



# Blessed is He Who Comes

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NALC ADVENT DEVOTIONAL 2019



## Introduction

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We are now preparing to enter, again, into the holy season of Advent. We will all benefit from additional time, if brief, spent reading God's Word — meditating on it and responding to it. This easy to use Advent devotional booklet is intended to stimulate personal, daily time in the Scriptures that encourages faithfulness. We also hope that these brief readings and meditations will help those not used to daily Bible reading, to begin the practice, at least during Advent. Perhaps readers will continue on with Scripture reading from Christmas into the New Year!

In 2018, we introduced, together with our Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) and Lutheran Church—Canada (LCC) sisters and brothers, a three-year daily Bible reading calendar. If there is one thing missing from our Lutheran tradition today it's familiarity with the Holy Scriptures. We worked together as a consultation — NALC, LCMS, LCC — because we all recognize a lack of knowledge of the Bible in our churches.

You can find the daily Bible reading guide, *Reading the Word of God*, on the NALC website. There are readings listed for each day, in a three-year cycle. If you complete the three years, you will have read through the entire Bible. Along with the daily calendar are weekly readings from the book, *Luther on Scripture*, by Johann Michael Reu. Perhaps you will add those readings to your daily devotional time during Advent. It is meaningful and insightful to learn how Martin Luther understood Holy Scripture.

You will notice that the daily Bible reading guide leads readers continuously through each book of the Bible. This means that the Old Testament readings for Advent are all from Isaiah, while the New Testament readings, except Advent I and Christmas, are from Paul's letters to the Corinthians. Most of the devotions are based on the Corinthian readings, with a few coming from Isaiah highlighting the prophecies of the coming of the Messiah. You will also note in a few instances the assigned reading may be shortened. This is for no other reason than to make the reading and devotion fit the allotted space. I trust you will read the entire passage in your own Bible.

As with all personal devotional practices, approach these readings with grace. If you miss a day or two, catch up when you have time. Bible reading, meditation and prayer are gifts of God to be enjoyed in freedom, not guilt or compulsion! Yes, we wish to be faithful in our devotional disciplines, but when we stumble, we get up, and by God's grace, we begin again. There is no prize or award for keeping your devotional routine pure and without blemish!

You may be reading these devotions in booklet form, provided by your congregation or printed on your own printer at home. They are also available on the NALC website or Facebook page. Our intention is to make your devotional time as convenient as possible, realizing it is all too easy for time in Scripture and devotion to be squeezed out of our busy days!

May our love for Holy Scripture and our knowledge of the Bible grow as we journey through Advent, together!

**The Rev. Dr. David Wendel**

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## The First Sunday of Advent | December 1, 2019

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<sup>21:1</sup> Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup> saying to them, "Go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to me. <sup>3</sup> If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord needs them,' and he will send them at once." <sup>4</sup> This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet...

<sup>6</sup> The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them. <sup>7</sup> They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them. <sup>8</sup> Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup> And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" <sup>10</sup> And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, "Who is this?" <sup>11</sup> And the crowds said, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee."

—Matthew 21:1-11



On this first Sunday of Advent, it may seem out of place to have as our reading a traditional Palm/Passion Sunday passage of the account of the Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. On Palm/Passion Sunday, this Processional Gospel (the procession into Jerusalem) is read at the beginning of the service. The Gospel reading during the service is most often the entire narrative of Christ's passion, beginning with the Maundy Thursday meal, His prayer and arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, His appearance before Caiaphas, Pilate and Herod, and finally, His death on the cross, as He concludes, "It is finished," His body prepared, and the tomb sealed with His crucified body inside.

Palm Sunday begins with joy and welcome as those in Jerusalem wave palm fronds, shouting "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" (Matthew 21:9). The focus shifts as the full force of the Jewish religious establishment and Roman empire are brought to bear upon Jesus, ending with His crucifixion. Palm/Passion Sunday ends with the sealing of the tomb and worshipers leave in somber silence, left to ponder and meditate upon the paradoxes of joy and sorrow, welcome and rejection, life and death.

Our reading from Matthew 21 is a fitting beginning to Advent, as the disciples are sent to prepare for the coming of the Savior. The season of Advent is a time of preparation, as we take time to prepare heart, home and life for Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee. We would like to observe this season full of joy and laughter, light and life! And yet, we experience the same wrestling with joy *and* sorrow, light *and* darkness, life *and* death, as day by day we are reminded that Jesus comes to us in the midst of struggle, grief, loss, loneliness, as well as happiness, fulfillment and peace. May we be prepared for His coming, regardless of our mental, emotional or life situation. May we, too, welcome Him, saying, "Hosanna, blessed is He who comes!"

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, come to me as light in the midst of darkness, as hope in the midst of struggle, as life in the midst of death. Amen.

**Advent action:** Take a few moments to read Matthew's account of the Passion, chapters 26-27.

## December 2, 2019 | Monday of the Week of Advent I

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<sup>13:1</sup> If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

<sup>2</sup> And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup> If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

<sup>4</sup> Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant <sup>5</sup> or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup> it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup> Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

<sup>8</sup> Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. <sup>9</sup> For we know in part and we prophesy in part, <sup>10</sup> but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. <sup>11</sup> When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. <sup>12</sup> For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

<sup>13</sup> So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”

–1 Corinthians 13:1-13



I read an article recently commenting on the fact that the University of California, Los Angeles is using a \$20 million donation to establish a Kindness Institute. The author of the article, Daniel J. Hannan, states that there is a need for greater kindness. He acknowledges that people today so readily condemn, seek to “cancel,” negatively label and dehumanize others with insults, suggesting a primordial tribal viciousness lurking underneath our modern sensibilities. “Kindness” is defined as “the quality of being friendly, generous and considerate.” I’m all for more kindness, as Paul writes in Ephesians 4:32, “...and be kind to one another...”

It seems, however, that kindness is just the beginning of what’s needed in the world today — and especially in North America. More than that, we need “love” — and not just any old kind of love, but the love Paul is writing about in our reading for today — ἀγάπη (anglicized as *agapē*). Most are aware that in the Bible there are three words for love — what we define as sexual love, familial or brotherly love, and then *agapē* — sacrificial, self-giving, divine love. Some consider this the highest form of love. It certainly may be considered the hardest form of love. Why would we say that? Read how Paul describes *agapē*: patient and kind; not envious or jealous; not arrogant or rude. It doesn’t insist on its own way. It doesn’t rejoice at the wrong, but at the right. It hopes all things, believes all things, endures all things. This love never ends. Who can love in this way? This surely is an “other-worldly” kind of love! And that’s Paul’s point, isn’t it?

The love described by Paul is just the kind of love with which the Father God loves His children — and loves us so much that He gave His only begotten Son — to be born as we are born, to live as we live, to die as we die. To then be raised, so that we, too, might have newness of life. That we, too, might be raised from death to life, to live with Him eternally! This is the love which we celebrate — and for which we give thanks as we prepare for Christmas!

**Prayer:** God, our Father; thank you for your love which redeems and strengthens us day by day; in the name of Jesus, your Son. Amen.

**Advent action:** Do something loving for the person you find hardest to love!

<sup>14:1</sup> Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. <sup>2</sup> For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. <sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. <sup>4</sup> The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. <sup>5</sup> Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up...

<sup>12</sup> So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church...

<sup>18</sup> I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. <sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue...

—1 Corinthians 14:1-25



In this passage, Paul is contrasting the practice of “speaking in tongues” with that of prophesying — speaking the Word of the Lord, we might say preaching the Word. Throughout the history of the Church, there have been those who speak in other tongues — Spirit-language that is unintelligible, unless there is someone to interpret the meaning. Paul has this gift, but it is only valuable for the church when there is interpretation. Nevertheless, says Paul, “I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.”

Paul’s message here is clear and easily understood. His wish, and what should also be our intention, is that what is spoken within the Body of Christ builds up the Church! Prophecy, speaking and preaching ought to always be for the purpose of encouragement and consolation! Our reading for yesterday begins, “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Corinthians 13:1). It brings to mind the song of the angels at the birth of the Christ child, as “Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased’” (Luke 2:13-14).

What a blessing that this message of peace and love was offered, not “in the tongue of angels” but in a language that could be received by shepherds keeping watch over their flocks — and by us! What a blessing that this message was not encrypted, needing a decoder for it to be understood! The good news of the coming of God With Us was not a mystery hidden, but a promise that was proclaimed and finally fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. Each Sunday, offering still, encouragement and consolation, Christians in every land announce, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace!”

**Prayer:** Lord God, let our every word be for the upbuilding, encouragement and consolation of those who are troubled and in need of Good News. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

**Advent action:** During the season of Advent, add to each email or text, “Glory to God in the highest, and peace to His people on earth!”

## December 4, 2019 | Wednesday of the Week of Advent I

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<sup>26</sup> What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. <sup>27</sup> If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. <sup>28</sup> But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God. <sup>29</sup> Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. <sup>30</sup> If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. <sup>31</sup> For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged, <sup>32</sup> and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. <sup>33</sup> For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.

As in all the churches of the saints, <sup>34</sup> the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. <sup>35</sup> If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

<sup>36</sup> Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached? <sup>37</sup> If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. <sup>38</sup> If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. <sup>39</sup> So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. <sup>40</sup> But all things should be done decently and in order.

—1 Corinthians 14:26-40



As Paul discusses the reality of worshipers speaking in “other tongues” at the church in Corinth, he makes it clear, first, that the aim of Christian worship is building up, encouraging and consoling. All speech offered in worship is to be in plain, clear, intelligible language, so that the community will be edified. Now, Paul says that everything that is done in worship should be done decently and in order. How powerful that Paul says, “God is not a God of confusion but of peace.” Some translations have it, “God is not a God of [chaos/disorder/dissension] but of order.” Paul then gives specific instructions about how and when people should speak. He explains that there should be both speaking and listening, with time to weigh in on what is being said, so that “all may learn and be encouraged.”

These words of Paul are instructive for those of us who worship within the Lutheran and yes, catholic tradition. The word “catholic” comes from the words for “of the whole —” meaning, what is believed and practiced in the whole Christian church, always and everywhere. It means our worship is not separate from the way Christians have worshiped from the beginning. In our worship, Word and Sacrament is offered in an ordered, biblical and peaceful manner. The first half of our worship service is reflective of synagogue Sabbath worship, with hymns, psalms, scriptural readings, preaching and prayers. The second half of our worship service, the Lord’s Supper, flows directly from the meal that our Lord instituted on Holy Thursday. This is the order of worship most Christians have followed since the first century of the Christian church and it provides for peace, order and structure in worship. The same is true of the Church Year, which begins with Advent. Advent prepares us for the birth of Jesus. Our lives are then shaped by the life of Christ, as day by day we remember His life, miracles, death and resurrection!

**Prayer:** Lord God, as in worship, remove from our lives chaos and confusion, that we may worship, pray and praise you in peace and joy! In Jesus’ name. Amen.

**Advent action:** During Sunday worship, consider how our liturgy is actually a dialogue!

<sup>15:1</sup> Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, <sup>2</sup> and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

<sup>3</sup> For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures...

<sup>12</sup> Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead... <sup>16</sup> For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. <sup>17</sup> And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. <sup>18</sup> Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. <sup>19</sup> If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

<sup>20</sup> But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep...

—1 Corinthians 15:1-34



Fictitious race car driver, Ricky Bobby, in the movie “Talladega Nights” prefers to think of and pray to Baby Jesus, “Eight-pound, six-ounce Newborn Baby Jesus...so cuddly but still omnipotent.” (Never thought you’d find that reference in a devotion, didn’t you?)

Of course, we all love the image of Jesus as a baby, “no crib for his bed,” “holy infant, so tender and mild.” Martin Luther loved to focus on the nativity of our Lord, writing, “Behold Christ lying in the lap of his young mother, still a virgin. What can be sweeter than the Babe, what more lovely than the mother!” He also wrote, “Let us, then, meditate upon the Nativity just as we see it happening in our own babies. I would not have you contemplate the deity of Christ, the majesty of Christ, but rather his flesh. Look upon the Baby Jesus.” And yet, for Luther as for us, the baby lying in a manger can never be separated from the Son of God, dying on the cross! Luther proclaims, “Now is overcome the power of sin, death, hell, conscience and guilt, if you come to this gurgling Babe and believe that he is come, not to judge you, but to save” (*Martin Luther’s Christmas Book*).

At the beginning of Advent, it is appropriate, then, to hear Paul’s reminder to the church in Corinth. Paul reminds the Church of the truth of the crucifixion and resurrection of the Lord. We are not on a journey only to Bethlehem, the stable and manger. We will arrive at Golgotha and the cross, the empty tomb and Easter morning. The message and meaning of Christmas are empty without the ever-present reality that this child, this babe born in Bethlehem, was born to be the Savior of the world. He was born to be the first fruits of those who have died, now to be raised from the dead. Let us be mindful each day during Advent that the shadow of the cross always falls across the manger. Let us never doubt the miracle of God With Us nor the Good News that Christ was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus Christ, we give thanks for your birth as a baby, to be the Savior of the world. Help us to remember your humble birth, suffering, death, and joyful resurrection. Amen.

**Advent action:** As you display your home/family nativity scene, include a cross in the tableau.

## December 6, 2019 | Friday of the Week of Advent I

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<sup>35</sup> But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” <sup>36</sup> You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. <sup>37</sup> And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. <sup>38</sup> But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body... <sup>40</sup> There are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is of one kind, and the glory of the earthly is of another...

<sup>42</sup> So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. <sup>43</sup> It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. <sup>44</sup> It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. <sup>45</sup> Thus it is written, “The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. <sup>46</sup> But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual. <sup>47</sup> The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. <sup>48</sup> As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. <sup>49</sup> Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.

–1 Corinthians 15:35-49



One of the greatest struggles in life has to do with death — what is resurrection like? What will we be like when we are resurrected? Will we know our loved ones? Will they know us? Paul anticipated our questions, and perhaps those in Corinth were already asking, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” Paul may well have considered us “foolish” for asking these questions, but our questions remain! Death and resurrection remain a mystery, and we would like to have answers.

In the midst of Advent, it is worth a little time to consider these questions. Unfortunately, Paul doesn’t provide answers to every question and the answers he does provide may be less than satisfying. There are several things which may be said, however.

Paul reminds us that our earthly, natural bodies are of one kind, while our spiritual, resurrection bodies will be another. We see that in the resurrection of our Lord, who was raised, with noticeable features on His body, yet, it appears, without the limits of time and space. In other words, Jesus could show the marks of crucifixion on His hands and side, but He could appear behind closed doors. Will our resurrection bodies be the same? We will have to wait and see. It is clear, however, that while Jesus’ disciples were not expecting to see Him risen from death, once He got their attention, they recognized Him, acknowledging, “It is the Lord!” (John 21:7) What matters, finally, is not whether our loved ones will recognize us, but whether the Lord knows us and will take us to Himself! As the Lord promises, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me” (John 10:14). He continues, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life...” (John 10:27-28).

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus Christ, because you live, give me hope and confidence that I, too, will be raised to new life with you. Amen.

**Advent action:** Send a card or note to a friend, family member or member of your congregation who has lost a loved one to death since last Christmas, reminding them of the hope of the resurrection!

## Saturday of the Week of Advent I | December 7, 2019

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<sup>6:1</sup>In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. <sup>2</sup>Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.<sup>3</sup>And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!”

<sup>4</sup>And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. <sup>5</sup>And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

<sup>6</sup>Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. <sup>7</sup>And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

<sup>8</sup>And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.” ...

—Isaiah 6:1-13



Most of the readings in this season of Advent will be taken from the appointed New Testament passages in the three-year cycle mentioned in the introduction. Occasionally, when there are messages of particular interest or appropriateness to our Advent meditation, we will hear from the Old Testament. This is the first of those devotions, as we hear from Isaiah.

Our reading today begins with Isaiah’s vision of the Lord God, sitting upon a throne. The seraphim call to one another in a hymn of praise, “Holy, holy, holy is he Lord of hosts...” (See *LBW* Hymn 165). As Isaiah hears the voice from the throne shake the very foundations of the temple through clouds of incense, he is humbled and afraid, being an impure, unclean human being in the presence of the Almighty, the King, the Lord of Hosts. One of the seraphim touches Isaiah’s lips with a burning coal from the incense burner, purifying him to be a worthy prophet, capable of speaking the word of the Lord. And what does Isaiah prophesy? What is the word of the Lord for the people?

Isaiah’s task is not a welcome one, for he is to speak words of judgment on the people for their sin and disobedience — a judgment which would be visited upon them by the coming Assyrian invasion. We love to sing the words of the song, “Whom shall I send?” responding wholeheartedly, “Here I am, Lord, send me!” We would welcome the chance to bring Good News to the poor and the afflicted. Would we welcome, as well, the opportunity to proclaim the Law and judgment of God to the people? Isaiah is called to speak Law and Gospel to the people, in God’s good time and at the Lord’s instruction. His is not an easy calling, nevertheless. The proclamation of wrath and woe is balanced with hope for restoration, in the very next passage, announcing, “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). We need to hear the Lord God’s announcement of judgment and wrath so that we may then more powerfully hear the Good News of His Son, Immanuel!

**Prayer:** Lord God, here I am, send me to speak your words of Law and Gospel, judgment and grace, that all may come to know your Son, Jesus, God With Us! Amen.

**Advent action:** In the pastor’s sermon tomorrow, see if you can discern both Law and Gospel.

## December 8, 2019 | The Second Sunday of Advent

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... <sup>13</sup>Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. <sup>14</sup>Let all that you do be done in love. <sup>15</sup>Now I urge you, brothers—you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints—<sup>16</sup>be subject to such as these, and to every fellow worker and laborer. <sup>17</sup>I rejoice at the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have made up for your absence, <sup>18</sup>for they refreshed my spirit as well as yours. Give recognition to such people.

<sup>19</sup>The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord. <sup>20</sup>All the brothers send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss. <sup>21</sup>I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. <sup>22</sup>If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed. Our Lord, come! <sup>23</sup>The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. <sup>24</sup>My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen.

—1 Corinthians 16:5-24



With these words, Paul concludes his letter to the congregation in Corinth. It might be titled, “What do we do in the meantime?” Paul has planted this congregation, but it is now struggling under pressures from outside the church (sexual immorality, pagan religious influences and corruption) and division within the church. He hopes to visit again, but until then, he is engaged in pastoral correspondence aimed at restoring and refocusing the faithful on the mission of Jesus Christ. As he closes his letter, he provides some suggestions regarding what to do in the meantime. He begins this letter reminding them of “the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you—so that you are not lacking in any gift, *as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (I Corinthians 1:4-8, emphasis added).

Paul was well aware that though Jesus’ return in power and glory was expected at any time, already Christians were losing sight of that fact, being caught up in bickering, quarreling and division. As time passed and time continues to pass, disciples necessarily ask, “What are we to do in the meantime?”

The advice is the same for us, as for those Corinthians: “be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like adults, be strong.” Similarly, watch for, and give heed to those who “refresh my spirit as well as yours.” There will always be difficult, skeptical people who destroy our spirit of hope and encouragement. Avoid those, and seek, rather, the faithful, hopeful, and encouraging who are here to uplift and build up the Body. We need lots of people in the Body of Christ who refresh our spirits. Perhaps you can be one of those who work for unity, love and peace in the congregation! What do we do in the meantime? What do we do as we wait, in these dark days of Advent, for the coming of Christmas? Pray, with Paul, “Our Lord, Come!”

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, come, and come quickly! Help us to be watchful, to stand firm in the faith, to be mature disciples — strong, patient and obedient. Amen.

**Advent action:** NALC Life-to-Life Discipleship is about raising up mature disciples and followers of Jesus, who will be leaders. Check out [nalclifetolife.org](http://nalclifetolife.org) and learn more!

## Monday of the Week of Advent II | December 9, 2019

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<sup>1:1</sup> Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia:

<sup>2</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, <sup>4</sup>who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.<sup>5</sup> For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. <sup>6</sup>If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. <sup>7</sup>Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.

<sup>8</sup> For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. <sup>9</sup> Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. <sup>10</sup> He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. <sup>11</sup> You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.

—2 Corinthians 1:1-11



The service for the Burial of the Dead in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* begins, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the source of all mercy and the God of all consolation. He comforts us in all our sorrows so that we can comfort others in their sorrows with the consolation we ourselves have received from God” (*LBW*, p. 206, vs. 3-4). For some, mention of the burial of the dead, suffering, trial and affliction may seem an intrusion into the season of Advent when, already, colorful Christmas lights may be twinkling on the tree, social gatherings fill our weekends and family and friends bring joy and laughter. This is what we expect during the pre-Christmas season of Macy’s, Norman Rockwell and Hallmark. The reality? Struggle, loss, grief and illness don’t take a holiday during Advent and Christmas.

Paul’s opponents challenged his apostleship, based upon his suffering. Paul turned their reasoning upside down, asserting that his suffering, in fact, caused him greater faith, relying not on himself, but only on the God who raised Jesus from the dead and even now brings comfort and hope. He writes, “For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort.” It is rare in our day and age for people to understand affliction and difficulty in life as a blessing leading to deeper, stronger faith in God. Commonly, we ask, “Why me, Lord?” A more profitable question might be, “Lord, what am I to learn from this? How can my faith, my trust in you be strengthened through this?” The saints and martyrs understood their suffering as an opportunity to grow in faith. Paul relied even more deeply on God as a result of his trials. Not that we seek affliction, suffering or grief, but neither will we succumb to it. We have set our hope on God, that He will deliver us again!

**Prayer:** Lord God, in every struggle and trial in life, let me rely, not on myself, but on you. Amen.

**Advent action:** Consider the trials of the past year and ask, “How have I grown through this?”

## December 10, 2019 | Tuesday of the Week of Advent II

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<sup>9:1</sup> But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

<sup>2</sup> The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. <sup>3</sup> You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. <sup>4</sup> For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. <sup>5</sup> For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. <sup>6</sup> For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. <sup>7</sup> Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

–Isaiah 9:1-7



Again, we turn to the reading for the day from the prophet Isaiah. And how could we not focus on this beloved, yet profound prophesy of the coming Christ child? “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace!”

These words have inspired great music, powerful artwork and moving sermons! The question is, how have they inspired, impacted, transformed you?

Isaiah is speaking words of woe to God’s people, announcing God’s judgment which will fall upon Israel and Judah because of their disobedience, laziness and lukewarm faith. In the midst of his prophecies of doom and gloom, however, the word of the Lord proclaims that those who walked in darkness will see light again! He is to remind the people that they will know joy again, as the rod of their oppressor will be broken, as there will be a restoration of the kingdom and a new King to establish and uphold it. This would come with the birth of a child, a son who would be Counselor, God, Father, Prince of Peace. And how would this happen? Isaiah reminds the people, “The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.” It will not happen by the faith, obedience or actions of the people. It will happen because the Lord of hosts is zealous for His people! It will happen because though the Lord of hosts brings judgment on those who deserve it, He shows mercy, even upon those who do not deserve it. Though there is darkness in life, joy comes with the morning! Though there is death, there is now, in the Son, resurrection! Have you had times in life when you are walking in darkness? Does it seem you are now, at this moment, dwelling in deep darkness? The light of Christ shines on you. The light of Christ is to increase your joy. The Child has been born. The Son has been given.

**Prayer:** Prince of Peace, bring Your light and joy into my heart and life. Drive out darkness and fear. Give me hope and courage! Amen.

**Advent action:** Light one candle every evening from now through Christmas Eve as a reminder of the light of Christ in your life.

<sup>1:23</sup> But I call God to witness against me—it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth. <sup>24</sup> Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith.

<sup>2:1</sup> For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. <sup>2</sup> For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained? <sup>3</sup> And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. <sup>4</sup> For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.

<sup>5</sup> Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. <sup>6</sup> For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough,<sup>7</sup> so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. <sup>8</sup> So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. <sup>9</sup> For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. <sup>10</sup> Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, <sup>11</sup> so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.

–2 Corinthians 1:23-2:11



As we read through the Corinthians correspondence, we are aware that in between the first and second letters, other events were taking place of which we can only guess. It appears that Paul had indeed visited Corinth again, and during that visit, some member of the congregation had caused offense against Paul, for which Paul demanded discipline and an apology. Evidently, this happened, Paul has forgiven the offender and wishes to move on for the sake of all. The reality, it seems, is that not all in Corinth are ready or willing to accept this. So, Paul has decided not to visit again and risk stirring up the situation. Paul's words in this passage deal with this situation. In some ways, it may seem a difficult text for us to apply to our lives, as we are not fully aware of the complete circumstances. Still, there is something we can take from this passage.

It is important for us to realize that when someone causes pain to another within the Body of Christ, it causes pain to all within the Body of Christ. It is unfortunate that in every congregation, there is, day by day, offense given. Sometimes it is unintentional, often it is intended. It can be a word or action, it can be a decision made in council, it can be a hasty text or email sent without sufficient thought. Nevertheless, a painful offense in the church brings pain to all, not just to the two or three who may be directly involved. When this happens, it is important that the offense is acknowledged, apology offered and accepted, and situation reconciled. This is how the Body of Christ is to function. When the offense is not acknowledged and apology offered, forgiveness is withheld and there is no reconciliation. This creates a breach or wound in the body, leading, finally, to a toxic infection that will be hard to heal! Advent, it would seem, is an appropriate time for addressing such situations for the sake of apology, forgiveness and reconciliation — for the sake of the whole congregation!

**Prayer:** Lord God, touch the hearts of those who have offended others, and bring reconciliation and restoration where needed, within the Body of your church. Amen.

**Advent action:** Is there an offense you have given? Apologize and seek reconciliation.

## December 12, 2019 | Thursday of the Week of Advent II

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<sup>12</sup>When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, <sup>13</sup>my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia.

<sup>14</sup>But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. <sup>15</sup>For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, <sup>16</sup>to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? <sup>17</sup>For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.

—2 Corinthians 2:12-17



We no longer have the experience of triumphal processions through the city streets after an army has won a great battle. Even after World War II, the returning warriors often blended quietly back into everyday life in the U.S. Similarly, our service men and women today step unceremoniously out of the airplane or off the ship without shouts or recognition, certainly without a triumphal procession!

Paul and the Corinthians knew all too well the spectacle of a Roman general and his army returning victorious. They would parade through the streets, led first by the Roman ensign and banners, then spoils of war and enemies, captured, marching to their executions. Next, priests and their acolytes, would fill the air with fragrant smoke from their swinging censers. Finally, the army and their general, would be greeted as victors by the crowds.

It's no wonder, really, that Christians, often persecuted by these very Roman soldiers, adopted their own version of the triumphal procession as clergy and bishop entered the church. The ensign was the processional cross, held high for all to see; the acolytes would fill the air with fragrant smoke from their swinging censers, and then came the clergy and bishop, originally processing, not in a show of personal grandeur or arrogance, but symbolizing the triumph of Jesus Christ and His Gospel over the powers of sin, death and Satan!

At this time, the middle of the first century A.D., Paul certainly wouldn't have known or experienced such a triumphal procession into a beautiful cathedral, and yet, his spirit soars with a similar emotion as he is considering the spread of the Gospel in Troas and Macedonia! There had been an "open door" for the preaching of the Gospel of Christ, as Paul found often in his travels. And he is careful to acknowledge that it is God who leads him, through Christ, to spread the knowledge of Him everywhere. We can sometimes be quite surprised to find that God has presented us with an "open door" for the sharing of the Gospel of Christ, when we speak with a neighbor, friend or family member. We can also be quite surprised to find an open door when we invite someone to join us for Advent or Christmas services, as we realize the Lord has gone before us to open hearts and lives!

**Prayer:** Lord God, help us to be bold and willing as we seek to share Jesus. Amen.

**Advent action:** Why not print up simple announcements of your congregation's Christmas services to share with friends, neighbors and family?

...<sup>4</sup> Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. <sup>5</sup> Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, <sup>6</sup> who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

<sup>7</sup> Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, <sup>8</sup> will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? <sup>9</sup> For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory...

<sup>12</sup> Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, <sup>13</sup> not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. <sup>14</sup> But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. <sup>15</sup> Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. <sup>16</sup> But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. <sup>17</sup> Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. <sup>18</sup> And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

—2 Corinthians 3:1-18



The comparison in this passage between Moses, veiling his face as he brings the Law to the people, and the veil being lifted for those who turn to the Lord is striking. How can one compare the awesomeness of God and His Law with the face of the babe of Bethlehem — innocent, life-giving, unassuming for all who might look upon Him? Moses veiled his face in fear. Mary, Joseph, the angels and shepherd looked upon the Baby without fear or trepidation.

Martin Luther wrote:

Behold Christ lying in the lap of his young mother, still a virgin... See how God invites you in many ways. He places before you a Babe with whom you may take refuge. You cannot fear him, for nothing is more appealing to man than a babe. Are you affrighted? Then come to him, lying in the lap of the fairest and sweetest maid. You will see how great is the divine goodness, which seeks above all else that you should not despair. Trust him! Trust him! Here is the Child in whom is salvation. To me there is no greater consolation given to mankind than this, that Christ became man, a child, a babe, playing in the lap and at the breasts of his most gracious mother (*Martin Luther's Christmas Book*).

We are blessed that almighty God is not shrouded in clouds on a far-off mountain top, but that He invites us to come, see Him in the face of a child. "With whom you may take refuge. You cannot fear him, for nothing is more appealing... than a babe."

**Prayer:** Almighty God, create in me a trusting heart, as I come to Jesus, in whom is my salvation. Amen.

**Advent action:** Take five minutes to meditate upon the face of baby Jesus — in a Christmas card, a nativity scene or artistic image.

## December 14, 2019 | Saturday of the Week of Advent II

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<sup>10</sup>In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious. <sup>11</sup>In that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant that remains of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Cush, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea...

<sup>12:1</sup>You will say in that day: “I will give thanks to you, O Lord, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, that you might comfort me. <sup>2</sup>“Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the Lord God is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation.” <sup>3</sup>With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. <sup>4</sup>And you will say in that day: “Give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the peoples, proclaim that his name is exalted. <sup>5</sup>“Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be made known in all the earth. <sup>6</sup>Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.”

—Isaiah 11:10-12:6



While leading a Bible study on Exodus in my former congregation, a member indicated she had commented to a friend that we are appreciating our study of an Old Testament book. The friend, who attended another church replied, “We don’t read the Old Testament, we only focus on the New Testament and the Gospel.”

It’s unfortunate that people consider the Old Testament to be all (and only) Law, and the New Testament all (and only) Gospel! It is truly a misunderstanding of both! As we are reading through Isaiah, one can clearly hear Law, judgment and condemnation, but there clearly is also good news, hope and promise! That is certainly the case in today’s reading from Isaiah 11.

As we’ve discussed before, the prophet is tasked with announcing a time of judgment which will come upon the people because of their faithlessness. At the same time, however, there is the promise of restoration and new life! Can there be a more hopeful image, than the Lord God extending His hand and “recovering” the remnant of His people?

If you read the entire appointed passage, there is an assembling, by the hand of the Lord: “The banished of Israel, [gathering] the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.” “And there will be a highway from Assyria for the remnant of the remains of his people,” to bring them back to the land God had given them. And in that day, the people will give thanks that though there was anger, the Lord turned away from His anger, and comforted His people. They will trust in the Lord and not be afraid. Rather, they will shout and sing for joy!

Tomorrow we will observe the Third Sunday in Advent, traditionally known as Gaudete Sunday, or Joy Sunday. The lessons often speak of joy and rejoicing! When I was in the parish it was a blessing to have one Sunday in the middle of Advent to change altar colors, in the midst of dark and dreary December, from purple (or now blue) to pink or rose, the color of joy! Let us tomorrow shout and sing for joy that the Lord has comforted His people!

**Prayer:** I give thanks to you, O Lord, for you have comforted me! Amen.

**Advent action:** Wear something pink, rose-colored or joyful tomorrow!

## The Third Sunday of Advent | December 15, 2019

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<sup>5:1</sup> For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. <sup>2</sup> For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, <sup>3</sup> if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. <sup>4</sup> For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. <sup>5</sup> He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

<sup>6</sup> So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, <sup>7</sup> for we walk by faith, not by sight. <sup>8</sup> Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. <sup>9</sup> So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. <sup>10</sup> For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

<sup>11</sup> Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. <sup>12</sup> We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart. <sup>13</sup> For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. <sup>14</sup> For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; <sup>15</sup> and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

—2 Corinthians 5:1-15



Paul writes, “if our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling.” Those of us who know we are saved by God’s grace, through faith in the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus, long for that heavenly, eternal home — “groaning,” “burdened” while still in this “earthly tent” of our physical bodies. Yet, while living on this earth, “we are of good courage,” aiming to please God whether we are here or there! And how are we to live, aiming to please God while still in this life? Paul shifts his message here, encouraging us not to live our lives preoccupied with *when* we will enter our heavenly home. Rather, while in this life, Paul would prefer we focus on bringing others to faith in Jesus, introducing others to Jesus so that they, too, may have the hope and promise of eternal life! This is why Paul speaks, now, of “persuading others.”

Paul says, “knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others.” We share the Good News of Jesus as Savior and Lord, hoping, praying that all will come to know Him and the power of His resurrection. Our desire is that no one should be lost, but that each and every person would confess Jesus Christ as Lord, to stand confident on the day of judgment, boasting not of themselves, but of Jesus Christ crucified and risen for us and for our salvation. On the day of judgment, Jesus Christ and His righteousness will be our hope! And where do we begin in our attempt to persuade? We begin with God become flesh to live among us, in Jesus!

**Prayer:** Lord God, let the love of Christ control and guide us, as we seek to reach the lost. Amen.

**Advent action:** Write down a three-minute version, an “elevator speech” sharing what God has done for you in Jesus Christ, to be offered when given the opportunity.

## December 16, 2019 | Monday of the Week of Advent III

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...<sup>16</sup> From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.<sup>18</sup> All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation;<sup>19</sup> that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.<sup>21</sup> For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

<sup>6:1</sup> Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.<sup>2</sup> For he says, “In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.” Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.<sup>3</sup> We put no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry,<sup>4</sup> but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities,<sup>5</sup> beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger;<sup>6</sup> by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love;<sup>7</sup> by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left;<sup>8</sup> through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true;<sup>9</sup> as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed;<sup>10</sup> as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

<sup>11</sup> We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open.<sup>12</sup> You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections.<sup>13</sup> In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also.

–2 Corinthians 5:15-6:13



I appreciate this format, which is different from the early days when I prepared Advent and Lenten devotionals for my congregations. Then, each was a snippet of Scripture, with a brief devotion on a half-size page. This larger size allows for more Scripture, and I am thankful we can include the entire reading above. If you don’t have time to read these simple thoughts, then read the Scripture!

The message is clear — God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to reconcile us to Himself, through the death and resurrection of that only begotten Son. And now, God has given to us this ministry of reconciliation. We are to share the Good News that in Christ God is reconciling the world to Himself, not counting our trespasses against us. Now, God has entrusted this message of reconciliation to us. “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.” We are to share the Good News of this reconciliation — the Good News of the coming of the Prince of Peace. We are also to embody, to live this reconciliation, day by day, in home and family, in congregation and community. How else can we be ambassadors for Christ?

**Prayer:** Lord God, help us to not be restricted in our own affections. With the love of Christ, widen our hearts that we may more readily be ambassadors for Christ in His ministry of reconciliation. Amen.

**Advent action:** Consider two things you can do to be an ambassador of reconciliation.

<sup>14</sup>Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? <sup>15</sup>What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? <sup>16</sup>What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, “I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. <sup>17</sup>Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, <sup>18</sup>and I will be a father to you and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.”

<sup>7:1</sup> Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.

–2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1



When Paul warns against being “unequally *yoked* with unbelievers,” he may be thinking of the commandment in Deuteronomy 22:10, “You shall not plow with an ox and an ass together.” The reality is the ox will pull more strongly than the donkey and, inevitably, you will be plowing astray! Paul’s warning is a challenge to us in our daily lives as disciples and followers of Jesus. What about our families in which we have brothers and sisters who are unbelievers? What about at work, where the owner of our company is an unbeliever? What does this mean for our social life? Sometimes in life we have to be “unequally yoked with unbelievers!”

In this passage, we are warned, exhorted and challenged. God become human, taking on flesh and blood in Jesus, born in Bethlehem to make His dwelling with us means He is to be our God and we are to be His people. God walks with us! God talks with us! Christ Jesus is a participant in our dinner table conversation, with us in our family arguments, sitting at the table with us at church council meetings. How can we honor and respect “God With Us” one minute, having to live with unbelievers and idolaters the next?

The Lord says, “Go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you.” Paul says, “Since we have these promises (the promises of God’s presence with us), beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.” Every moment of every day, we are tempted to choose darkness rather than light, to leave God in the church building so that we can go about our worldly business without restriction. Paul is making life hard for us in the words of this passage! We will necessarily struggle as we sometimes have to live with and relate to “unbelievers.” Living life in the world but not of the world is always a challenge. We are saved by grace through faith in Jesus. How we then live is the reality of life as a disciple and follower of Jesus.

**Prayer:** Lord God, by your incarnate presence, cleanse and purify us. Give us courage to go out and separate, when necessary, that we may be welcome in Your kingdom and household. Amen.

**Advent action:** Discuss this passage with a trusted fellow Christian — what does it mean for me, how do I live in response to this warning, exhortation and challenge in my daily life?

## December 18, 2019 | Wednesday of the Week of Advent III

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<sup>2</sup>Make room in your hearts for us. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one. <sup>3</sup>I do not say this to condemn you, for I said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together. <sup>4</sup>I am acting with great boldness toward you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with comfort. In all our affliction, I am overflowing with joy...

<sup>6</sup>But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, <sup>7</sup>and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more. <sup>8</sup>For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it—though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while.<sup>9</sup>As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us.

<sup>10</sup>For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. <sup>11</sup>For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves...At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter. <sup>12</sup>So although I wrote to you, it was not for the sake of the one who did the wrong, nor for the sake of the one who suffered the wrong, but in order that your earnestness for us might be revealed to you in the sight of God. <sup>13</sup>Therefore we are comforted.

And besides our own comfort, we rejoiced still more at the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all. <sup>14</sup>For whatever boasts I made to him about you, I was not put to shame. But just as everything we said to you was true, so also our boasting before Titus has proved true. <sup>15</sup>And his affection for you is even greater, as he remembers the obedience of you all, how you received him with fear and trembling. <sup>16</sup>I rejoice, because I have complete confidence in you.

—2 Corinthians 7:2-16



Once again, we are aware of the fact that there were things happening in the relationship between Paul and the church in Corinth. There had been an occurrence in which deep and hurtful offense was given to Paul and Paul called the offender (and the community) to account. This caused what Paul calls, “godly grief” or we might say “godly sorrow” that brought recognition, repentance and finally, reconciliation. Paul contrasts this with a worldly attitude that creates resentment and regret without the hope of reconciliation. Thankfully, Paul learns from Titus that the godly grief or sorrow has led to repentance that leads to salvation — as it led to an eagerness to resolve the situation.

Sadly, even in the Body of Christ, we do not arrive at godly grief that leads to reconciliation. Often offense is given and rather than the offender acknowledging the offense, humbly apologizing and seeking forgiveness, the offender is arrogant, believing himself justified or righteous in the outcome, leaving the offense, the hurt and the breach in the community. As mentioned previously, such an unhealed wound in the Body of Christ leads to infection and often a toxic situation in the congregation. In all things as the Body, we are to be ambassadors of Christ Jesus, seeking always repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation!

**Prayer:** Lord God, give to us the joy that comes from always seeking forgiveness and reconciliation, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

**Advent action:** To whom have you given offense? In godly grief, apologize and reconcile.

## Thursday of the Week of Advent III | December 19, 2019

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<sup>8:1</sup>We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, <sup>2</sup>for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. <sup>3</sup>For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, <sup>4</sup>begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— <sup>5</sup>and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. <sup>6</sup>Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. <sup>7</sup>But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also.

<sup>8</sup>I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. <sup>9</sup>For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. <sup>10</sup>And in this matter I give my judgment: this benefits you, who a year ago started not only to do this work but also to desire to do it. <sup>11</sup>So now finish doing it as well, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have. <sup>12</sup>For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. <sup>13</sup>For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness <sup>14</sup>your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. <sup>15</sup>As it is written, “Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.”

—2 Corinthians 8:1-15



I have on my desk a Holy Bible with a camo cover, produced by the Armed Services Ministry of the American Bible Society. This version of the Bible is given to recruits as they begin their basic training and inside the front cover, it introduces “The Basic Training Challenge; Spiritual Fitness for the Warrior.” There are 75 sections highlighted in this Bible, aimed at introducing these young men and women to God and His plan revealed and completed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It then challenges them to grow as disciples and followers of Jesus, developing into mature leaders. It would be hard to imagine how many soldiers came to know Christ through these pocket-size Bibles, and how many of these Bibles went with these soldiers into service as a constant companion and guide.

I mention this because one of the 75 passages highlighted in Scripture is our reading for today, II Corinthians 8:1-15. Here, Paul writes of the faith and generosity of the churches of Macedonia who, out of their abundance of joy (and extreme poverty) gave of themselves for the spread of the Gospel and the “relief of the saints.” Paul speaks powerfully about the Christian life, how it is the call of the disciple to give oneself to God first, then to others! And what a meaningful Advent message that is, as we remember that it is more blessed to give than to receive! (Acts 20:36).

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, as you so graciously gave your Son to be our Savior, move our hearts to overflow in a wealth of generosity for those in need, this holiday season. Amen.

**Advent action:** Whether you give out of abundance or poverty, find a way to share something with those who have no shelter, food or stability, in response to the gift of God’s Son, Jesus.

## December 20, 2019 | Friday of the Week of Advent III

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<sup>16</sup>But thanks be to God, who put into the heart of Titus the same earnest care I have for you.<sup>17</sup>For he not only accepted our appeal, but being himself very earnest he is going to you of his own accord. <sup>18</sup>With him we are sending the brother who is famous among all the churches for his preaching of the gospel. <sup>19</sup>And not only that, but he has been appointed by the churches to travel with us as we carry out this act of grace that is being ministered by us, for the glory of the Lord himself and to show our good will...<sup>22</sup>And with them we are sending our brother whom we have often tested and found earnest in many matters, but who is now more earnest than ever because of his great confidence in you. <sup>23</sup>As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker for your benefit. And as for our brothers, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ. <sup>24</sup>So give proof before the churches of your love and of our boasting about you to these men. <sup>9:1</sup>Now it is superfluous for me to write to you about the ministry for the saints,<sup>2</sup>for I know your readiness, of which I boast about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year. And your zeal has stirred up most of them. <sup>3</sup>But I am sending the brothers so that our boasting about you may not prove empty in this matter, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be. <sup>4</sup>Otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—for being so confident. <sup>5</sup>So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you and arrange in advance for the gift you have promised, so that it may be ready as a willing gift, not as an exaction.

–2 Corinthians 8:16-9:5



It is a blessing to have in our daily readings, so close to Christmas, reflections about generosity and giving. No one speaks so clearly and powerfully as Paul about the responsibility of followers of Jesus to make generous giving a part of our lives. Indeed, Paul is bold as he lifts up the example of the Macedonians and bold as he encourages and expects the Corinthians to be ready with their offering. Paul is sending brothers to receive the offering which will be used for the relief of the saints in Jerusalem and has told the brothers of the zeal and readiness of the Christians to give. So, Paul writes, “don’t let me be humiliated!” “I have boasted of your generosity.” Paul continues, “So that (the gift) may be ready as a willing gift, not as an exaction.”

The seasons of Advent and Christmas are certainly times in our lives when we naturally consider those less fortunate, those who have fallen on hard circumstances, those who may not have means or resources as we do. Congregations readily take up special offerings, make care packages and food baskets and provide Christmas gifts for children who may not expect much on Christmas morning. And yet, while there is perhaps a greater outpouring as we draw near to Christmas, let us give thanks for our congregations’ kindness and generosity throughout the year. Christians are not stingy or greedy. We see every one of our congregations involved in special offerings week by week for the sake of those in need, locally and around the world. For your generosity, we give thanks!

**Prayer:** Gracious and giving God, keep us mindful of those less fortunate and create in us giving hearts throughout the year. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

**Advent action:** Commit yourself to making a special Christmas offering every month of the year.

<sup>6</sup>The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. <sup>7</sup>Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. <sup>8</sup>And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. <sup>9</sup>As it is written, “He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.”

<sup>10</sup>He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. <sup>11</sup>You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. <sup>12</sup>For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God. <sup>13</sup>By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission that comes from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others, <sup>14</sup>while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you. <sup>15</sup>Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!

—2 Corinthians 9:6-15



It would be easy and all too expected to continue our recent line of thought these last few days with further devotional conversation about each one giving “as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” Paul certainly is speaking directly and plainly to the Corinthian Christians about their obligation to give, the joy and cheer that comes from giving and his expectation that disciples of Jesus will give generously and from the heart!

The key to Paul’s thought, however, comes from verse 15, “Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!” What matters is not what we give or how much we give. What matters is that God has first given to us — an inexpressible gift — the gift of His own Son! Born to Mary and Joseph, born in a stable in Bethlehem, born to give His life on the cross for us and for our salvation!

Paul reminds his readers that, as it is written, “[God] has distributed freely, he has given to the poor, his righteousness endures forever.” He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God.” Paul is careful to remind the Corinthians — and us — that God is the giver; that God first gives to us. Paul reminds us that God created us and all that exists — the universe, the earth, the soil and seed, sun and moon, wind and rain, plants and animals for food, home, family and relationships. The greatest gift of all, however — the inexpressible gift — is the gift of His Son Jesus! It is this gift which so moves and opens the heart that we cannot help but give God our thanks and praise and give to others whatever we can to help them in their need. Christmas is indeed a festival of giving. As the Father gives the Son, we receive Him, and give, in love, to others!

**Prayer:** Father God, we give thanks for the inexpressible gift of your Son, Jesus! Amen.

**Advent action:** As we draw near to Christmas — be cheerful, in joy and thankfulness for Jesus!

## December 22, 2019 | The Fourth Sunday of Advent

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<sup>10:1</sup>I, Paul, myself entreat you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ—I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away!— <sup>2</sup>I beg of you that when I am present I may not have to show boldness with such confidence as I count on showing against some who suspect us of walking according to the flesh. <sup>3</sup>For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. <sup>4</sup>For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. <sup>5</sup>We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, <sup>6</sup>being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.

—2 Corinthians 10:1-6



The apostle Paul seems to be wrestling with his very bold speech in his letter, realizing that when present with the Corinthian Christians he is careful to approach them with humility and pastoral sensitivity. It sounds as if there are those in the congregation who are accusing Paul of arrogance and haughtiness, marks of humanity and of “walking according to the flesh.” Is Paul “all-too-human,” so that his pastoral sensitivity is often overshadowed by his sinful human nature? Perhaps — as is the case with all of us. Still, Paul believes that he has reason to speak boldly, and sometimes too boldly, as he seeks to “destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God...ready to punish every disobedience.”

Boldness and humility. We struggle with that, ourselves, every day. This fourth Sunday in Advent, we are reminded of the song of Mary, upon the visit by the angel, announcing her conception by the Holy Spirit and the birth of Jesus, who would be called holy and Son of God. It is full of the contrast between boldness, arrogance, our haughty human nature, and the willing humility of the mother of Jesus. And Mary said,

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever (Luke 1:46-55).

Our God casts down the mighty and lifts up the lowly. Our God fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty. His royal Son is born in a livestock barn, while Herod, the king, lives in a palace. And how will this turn out? The rich and kingly are thrown down, while the poor and unassuming are raised up. Raised up — as on a cross...

**Prayer:** Almighty God, Father of Jesus, create in us clean and humble hearts as we prepare to celebrate the mystery of Christmas. Amen.

**Advent action:** Be bold, and humbly remind someone that Christmas is still about the birth of Jesus, Son of God and Savior of the world!

## Monday of the Week of Advent IV | December 23, 2019

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<sup>7</sup>Look at what is before your eyes. If anyone is confident that he is Christ's, let him remind himself that just as he is Christ's, so also are we. <sup>8</sup>For even if I boast a little too much of our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I will not be ashamed. <sup>9</sup>I do not want to appear to be frightening you with my letters. <sup>10</sup>For they say, "His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account." <sup>11</sup>Let such a person understand that what we say by letter when absent, we do when present. <sup>12</sup>Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding.

<sup>13</sup>But we will not boast beyond limits, but will boast only with regard to the area of influence God assigned to us, to reach even to you. <sup>14</sup>For we are not overextending ourselves, as though we did not reach you. For we were the first to come all the way to you with the gospel of Christ. <sup>15</sup>We do not boast beyond limit in the labors of others. But our hope is that as your faith increases, our area of influence among you may be greatly enlarged, <sup>16</sup>so that we may preach the gospel in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in another's area of influence. <sup>17</sup>"Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." <sup>18</sup>For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.

—2 Corinthians 10:7-18



Still, Paul is defending his ministry among the Corinthians, as there are those who are accusing him of throwing around a little too much weight in his letters, a little too much of his authority — maybe frightening some through his letters, as they are “weighty and strong.” But Paul asserts, “we will not boast beyond limits, but will boast only with regard to the area of influence God assigned to us, to reach even to you.” In other words, God has given Paul the task of preaching to the Gentiles, and his ministry to the Corinthians is within that responsibility. He states, his aim, first and foremost, is to be “the first to come all the way to you with the gospel of Christ.” And his hope is that he may then, with their support, go on to preach the Gospel in lands beyond!

To whom has God given us — you and me — the responsibility for bringing the Gospel of Christ? The beloved and familiar African American spiritual goes, “If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul, you can tell the love of Jesus and say, ‘He died for all.’” Whom has He given to you and me to announce, “There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole—to heal the sin-sick soul?” Every one of us is commissioned to go announce the Good News of the birth of Jesus, the Word made flesh to dwell among us. We are commissioned to go and make disciples, one by one, life-to-life, telling of the love of Jesus and that He was born, lived and died for all!

As tomorrow is Christmas Eve, in the midst of final preparations and busy-ness, let us consider the love of God in Jesus Christ, and the fact that He came to die for all!

**Prayer:** O Lord God, give me an open door to be able to say to someone, somehow, “Jesus loves you, was born for you and died for you!”

**Advent action:** Say to someone, somehow “Jesus loves you, was born for you and died for you!”

## December 24, 2019 | The Nativity of our Lord, Christmas Eve

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<sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. <sup>20</sup>But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup>She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” <sup>22</sup>All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: <sup>23</sup>“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). <sup>24</sup>When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, <sup>25</sup>but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

—Matthew 1:18-25

On this night of wonder, let us spend a few moments considering the *mystery* of God become human, a baby conceived by the Holy Spirit, apart from natural processes, an ancient prophecy fulfilled in the birth of Immanuel — Jesus. *Mystery*: an interesting word and an even more interesting notion. It comes from the Greek word μυστήριον (*mystērion*), a derivative of the root word which means literally “to shut one’s mouth” or to render one silent. A mystery leaves us speechless! Is that not a proper response to “God With Us?” On Christmas Eve, we are speechless. We are rendered silent at the mystery that is the virgin conception and birth — God’s intention to stoop low as the Word made flesh.

In the book, *Millennium Matrix*, the author, M. Rex Miller, speaks of the transition to this current age, and how this has, in fact, created a yearning in the heart and soul for what is often missing these days. His research indicates one renewed spiritual hunger which has surfaced among younger generations is the yearning for mystery.

We should always be mindful of the fact that we need mystery in our lives, and in the Church. We need to experience God in ways that cause us to “be still and know that [God] is God” (Psalm 46:10).

God become human cannot be anything but a mystery. God present for us in the Word, written, read and preached is miraculous! God present for us in bread and wine which become His body and blood leaves us speechless and without rational, reasonable comment or explanation. We will always want to allow for mystery in our worship, in our meditation on the Word of God and in prayer, welcoming the super-natural divine presence of God.

This Christmas Eve, may we welcome and rejoice in the mystery of God’s presence with us, in the holy Child of Bethlehem!

**Prayer:** On this holy night, Lord God, fill us with the mystery that is Immanuel — Jesus. Amen.

**Advent action:** If you are able, join with a congregation for worship. If you are home-bound, join with the Church on earth, reading this devotion, praying for the Church, the world and your loved ones this wonderful night of our Lord’s humble birth.

## The Nativity of our Lord, Christmas Day | December 25, 2019

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<sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup>In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup>All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. <sup>4</sup>In him was life, and the life was the light of men. <sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

<sup>6</sup>There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup>He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

<sup>9</sup>The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. <sup>10</sup>He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. <sup>11</sup>He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. <sup>12</sup>But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, <sup>13</sup>who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

<sup>14</sup>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. <sup>15</sup>(John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'") <sup>16</sup>For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. <sup>17</sup>For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. <sup>18</sup>No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

—John 1:1-18

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Martin Luther wrote:

Among all the gifts the gift of the Word of God is the most valuable. For if you take this away, it is like taking the sun away from the earth. For if the Word were removed, what would the world be but a hell and mere realm of Satan...For only the Word keeps a joyful conscience, a gracious God, and all of religion, since out of the Word, as from a spring, flows our entire religion. Without the Word and Christ the world would not continue to exist for one moment. Therefore though there are many great gifts of God in the world...yet the one which includes and sustains all the others is the Word, which proclaims that God is merciful and promises forgiveness of sins and life everlasting (*Exposition on Psalm 122 in 1531*).

While Christmas Eve finds us kneeling at the manger, pondering the birth of the baby, Jesus, Christmas Day is traditionally focused on the Word of God, and what it means that this Word entered our world to bring light and life. Truly, as Luther says, God created all that exists by His powerful, life-giving Word, and the world would not continue to exist for one moment without His Word. Though there have been many gifts given and shared this Christmas morning, though there are many great gifts of God in the world, dear Dr. Luther reminds us that the greatest gift, the one which includes and sustains all others is the Word, which proclaims that God is merciful and promises forgiveness of sins and life everlasting.

It has been a joy to walk with you through Advent, sharing the Word of God and these devotions. May your Christmas be even more joyful and the coming year find you living ever more deeply in the Word of God, in the Word made flesh, and so in God's grace and peace.

May Almighty God bless you and keep you,  
in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



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