuesday in Advent

DECEMBER 17, 2024

Today's Reading: Philippians 4:4-7

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

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. (Philippians 4:4)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Somehow, “rejoice” has come to mean “put on a happy face” to Christians today—especially this time of year. But when everyone else is happy, sad feels just that much sadder. Loss feels that much sharper, and calls to rejoice when you’d rather just cry make one of two things feel fake: either you for pretending for the sake of piety or the religion for not being able to lift your spirits.

I could tell you joy isn’t the same as happiness. Joy is a deeper contentment, while happiness is a surface-level elation. That’s true, but even joy seems to run dry sometimes. It’s almost always because of which word we focus on. I wonder if the most important word isn’t “in.” Rejoicing endures all things only in the Lord. And for that to happen, He has to show up. We can rejoice always because God advents. The Lord is at hand. He who guards us from sin, death, and the devil is so near He surrounds us. We are in Him.

Hear this. Because anxiety isn’t something we can shut off. It’s a brain that can’t stop thinking. So, Paul gives us something to think about. Christ advents to save sinners. Even now. You are baptized. You have put on Christ. His death. His resurrection. His victory for all who believe. You wear that now. That doesn’t mean “pretend to be happy all the time.” It doesn’t mean “shut your brain off whenever anything bad enters it.” It means that when you feel anxious or low, sad or depressed, hear the promises of the God who draws near to you and find comfort. When you can’t shut your brain off, hear the gospel so it can focus instead on the promises of Christ. They drive us to reasonableness. Not just being levelheaded, but thinking about our problems in light of Christ’s victory. Even death can’t overwhelm you now. Jesus will just raise you up again. So whatever else that’s ripped joy from you, is it bigger than death? Be reasonable. God is here to wipe every tear from your eye. Your heart is guarded by Christ Jesus.

It drives us to prayer. Let your requests be made known to the God who does not abandon you down here. He draws near to save. He might not give you everything you want, but in Him, nothing can be taken from you that His victory does not restore one hundredfold. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

By grace! On this I'll rest when dying; In Jesus' promise I rejoice; For though I know my heart's condition, I also know my Savior's voice. My heart is glad, all grief has flown Since I am saved by grace alone (LSB 566:6)

The Third Wednesday in Advent

DECEMBER 18, 2024

Today's Reading: Revelation 6:1-17

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 34:1-2, 8-35:10; Micah 1:1-7:20; Revelation 6:1-17

Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, "Come!" (Revelation 6:1)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. The four horsemen of the apocalypse. 450 words. Cool. Books have been written speculating what each horseman symbolizes. Because there's so much wrong here that it's hard to pick out just one thing that it could be. And that speaks volumes to the idea that what's coming might be even worse. But it was the Lamb who opened the seal to them. And that's even more concerning. After the sixth seal, everyone, slave and free, hides in caves, begging mountains to fall on them to hide them from the wrath of the Lamb. The daily lectionary doesn't quite line up with "Silent Night."

The might behind the angel chorus that sang to shepherds attests to the power of the God made man who will be born on Christmas. That power, that glory, that urgency for justice is found in the Christ child, too. When we pray for God to advent, we prefer the weakness of baby Jesus to the wrathful Lamb sending horsemen of death and destruction. Repent. Both pictures are the same Jesus.

We live in the end times and pray, "Come, Lord Jesus." Spare us from more tribulation. Rescue us from ourselves and the power of the foe. But the tribulation is God's tribulation. The devil is God's devil. All creation serves His will because creation has already been won back from the devil. Christ has died and risen to claim the victory. Evil is still evil, but God commands it now that it would do more than just sow tears. The evil points us to a need for salvation, and the cross not only answers the need but paints a picture of a God amidst the fray, wearing a crown of thorns, conquering death itself to save you.

Now even death and destruction simply point to the cross where the God made man, the Lamb who sits on the throne, was slain for you and for all. The catastrophes of the Revelator pull us from the fantasy that we can conquer God and His horsemen even as they drive us to the hope that the Lamb has conquered to save us. And the presence of God marks a silent night, peace on earth, not by measure of the earth, but by measure of God's Advent to save us from it. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Glory to the Father sing, Glory to the Son, our king, Glory to the Spirit be Now and through eternity. (LSB 332:8)

The Third Thursday in Advent

DECEMBER 19, 2024

Today's Reading: Catechism: The First Commandment

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

You shall have no other gods.

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. This commandment shouldn't actually be that hard. There's only one God. He's literally the only God there is. There was a piece of fruit on a tree, and we made a god out of it. The fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil was not God, but we imagined it was so that we could not need Him anymore. It didn't work, but we've never stopped trying to get rid of the real God who loves us to chase after the fake ones that don't.

This commandment is at the root of every other sin. We do not fear, love, and trust in God above all things. If we did, we'd stop taking the good Gifts He gives us and turning them into replacements for Him.

This commandment might be at the root of our sinful desires, but the root of this commandment is that God actually wants to be God to you. He insists on being the God of sinners. He insists on giving you good Gifts. He insists on calling you back to Him over and over. He calls us not to treat the things that can't save us like they can. Don't trust in imaginary gods. Don't trust in creation as if it was the creator. Don't trust in yourself to save yourself. None of that works. None of it needs to, though; He already has. He bore the cross to forgive your idolatry. He insists you have no other source of salvation than Him. Trust only that. Love only Him. From there, even the fear part comes into right understanding.

Fear, love, and trust in God above all things. Fear doesn't just mean healthy respect. We downplay it because it seems like it doesn't go along with love and trust. Fear means realizing you can't control God. That's the First Commandment all over again. The desire to control God is the desire to be God. To fear God is to recognize that we can't control Him but to love and trust in Him is to recognize that we don't need to. He wants to be God to you. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

O LORD God, Dear Father in Heaven, You have given us the Law for our good, calling us to fear, love, and trust in You above all things. Rejoicing that You would insist on being God to us, help us to cast aside all idols and follow you alone, through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Third Friday in Advent

DECEMBER 20, 2024

Today's Reading: 1 Samuel 2:1b, 2, 5b-7; Luke 1:46b-47

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

The LORD kills and brings to life; He brings down to Sheol and raises up. (1 Samuel 2:6)

In the Name † of Jesus. Amen. The Lord Kills and makes alive. He brings down to Sheol and raises up. The Lord gives, the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. If you can't first see those things fulfilled in the Son, you can never receive them as Gifts when He does them to you, too.

It isn't just because it's easier to account for what's taken than what's given or because it's easier to find things to complain about than to thank God for. It's because what the Lord takes, we can't get back on our own, and deep down, we know it. All our best plans and efforts can fall apart in minutes. A life can end in the blink of an eye, and no amount of preparation, fitness, or cautiousness can change that fact.

And He has every right to do it. To kill. To cast down. To take. Lay your justifications aside. The wages of sin is death. At the core of your heart, where you hide the anger, the lust, the greed, God sees who you really are. He sees someone destroying His creation and harming His children, often in secret. Some things that are broken can't be fixed. They can't be balanced out by trying harder at something else. So the best we can do is run from death, run from loss.

But these were first borne by the Son. He was killed and made alive. He descended into Hell and rose from the grave. He who was God was stripped of all honor and glory for you to enter a creation made sinful by men in order to save the very same sinners. You. Me. And in His loss, death, and resurrection, He has not only forgiven you all your sins but carved a path through death and loss for you as well.

It means we don't have to escape anymore. And it means what's taken is not gone. When you see things taken, you can know not just that they can be given back, but that they will. Christ is risen. We will rise. And more, it isn't arbitrary. It isn't callousness that drives our Lord. It's purpose. It was purpose that sent the Son to the cross. And so too with you. In your loss, there is purpose. In your gain, there is purpose. Even in your death, there is purpose, and you can look forward to your resurrection.

Blessed be the Name of the LORD because that's the thing that's been stable this whole time. He doesn't change. He is always working for your salvation. In the Name † of Jesus. Amen.

The will of God is always best And shall be done forever; And they who trust in Him are blest; He will forsake them never. He helps indeed In time of need; He chastens with forbearing. They who depend On God, their friend, Shall not be left despairing. (LSB 758:1)

Saint Thomas the Apostle

DECEMBER 21, 2024

Today's Reading: John 20:24-29

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

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." (John 20:21)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. We call Thomas by his nickname even though it's never in the Bible at all. This story isn't walking-through-a-wall-risen-from-the-dead-peace-giving-Jesus. This is doubting Thomas. Except it's not just Christian shorthand that describes the Bible story. We say more than we really mean to. We say Thomas' sins were died for on the cross. Forgiven... but not forgotten. Forgiven... but he should be remembered for all eternity by his sin of wanting to boop the Lord. Forgiven... but... not really. Then we take this fun new idea out with us and talk about each other the same way because talking about forgiveness is all well and good, but we still remember. Whatever else happens for the rest of their life, we know them by their weakest moment. That is an interesting take from the text that literally gives us the Absolution of sins.

What if this story isn't about one guy who expresses doubt in his weakness and is marked for the rest of us as a warning of what happens when we accidentally confess to being sinners, too? What if it's about Jesus? What if it's about a God who loves us so much that after dying for all of these sins we carry around, all of the labels we wear, all of the scars we bear, He rises from the dead to show that they really are brought to nothing? What if this same Jesus actually loved sinners enough to show up not for the worthy but for sinners and doubters? What if He said stuff like, "Peace be with you?" Jesus didn't show up to guilt trip Thomas but to give the peace Thomas was so desperate for.

The marks on Christ's hands are not just the proof of His love and forgiveness and peace. They are Christ's burdens to bear. Those scars Jesus bears for you are the scars of all of your sins that He bled for, paid for, and died for. He still has those scars because He doesn't just take your sins from you to die on the cross and then give them back to you afterward for you to deal with. They aren't your scars to carry. He doesn't give them back. So be at peace. Stop trying to wrestle your old scars out of Jesus' hands. Jesus won't let go of them. All you get instead is peace.

This is why we speak confession. God wants you to have the very same peace He gave in that room. He sends pastors bearing it, speaking forgiveness, pointing to He who forgives sin by bearing Himself. We confess because now we hear Absolution. Peace be with you. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

That night the apostles met in fear; Among them came their master dear And said, "My peace be with you here." Alleluia! (LSB 471:4)

The Fourth Sunday in Advent

DECEMBER 22, 2024

Today's Reading: Luke 1:39-45 (46-56)

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 43:1-24; Revelation 9:13-10:11

"for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;" (Luke 1:48)

In the Name ✝ of Jesus. Amen.

Blessed are you among women
To be called the mother of God by the small whispering word
And so much worse by those without ears to hear.
The virgin shall conceive and bear abuse.
But she named it all Immanuel.
God with us.

For the belittled and the befouled
The mocked and reviled, the virgin gives a hymn.
He has regard for the humiliated.
who in their shame would prefer sticks and stones to words
used to cause much deeper hurt
He sheds precious blood and names the least of these holy.
Exalting what has been profaned,
and blessing what others only curse.

In the Name ✝ of Jesus. Amen.

Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come and help us by Your might, that the sins which weigh us down may be quickly lifted by Your grace and mercy; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

The Fourth Monday in Advent

DECEMBER 23, 2024

Today's Reading: Micah 5:2-5a

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 43:25-44:20; Revelation 11:1-19

"And he shall be their peace..." (Micah 5:5)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Bethlehem. House of bread. There's peace there. Pay attention. Not just to look back but to look forward, too. It's easy to sing "O Little Town of Bethlehem," to read a verse out of context in Micah, and connect the dots that Jesus was born to fulfill a prophecy. He is the one who, after hundreds of years of silence from prophets, appears to speak. He is the one promised from days of old. He is the one who shepherds the flock of the LORD. He is our peace.

But if all you see is a Jesus who fulfilled the prophecies of old, where is He now? Where is the peace He is supposed to be? Your pastor holds it up on Sunday mornings and tells you. He sings, "The peace of the Lord be with you," as he holds up the chalice and the host, the Body and Blood of the very same Christ. Bethlehem. House of bread. There's peace here. For you. The Christ born in the house of bread doesn't just fulfill old promises. It makes new ones. You'll see them fulfilled every Lord's Day. Every feast day. Honestly, whenever you ask your pastor to feed you.

Because we still need shepherding. We still need Immanuel. We still need God with us, even to the ends of the earth. We need the place to dwell securely. We don't just need prophecies fulfilled. We need them fulfilled for us. So you can find your peace in bread. Christ is present there to forgive you your sins, to tie you to the victory over the grave, to grant to you the security that sin, death, and the power of the devil are dashed to pieces against. Go to Communion. Eat and drink the Body and Blood of the Christ born in Bethlehem. There's peace there. And it's for you. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

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; O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Immanuel! (LSB 361:4)

Christmas Eve

DECEMBER 24, 2024

Today's Reading: Matthew 1:18-25

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 44:21-45:13, 20-25; Daniel 10:1-12:13; Isaiah 48:1-22; Revelation 12:1-17

"Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit." (Matthew 1:18)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. The birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. Mary was engaged to Joseph, but she got pregnant. From the Holy Spirit. From hearing the Word. She's totally still a virgin. And Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. That means he didn't believe her, which is probably not unfair. You have to admit how it looks.

Maybe that's why the world doesn't understand the reason for the season. Nobody was converted by Christmas decorations. Look at the nativity and tell me someone could look at it and proclaim, "Hey, look, that baby is fully God and fully man, Son of the Father, born of the virgin. He's going to die on the cross and rise from the dead to forgive us our sins." You have to admit how it looks. You're not going to figure this out on your own. It has to be revealed. So an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and explained it. To all of Nazareth, Mary looked unfaithful. And a little crazy because she stuck to the story. Yet she is blessed among women because she is the mother of God. Joseph looked like an old fool, yet he believed where so many didn't. The more they believe, the worse they look.

Especially to the Pharisees, who look so amazing all the time. They weren't perfect, just good at hiding what was wrong. Excusing it. Blaming others. Anything but confessing what's wrong to be sin and hoping God would be merciful to sinners, which is sort of the whole point of the religion. The believing Mary and Joseph looked like sinners and fools. The unbelieving Pharisees looked righteous.

We love to measure how things look. But how does Jesus look hanging on the cross where He saved the world that couldn't save itself? This is foolishness to the wise. He became the same. To dwell in creation, alongside us, in sin and misery. God almighty became an infant. God with us. He knows what He looks like. It's ok. Nobody figures it out on their own. It's always been revealed. Because faith comes by hearing, not looking. Look at the manger. Look at the cross. It doesn't look like much. No wonder the world mocks us. Christ came to assume your weakness and carry your sins. The ones others belittle you for. The ones you hide so well. The ones that prove you don't measure up. The ones that make you look like a bad Christian. The ones it's easier to hide or excuse. He saves you from your sins. All of them. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

O God, grant to us ears to hear Your promises that our eyes may perceive Your glory, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Feast of the Nativity

DECEMBER 25, 2024

Today's Reading: John 1:1-14 (15-18)

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

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

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. There's a curated charm about Christmas Eve that just doesn't transfer over to the morning. Christmas Eve is prettier, but it's fragile. If you speak, you can break the moment. Christmas Eve will always be the bigger deal, but Christmas Day dares to ask, what if it all actually meant something after the candles are blown out? What does it mean for you who sing about stables you've never knelt in outside of towns you've never visited? On Christmas Eve, we make a pilgrimage to Bethlehem but find no nativity. Just words. On Christmas Day, we find out that's how it's supposed to be. On Christmas Eve, the words describe shepherds and angels and a baby Christ child in years past. On Christmas Day, the words take shape in the now.

We like baby Jesus more because He doesn't do anything obnoxious. Like talk. So, when Jesus is introduced as the Word and not the infant, it makes us nervous He'll open His mouth and break the charm of last night, even though we know it's well on its way to fading already. It's why we need the word. It's what gives the shepherds in the field meaning. It's what connects the miracle of then to the quiet desperation of now. A religion divorced from meaning is quaint, like turning off LEDs and lighting candles, but doesn't combat the darkness. It doesn't save. It just lets us pretend for a little while, which is our go-to solution to problems we can't actually fix. But it's dark today. So today, we are given the Word.

You don't have a God of charming moments. You have a God who speaks. You have a Word made flesh. The living, breathing promise made to you. It tells you, "You have the right to become children of God, born of His will." It means He saved us, not by works done by us in righteousness, but by incarnation. By making the promise real. With the infant Christ, Words don't stay words. They become flesh. They don't just call us to try harder, be more, love. They wrap themselves in weakness that cannot. It's what real light looks like. Not a time free from problems or a world free from darkness, but a God bearing them to their end for us. A light that even the darkness cannot overcome. The Word made flesh can bleed. God made man can die. And He promises it's for you. Christ crucified is the light that darkness cannot overcome. We celebrate the birth of a savior; we sing of the God made flesh to be light even when all we can see is darkness, because the darkness cannot win. It has already lost. Merry Christmas. May you have the peace of Christ Who became like us that we would be like Him. And indeed, we already are. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Almighty God, grant that the birth of Your only-begotten Son in the flesh may set us free from the bondage of sin; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Saint Stephen the Martyr

DECEMBER 26, 2024

Today's Reading: Matthew 23:34-39

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

*"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"
(Matthew 23:37)*

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. They killed Stephen. They threw rocks at him until he was dead. He prayed for their forgiveness while they did it. Stories of martyrdom get... more creative from there. Flaying. Burning. Quartering. Beheading. Also, people are mean to us on the internet sometimes.

When the martyrs come up, Christians today bicker over what actually makes for genuine persecution. There are modern-day martyrs. People really killed for the crime of faith. The thing is, I don't think Jesus warns us about it so that we can lean into how bad it is, finding martyrdom in every comment section.

The church is left with Christ's words here, along with the story of Stephen, for two reasons. First, so that we would not be surprised if it happens. It is not a sign things are broken. It is not a sign of God's absence. It is a sad reality that Christ Himself bore for us. Secondly, though, it is to point us toward what to look for should we find it.

Stephen didn't lament those who stoned him. He prayed for their forgiveness. Jesus didn't ignore Jerusalem. He wept over it, knowing Stephen and all the rest of the prophets and martyrs, and then rode into the city to conquer. Not by outkilling the killers. By bearing their sins unto death. He knew they'd reject Him. He still died for them. The focus doesn't seem to be on resistance. Or even lamenting every barb the church has taken. It's always been the forgiveness of sins that grants us certain life in the face of death. We live in uncertain times. We know now the future. So we're told to cling to a love so strong it would weep for Jerusalem, who would not believe, yet die for her anyway. Stephen is remembered as a martyr. But Jesus is remembered as the God made man who died and rose again to grant Stephen's prayers. In Christ, the martyrs live. And in Christ, there is forgiveness, even for those who throw stones. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Heavenly Father, in the midst of our sufferings for the sake of Christ grant us grace to follow the example of the first martyr, Stephen, that we also may look to the One who suffered and was crucified on our behalf and pray for those who do us wrong; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Saint John the Apostle and Evangelist

DECEMBER 27, 2024

Today's Reading: John 21:20-25

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

"So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?'" (John 21:23)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. John died of old age, exiled on Patmos. I wonder if it flavors the way he wrote his gospel. He calls himself the apostle whom Jesus loved. He's clearly brilliant. Especially compared to Peter. He runs faster, too. I used to think John thought a lot of himself. The more I get to know him, the more I wonder if it was the opposite. John was spared the martyrdom that the other eleven received. At one point, I would have assumed John counted it as a mark of favor. Maybe, though, to John, it wasn't.

It's great faith that stands steadfast in the face of torture. Unwavering in the face of death. We all like to think we'd do the same, but pray we'd never have to. We all pledged to remain steadfast in this faith and face all, even death, rather than fall away from it, but enough kids stop going to church the week after they make this promise with the help of God at their confirmation that it's a trope. As John grew old on Patmos, I wonder if the apostle whom Jesus loved was the apostle who was afraid he wouldn't.

Bravado often masks insecurity. And sometimes, it's even more terrifying to disappoint someone than to die horribly. Do the subtle boasts John makes really just show how afraid he really is? But he's a fast runner. Way faster than Peter. And he's wicked smart, too. I don't know. Maybe I'm wrong. There are marks of John throughout his book, but motive is a tricky thing. We don't even understand ourselves sometimes. Today, the church remembers St. John, who had a personality I can't help but speculate about. But the thing he clings to is clear. Christ. His letters are not remembered for his wit or his spats with Peter but for confessing the crucified and risen Lord. This Jesus died and rose not only to cover over John's sins, but to give him courage in the face of his fears. John died of old age but already conquered death in his Baptism. That Baptism gives us the freedom to see him in joy as someone who gives us permission to maybe be afraid, but someone holy nonetheless because of the Christ who washes us clean. One day, you'll die, too. I'm not sure how people will remember you or what credit they'll give to your motives and actions. But you'll go into the grave Baptized, covered. And you'll rise, too. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

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

The Holy Innocents the Martyrs

DECEMBER 28, 2024

Today's Reading: Matthew 2:13-18

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

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

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Where was God when Herod's soldiers went house to house slaughtering toddlers? Why does He seem so far away? It seems deep down like we spend more time defending God than He spends defending us. It seems like tragedy is where we need to protect the idea of God, not where we actually expect Him to protect us. Here's a fortune cookie slogan about God's plan that makes it not sound so horrible. Here's something besides His word to make us seem content when we aren't. Some poem about footprints and sand. Some parable about blind folks and an elephant. All of them attempt to answer the issue behind any religion that claims its god is loving. Why is there evil?

Rachel weeps for her children and refuses to be comforted because they are no more. This is not the time for the footprints poem that isn't actually in the Bible. I don't have any good excuses here. Not because God doesn't explain it. Because we don't like the answers He gives. We want a God that gives us free will. Freedom from suffering. It was everything Herod sought. He prayed to the god of security and made rite sacrifices. He wanted to be in control, not face hardship or hurt. So, if I'm being honest, I can relate more to Herod than to Christ, who left the glory and security of heaven to be born in a manger, smuggled across borders only to die on a cross.

We'd rather a Herod than a Christ, as long as he's on our team. We want security from God every bit as much as we want security from God. We can recoil at the price Herod was willing to pay for it, but we all play the same game on a smaller scale. You might not sacrifice thousands of lives, but statistically, more women enter planned parenthood for an abortion identifying as Christian than not. And men, spared from having to sacrifice this way to the god of choice, still find plenty of other ways to chase the same securities. All we're doing is quibbling over the price we're willing to pay for them. So He acts.

Jesus didn't stop Herod from massacring children. He worked salvation in the middle of it. He entered to face it and carve a path through death to resurrection. It makes the object of our salvation closer to us when things fall apart. That's where God puts Himself for you. When we have no good answer, God gives you His cross, not a trite explanation or a poem about footprints. God isn't with us to be strong when we are weak. But to be weak too, for us. It gives us hope for those lost. And it gives us forgiveness for those sins we dare not speak out loud. Even your abortion is forgiven. Because explanations are resigned to how things are now, but the cross looks forward to an empty tomb. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

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

The First Sunday After Christmas

DECEMBER 29, 2024

Today's Reading: Luke 2:22-40

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

"...so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. I have worked with kids for 35 years. I've been a high school teacher, soccer coach, drama director, youth minister, and now, a pastor. In these roles, I have dealt with some of the flakiest and most frustrating kids imaginable—kids without a clue or care and completely self-centered in their focus. Based on my experience, I would have told you that these kids were hopeless. But God is always working, and even when someone seems like a lost cause, the Lord isn't finished with them.

A few years ago, I had an email from one of these former students. This kid was as flakey as they come, and I saw his immaturity and selfishness play out in several settings. He was disrespectful to authority figures, cruel to teammates, and oblivious to the needs of others. As a 16-year-old, this young man was on a road to nowhere and couldn't care less.

Fast forward 20 years. I had been out of teaching and coaching for a generation, and most of the kids from that part of my life had faded into memory when, completely out of the blue, I received an email from the past. "Do you remember me? I hope you are doing well. I live on the East Coast with my wife and two kids. I have a great job and serve as a volunteer at my church. Thank you for the values you instilled in me." My jaw hit the keyboard as I stared in disbelief at the words on the screen in front of me.

On our own, we are all without a clue or care and hopeless in every way. But the Lord never gives up on us. He continues to send out His Word of grace with the promise that He will always accomplish the purpose for which He sent it. In Christ Jesus, we know that God's purpose is always to save, and even when we resist and rebel, He will persist, and the Spirit will succeed in bringing the forgiveness and life Jesus died to secure. The Word always works; whether we can see it or not, the Holy Spirit is creating faith and changing hearts through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Lord, thank you for working in your Word to accomplish Your purpose in my life.

The First Monday After Christmas

DECEMBER 30, 2024

Today's Reading: Exodus 13:1-3a, 11-15

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

"Therefore I sacrifice to the Lord all the males that first open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem" (Exodus 13:15).

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Like any new parents, Mary and Joseph wanted to do everything just right for their newborn son. So, 40 days after Jesus' birth, Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem to offer the sacrifice demanded by the Law for consecrating a firstborn male to the Lord. Luke records this act of obedience as the Holy Family travels to the Temple to fulfill the requirements of the Law.

In Exodus 13, the LORD said to Moses, "Consecrate to me all the firstborn (and Remember this day in which you came out from Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exodus 13:1, 3). This command was given by God to remind His people that He had delivered them out of Egypt after the final plague in which the LORD killed all the firstborns in the land of Egypt. But this was more than a simple nod to the past.

In this requirement of consecration, God was also pointing His people forward to the Firstborn Son who would be consecrated for us. Jesus Christ, the Son of the Most High, went to the Temple in accordance with the Law of Moses to begin a journey of obedience that would lead to a cross. There on Calvary, in the ultimate sacrifice, our Lord received what we deserved, and by the sacrifice of the sinless Son of God, we have been consecrated - set apart - for the Lord.

Jesus Christ is the "firstborn of all creation" (Colossians 1:15) and the "firstborn from the dead" (Colossians 1:18), and, as Paul reminds us, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Romans 6:1-6). This firstborn son of Mary is also the Firstborn and only Son of God, who fulfilled the Law in our place and died our death to lead us out of our slavery to sin and our heavenly Promised Land. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Lord God, thank you for giving your only begotten Son to die for us so that through His obedience, we might live.

Eve of the Circumcision and Name of Jesus

DECEMBER 31, 2024

Today's Reading: Luke 12:35-40

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

"You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect." (Luke 12:40)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. In 1914, Ernest Shackleton and 27 crewmembers left from Plymouth, England, on a ship named The Endurance. On January 18, 1915, after five months at sea, the ship became stuck in pack ice and was unable to move. Week after week, the crew lived in their stuck ship until the pressure from the moving ice finally began to crush the ship's hull. The crew salvaged what they could and set up shelters on the ice as their boat slowly disappeared into the frozen sea.

Nearly four months after the ice had stopped the expedition, Shackleton decided their only chance for survival was to use the salvaged lifeboats to find help. After seven terrible days on the open sea, the men arrived on an uninhabited spit of rock called Elephant Island. Shackleton knew there was no chance of rescue from this remote island, so he selected five of his strongest men and announced that they would sail one of the lifeboats to South Georgia Island, where he knew they could get help. South Georgia Island was over 800 miles away.

Two weeks after leaving his men behind, Shackleton reached South Georgia Island and began planning a rescue for the crew members left on Elephant Island. Finally, on August 30, 1916, – 19 months after their ship had become stuck and four months after their leader had left for help – Shackleton arrived at Elephant Island. When he reached his men, he was overjoyed that they were all alive, and he was amazed to find them all packed up and waiting. When Shackleton asked how they knew to be ready for his arrival, one of the crew members replied, "Sir, when you left, you said you would come back for us, so we never gave up hope. Each day, we packed up our sleeping bags and reminded each other, 'Watch friends! The boss may be coming back today.' We were always ready for your return."

One of the reasons the "Shackleton" story is so amazing is that the readiness we see in the men on Elephant Island is so different from what we see in ourselves. We are impatient. We are pessimistic. We doubt. And yet, as we struggle with our sin, God knows. He knows who we are. He knows about our lack of patience and our pessimism and our doubt. He knows that we are not prepared, and that is why He sent His Son. Jesus came to make us ready, and He did it by taking on human flesh, and with it, He also took our selfishness, our doubt, and our impatience. He took these sins to the Cross and did all of this so that we would be forgiven and ready for His return. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Lord Jesus, thank you for making us ready for Your return through Your death and resurrection for us.

Circumcision and Name of Jesus

JANUARY 1, 2025

Today's Reading: Luke 2:21

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

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

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. The new year always begins with a festival called "The Circumcision and Name of Jesus." This part of the Christmas story is celebrated every year on the Church calendar, but since we usually aren't in church on New Year's Day, it can easily slide by unnoticed, and when you consider the length of today's text, it's no wonder. This is the shortest reading in the entire lectionary, and this one-sentence lesson simply reads: "And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb."

This reading may be brief, and yet the truth it contains is vast. You see, in this succinct Scripture, the infant Jesus is subjected to life under the Law of God, and for the first time, His blood is shed as a foreshadowing of the ultimate shedding of His blood on the Cross. In this important event from the life of Christ – on the eighth day of Christmas – we see Jesus keeping the Law in our place while, even as an infant, He begins His redeeming work for us, and all of this is captured in the name given by the angel:

"Jesus," which means "Yahweh – the Lord – saves."

This name takes us completely out of the equation. This is important to note because as much as our sinful nature likes to tell us otherwise, God's Word is never simply a call for us to get busy or to get better! Instead, it is first and foremost a proclamation of performative language where God is putting our sinful nature to death and then raising us to life as a new creation created in Christ Jesus to do good works. He does this through His Law, and He does this through His Gospel, and in this personal application of performative language, the LORD does something to us and in us that fundamentally changes who we are!

This week, I saw a list of the top resolutions people made to greet the New Year, and ahead of both weight loss and improved health, the number one resolution for 2025 was to "be a better person." Well, today, we need to recognize that in the eyes of the Lord, this resolution will always be impossible for us. The things that depend on our resolve will always fail to deliver us... but in the things that really matter – in eternal things – we have a Heavenly Father whose resolve was demonstrated in the cross of His Son and delivered to us by the Holy Spirit. In the Name of Jesus, we are blessed now and forever. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Lord Jesus, take me and my sinful nature out of the equation and remind me that in my Baptism, I have received your saving Name.

The First Thursday After Christmas

JANUARY 2, 2025

Today's Reading: Catechism: The Second Commandment

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

"For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet, until her righteousness goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as a burning torch." (Isaiah 62:1)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. In today's Old Testament lesson, the prophet writes, "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, for Jerusalem's sake I will not remain quiet" (Isaiah 62:1). This Word of God was spoken at a time in Israel's history when life had been devalued, when God's Word had been ignored, and when it would have been much easier to simply be silent and let evil have free course instead of speaking out. But, in complete contrast to the culture of his day, Isaiah spoke God's Word. He proclaimed a message of life and a promise of deliverance, even as the destruction of his nation and the judgment of God knocked at the door.

In the safety of our sanctuaries, we can talk about the sanctity of human life, but how are we to respond when faced with a world that devalues life and ignores God's word? The answer to this question is found in today's reading. Isaiah said, "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, for Jerusalem's sake I will not remain quiet, till her righteousness shines out like the dawn, her salvation like a blazing torch." In these words, Isaiah calls us as the Church to announce the truth of God's Word and the salvation He came to bring. You see, even in a world gripped by death and the delusions of the devil, the call of Jesus Christ remains: "Go make disciples of all nations," and, my friends, we can only speak the Word of God when we have first listened to it.

We cannot give what we do not have, and listening to God's voice is the only thing that can properly prepare us to speak. Our message cannot come from a political agenda or a radio show; it cannot come from a generic moral imperative or from a social gospel or theology of glory. Our message of life can only come from the Word of God because only when we have truly listened to God do we clearly understand that it's our sin that is under judgment, that it is for our transgressions that Christ suffered and died, and that it is for our salvation and our eternal life with God that Jesus was raised from the dead. The demands of God's Law are for me! And the Word of God's judgment is for me! And the promise of grace is God's promise to me! And once I have listened to the Word in this way, I can then listen to someone else whose broken and sinful life is equally sacred to God. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Lord, help me to listen to your word of Law and Gospel so that I can speak it to others.

The First Friday After Christmas

JANUARY 3, 2025

Today's Reading: Colossians 3:12-17

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

"...my eyes have seen your salvation" (Luke 2:30)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Simeon is not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible. He was not a political ruler or official of the temple. He was not a man of wealth or social standing. As far as we know, Simeon held no worldly power or influence, and yet Luke tells us that Simeon was a "righteous and devout" man of God who was "waiting for the consolation of Israel." This means that Simeon was waiting and watching in faith. He was a man who had lived his life on the lookout, and – through the Spirit – he had been given a special revelation that he would not die until he had seen the promised Christ.

There must have been days when Simeon questioned and maybe even doubted the Holy Spirit's promise. "Is my mind playing tricks on me? Is my age finally catching up? What about my sins? How can God reveal the Messiah to a scoundrel like me?" And there, amid this storm of expectation and doubt, of anticipation and disbelief, of hope and despair, the Spirit acted again. Luke writes that "(Simeon) came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God" (Luke 2:27-28).

In a knowledge that could only have been divinely revealed, Simeon recognized the Christ. His eyes were opened, his forgiveness was assured, and his hope was confirmed. In unimaginable joy, he took this baby boy out of his mother's arms, and there, in the temple courts, Simeon shared the Good News that he had waited his whole life to experience: "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples" (Luke 2:29-31). These famous words of praise, called the "Nunc Dimittis," illustrate with poetic and prophetic clarity the Good News that the Scriptures were written to proclaim: that in this baby boy, "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them" (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Without God's action, we are left like Simeon to wait and wonder while life slips away. Without God's action, we are left to fend for ourselves in a world where the strong survive and the weak are trampled. Without God's action, we continue to walk blindly in the way of our sin, and it is a way that can only end in death. But through the Gospel of Jesus Christ, God acts and our eyes are opened, our sins are forgiven, and life begins. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Almighty God, thank you for revealing salvation in Jesus to our eyes by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

The First Saturday After Christmas

JANUARY 4, 2025

Today's Reading: Psalm 147:1, 5, 11-12; John 1:14

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 63:15-65:2; Luke 2:41-52

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

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. W.H. Auden once wrote, "Nothing that is possible can save us. We who must die demand a miracle." We believe in miracles. Every week, we confess this very thing in bold words that define our faith by the miracles they proclaim. "And (I believe) in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, (and) born of the Virgin Mary."

The theological term used to encompass this confession of faith is the word "incarnation." This means that Jesus knows from the inside what it means to be human. He knows from the inside what it means to have a family. He knows from the inside what it means to suffer disappointment. He knows from the inside how it feels to be hungry and tired and angry and sad. He knows what it means to fall into bed exhausted after a long and frustrating day of work. He knows the pull of temptation and the sting of betrayal. The Incarnation means that in nearly every way, our Brother Jesus knows what it means to be fully human because He is fully human. And when you go to Him with the concerns of your heart, no matter how desperate they may be, He understands you as your Brother because He's been there.

When the Son of God was "conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary," He took on human flesh, not like a uniform that you throw into the laundry at the end of the day. No, the Incarnation means that the second Person of the Trinity took on our flesh forever. He is right now and will be forever true God and true man. Tempted in every way just as we are tempted, yet without sin, Jesus Christ came to do for us what we could never do for ourselves. This means that Jesus Christ fulfilled the Law for us where we had failed. And this means that Jesus Christ suffered and died to pay the penalty our sins required. This means that Jesus Christ defeated death for us by walking out of His grave in our flesh, and because this is true, we will follow our Brother out of our tomb as well.

The poet was right, "Nothing that is possible can save us. We who must die demand a miracle." We are people who must die. Our sin requires it, and nothing we have done or can do will ever change this fate. So today, we lay our filthy rags at the feet of our Brother Jesus, who has accomplished the impossible for us. "We who must die demand a miracle." And the "good tidings of great joy" of this Christmas season proclaim that Jesus is the miracle of miracles. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Lord Jesus, true God and true Man, thank you for the miracle of my life. Amen.

The Second Sunday After Christmas

JANUARY 5, 2025

Today's Reading: Luke 2:40-52

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

"And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them." (Luke 2:51)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Today is the Eve of the Epiphany of our Lord. The lights of Christmas and the New Year still shine, and the whole world waits in anticipation of the Light who has yet to reveal Himself in His fullness. Yet within the small household of the astonished Joseph and Mary, the wisdom of God is already being revealed. The boy Jesus goes missing from His parents for three days. Jesus was not a runaway. This was not some act of preteen rebellion. No, worldly wisdom does not explain the actions of the Christ child, for God's wisdom is higher than man's. He chooses what is foolish to shame the wise. This humble Jesus has come to share the wisdom of God—and not just to the small household of Joseph and Mary, but for all. Worldly wisdom would keep God to the righteous and wise of the world. But God's wisdom invites even sinners to be cleansed of their sin and to enter His eternal household. He even takes on human flesh and submits Himself to the care of human parents. Joseph and Mary finally find Jesus where they should have been looking all along: in the Temple, revealing the wisdom of God. All present looked on with astonishment. The doctors of the Law, Gaze on the wondrous child, And marvel at His gracious words, Of wisdom undefiled. ("Within the Father's House," LSB 410: 2)

We are invited to join those doctors of the Law in wonder at God's unfathomable wisdom, first demonstrated in the Incarnation and now poured out for us in the reading, learning, and preaching of His Holy Word. In a world that constantly distracts us from God's Word and teaches us to despise the preaching of God's Word, let us set our minds even more resolutely on being enlightened by His wisdom. What joy and peace His wisdom provides! What comfort this knowledge brings our suffering souls! While our mortal minds are wearied by knowledge of our sinfulness, Jesus nonetheless reveals Himself in human flesh to prove that God still desires our salvation. He does not abandon us to the pattern of this world but claims our bodies as His temples, transforming us through the renewal of our minds. Each day, He sends His Spirit anew to you, calling you to repentance and enlightening you by His Gospel to see His wisdom. Knowing the depth of our sin, it hardly seems possible— but this is the wisdom of God. As the lights of Christmas fade, let the Light of His wisdom shine in our hearts. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Almighty God, You have poured into our hearts the true Light of Your incarnate Word. Grant that this Light may shine forth in our lives; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. (Collect L10)

The Epiphany of Our Lord

JANUARY 6, 2025

Today's Reading: Matthew 2:1-12

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

"When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him..." (Matthew 2:3)

In the Name † of Jesus. Amen. Herod had a problem: he wanted to be first. It is why his life was a constant rat race. It was why he, an Idumean, usurped the Jewish throne. It was why he entertained Caesar and borrowed his legions. It was why he styled himself Herod 'the Great.' It was why he married into the last remnants of the great Jewish houses to insert himself into a genealogy and birthright that was not his. It was why his family tree was heavy with fratricide, patricide, matricide, and murder. He killed at least one of his wives, their two sons, his brother-in-law, his mother-in-law, and his grandfather-in-law. Yet Herod still had a problem: he was not first. Despite his treaty marriages and mass murders, Herod remained last. Another claimant to the throne was and is and forever will be the rightful Heir. When the Magi came to seek after the One who had been born King of the Jews, Herod was troubled. And when Herod was troubled, all of Jerusalem knew the wrath that was brewing. The pretender-king's sin rolled down on others.

The Magi listened first to God. He preserved them from Herod's wrath and instead led them to the true King—the King who does not demand to be first because He truly is first. Indeed, the whole earth is but His footstool and even that analogy does not do His grandeur justice! He was present at creation and saw humanity plunge the world into sin. He knows the wrath this world deserves. But Jesus is not the King who merely takes what is rightfully His; He redeems it. This is why He, the first, became the last. He suffered the pain and agony that our sins would demand so that we would be freed from the punishment we deserve. For this magnificent work, Jesus is the sole King to whom God the Father says: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." Through Baptism into His name, His birthright is transferred to us. We are grafted into His family tree and are empowered by His Holy Spirit to rise forgiven each day—made first by Him. In the Name † of Jesus, the first and last. Amen.

What joy to know, when life is past, the Lord we love is first and last, the end and the beginning! He will one day, oh, glorious grace, Transport us to that happy place beyond all years and sinning! Amen! Amen! Come, Lord Jesus! Crown of gladness! We are yearning for the day of Your returning! (LSB 395:6)

The Second Tuesday After Christmas

JANUARY 7, 2025

Today's Reading: Ephesians 1:3-14

Daily Lectionary: Ezekiel 1:1-14, 22-28; Habakkuk 1:1-3:19; Romans 1:1-17

"...In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ..." (Ephesians 1:4b-5a)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Have you ever heard an excited child talk about a favorite gift? They are so filled with joy that they can hardly contain it! They babble with a bubbling buzz, bursting on and on about their treasure. Or have you heard a little one pray? Again, they babble with a bubbling buzz, praising God for each and everything that is dear (or merely near) to them: Grandpa and Grandma, Mom and Dad, siblings, toys, even the ceiling that keeps rain off their heads. They form a litany of praise and thanksgiving. St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians bursts on and on with a similar litany of praises. In English, verses 3-14 are split into several sentences, each still quite long. In the Greek, however, the sentence divisions are not so clear; one might read verses 3-14 as a single, continuous sentence— totaling up to 202 Greek words! That is the longest sentence in all of Scripture. St. Paul babbles with a bubbling buzz, like an excited child or a praying child. The truth is, he is both: he is a child of God. The Father predestined St. Paul for adoption through the blood of Jesus Christ. Upon the Cross, the sins of all were forgiven. In Holy Baptism, St. Paul received the inheritance due to the Son of God.

What was true for St. Paul then remains true for you today. You also have been predestined for adoption into the household of God. Your sins have been forgiven. You have been raised to new life. If this alone were not enough to have you babbling with a bubbling buzz about His love, consider also the litany of Gifts God the Father provides for you: an eternal family through His only-begotten Son, siblings bound together forever in His name, His blessed Sacraments to delight in, and –yes– even the ceiling which keeps rain off your head. God has provided you with everything you need to support your body and life. For this, it is your duty to thank, praise, serve and obey Him. This is what St. Paul models for us in Ephesians. His praise is simultaneously profound and simple. Let the Triune God be praised for His work yesterday, today, tomorrow, and on and on into eternity! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

All praise to God the Father be, All praise, eternal Son, to Thee. Alleluia, alleluia! Whom with the Spirit we adore Forever and forever more: Alleluia, alleluia! Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia! (LSB 816:3)

The Second Wednesday After Christmas

JANUARY 8, 2025

Today's Reading: 1 Kings 3:4-15

Daily Lectionary: Ezekiel 2:1-3:11; Romans 1:18-32

"And Solomon awoke, and behold, it was a dream. Then he came to Jerusalem... and made a feast for all his servants." (1 Kings 3:15)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Did you get what you wanted for Christmas? Was your wishlist fulfilled? Or did you perhaps get a gift for someone else? Was it just what they hoped for? It is a good tradition to give and receive gifts at the birth of our Lord since He has given Himself as a gift to us. It is only through His holy Incarnation, precious death, fulfilling resurrection, and glorious ascension that we are gifted the forgiveness of sins and blessed with life in His name. Praise be to God for this indescribable Gift!

A 'Christmas gift' of sorts came about 950 years early for Solomon. The LORD invited him to ask for a gift. All Solomon needed to do was name his desire, and it would be given to him. Can you imagine? Solomon had the ability to get what he had always wanted and to fulfill his wishlist.

Yet Solomon did not ask for something for himself– not primarily, anyway. No, Solomon asked for "a wise and discerning mind," or as some might translate, "heart." Motivated by love for the LORD and His people, Solomon asked for what was necessary to carry out his vocation as a servant-king. He even provided a feast for his servants– not for his fellow kings or for lesser nobility, but for his servants! Solomon's servant-leadership foreshadows the work of the King of kings in serving His people. Our Lord sets a great Feast before us. His own Body and Blood draws us together and strengthens us for service in His kingdom, which has no end.

We may not be kings, but we have been made daughters and sons of the King of kings. We gain His inheritance and are blessed with advancing His kingdom through our various vocations and callings. Like Solomon, we are called not to use our gifts for ourselves but for others. This is in keeping with God's will. We are capable of serving others with our gifts because God first gave to us. He has clothed us in His own righteousness. Truly, truly, not even Solomon in all his earthly splendor was arrayed as you are now! As you thank God for your many gifts this Christmas, recall the most precious of all: Jesus Christ. You have, indeed, received what you wanted for Christmas! Your wishlist truly has been fulfilled! Share that Gift. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

O Lord, through the Incarnation of Your Son, You have given an inestimable gift: the restoration of our human nature. Grant us, as Your servant Solomon, discerning hearts to pursue what is good, true, and beautiful in our vocations; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Second Thursday After Christmas

JANUARY 9, 2025

Today's Reading: Catechism: The Third Commandment

Daily Lectionary: Ezekiel 3:12-27; Ezekiel 4:1-11:25; Romans 2:1-16

The Third Commandment: Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.

What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. "What makes you so special?" That question could be taken as Law or Gospel, depending on the context. Both are helpful to us as we reflect on the Law of God laid down in the Third Commandment and the Gospel promise He offers apart from it.

"What makes you so special?" an honest friend asked a young church worker. After years of schooling and moving and sacrificing for others, the young church worker was convinced that a getaway weekend was deserved. So it was planned, miles away from any church. "After all," they explained to their friend, "the Sabbath is not a literal 'day' for the Christian who finds his Sabbath in Jesus."

While true, this attitude betrayed a dangerous misunderstanding of Christian freedom. One Sunday away from church may not break a believer's faith, but intentionally spurning the Word of God will lead to rejection of the faith received at Baptism; this is most certainly true. There are no exceptions; no one is so special as to be immune from the Law. There is no vacation from God nor rest apart from Him. There is no portion of one's life that can be kept for oneself. All things belong to the Lord, who commands us to worship Him. The words of Ezekiel are a warning to us: "Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God?"

So the honest friend asked: "What makes you so special?" The words were like a shot through the heart, as the Law so often is. The young church worker knew they had despised God's Word. They repented and found a place to worship, even on vacation.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: gladly hear and learn the Word of God. Come to worship as regularly as you can. This is in keeping with God's good Law; it is His good and gracious desire for you to hear His Word, that it may convict you of your sin and bring you to repentance. As the Holy Spirit works within your heart, you will hear the same Word of God, but it will take on a new and glorious meaning— for the Law has been fulfilled in Jesus! True Sabbath rest is His free Gift to you! "What makes you so special?" now has an answer: Jesus! In His Word, He declares you so special that He forgives your sin! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

O Lord, we are men of half faith, of cloven faith, half given to You, half saved up for ourselves. Forgive us, Lord. Teach us, O Lord. Teach us to walk as Your Son walked on earth through ministry to death, through death to life and glory at Your right hand. Through Him we pray. Amen. (adapted from a prayer "To Live by the Word of God" by Martin Franzmann, in "Pray for Joy," CPH: St. Louis, MO, 1970)

The Second Friday After Christmas

JANUARY 10, 2025

Today's Reading: Romans 2:28-29

Daily Lectionary: Ezekiel 18:1-4, 19-32; Ezekiel 19:1-24:27; Romans 2:17-29

"For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God." (Romans 2:28-29)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Jesus Christ came to fulfill the Law and thereby redeem all peoples, Jew and Gentile alike. This was plain enough to the early church from the Holy Scriptures, the teachings of the Apostles, and the very words of Jesus Himself.

But the Christ came "first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" (Romans 1:16). So did Gentile converts first need to become Jews in order to become Christians? Did they need to learn all 613 Mitzvot? Adopt Second Temple-style worship, dress, and cultural norms? Did Baptism truly impart new life and freedom from sin, or merely bring one into a new legal covenant? The Law was the teacher of God's chosen people for centuries; it demanded outward righteousness. What part did it play now?

Some in the church abused the Law, lording worldly power over Gentile converts. The true Lord, however, charged us not to lord power over the other members of His body (Matthew 20:25-28). The church of Christ is not some cultural country club; it is truly catholic (universal). The Christian is called by the Holy Spirit, enlightened, sanctified, and kept in the true faith through the gospel. In other words, we are Christians not because of our own outward works or cultural heritage but because of the inner workings of Christ in our hearts.

St. Paul makes this abundantly clear in his letter to the Romans. While many of God's people considered themselves generally upright and to have made proper atonement for their sins, the fact remained: all failed to uphold His Law in their hearts. All except one: Jesus Christ. He has fulfilled the Law, accomplishing what no sinful human being ever could through circumcision nor any other outward work. For this, He received no praise from men. Instead, He was crucified—given as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of all people. Praise be to God for the salvation accomplished by Him! Salvation is now for all who trust in Him. It is yours, not through works, but by faith! "No temple now, no gift of price, No priestly round of sacrifice, Retain their ancient pow'rs. As shadows fade before the sun The day of sacrifice is done, The day of grace is ours." (LSB 530:1) In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

O God, You made known Your only-begotten Son to the Gentiles. Lead us, who know You by faith, to enjoy in heaven the fullness of Your divine presence; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. (Collect L11, adapted)

The Second Saturday After Christmas

JANUARY 11, 2025

Today's Reading: Psalm 2:7-11,12c; antiphon: Isaiah 42:1a

Daily Lectionary: Ezekiel 33:1-20; Romans 3:1-18

*Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights.
(Isaiah 42:1a)*

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. God delights in whom He chooses. This phrase is a comfort to us because we know that God chose to give His only-begotten Son for the entire human race. Not just to some. Not just to those who would choose Him back (as if any sinful human being could apart from the Holy Spirit). But to all. That includes you. God delights in you!

This is a marvelous thing to ponder. God chose to love sinful human beings, even though they turned from His desire for them and even turned on one another. The Psalmist lays it bare in Psalm 2: entire nations rage, people plot and scheme– but it is in vain. The love of God remains freely given to all. This is the good promised when we yield our will to God's will, and permit Him to do the choosing.

Unfortunately, we like to be 'choosy.' It makes us feel powerful, like God. Sometimes, we even convince ourselves that we have chosen to follow God of our own 'free will.' This is nothing but the Old Adam within us, attempting to deny the brokenness of the human will apart from Jesus. It wants to claim some part, however small, in choosing Him. Drown that fellow in the memory of your Baptism each day.

Because the fact is that we are not as 'choosy' as we think. Apart from Christ, our will is bound to sin. But we know that we are not apart from Christ. He has taken the part of the Servant, suffered and died for our sins, and now is upheld by God to all eternity! Praise be to God that He alone is the 'Chooser!' Luther describes the daily victory God wins within us: "For He slays our will in order to establish His own will in us. He puts to death the flesh and its lusts in order to make alive in us the Spirit and the things that He desires."

In moments of weakness, turn to your Baptism, that moment when God chose you. Remember that He sees in you His Servant whom God upholds, whom He Himself has chosen, in whom He is well-pleased. Find your delight in Him, too. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Lord, 'tis not that I did choose Thee; That, I know, could never be; For this heart would still refuse Thee Had Thy grace not chosen me. Thou hast from the sin that stained me Washed and cleansed and set me free And unto this end ordained me, That I ever live to Thee. (LSB 573:1)



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