

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24

Isaiah 2:2-5

Happy New Year!

By Pastor Gabe Kasper

Today marks the start of a new church year and the beginning of the Advent season. Advent is the season of expectation and hope, which we see on display in this text from Isaiah.

The context of Isaiah 2 is not a pleasant one. The Assyrian war machine is advancing, with its eye set on Israel. We need to understand that the Assyrian Empire is one of the most cruel and grotesque empires in history. And as they approach God's people, Israel has two options: join or be destroyed.

What hope do they have?

It's in the midst of this seemingly hopeless situation that God speaks through Isaiah. His message to them is that this, what you see right now—war, hardship, struggle, and pain—is not the end. It's not the end of the story. A day is coming when nation will *not* take up sword against nation, and all people will worship at the mountain of the Lord. Isaiah's message to Israel is a message of hope.

And this is why I love Advent. Because it's so easy to recognize that this world isn't perfect. It takes five minutes of reading news headlines to know that this world is hemorrhaging in pain. And just like Isaiah, Advent doesn't ignore that pain; Advent doesn't gloss over it and pretend

Isaiah 9:1-7

Deep Darkness to Wonderful Light

by Rachel Thoms

Gloom. Anguish. Contempt. Darkness. The people of Israel are suffering. Not only are they suffering; they're suffering without hope. Their darkness is deep; their anguish is consuming.

They need a Savior.

Like the Israelites, we experience darkness. Physical pain, mental illness, financial strain, grief, loss, and doubt consume our lives and leave us feeling like we are wandering through a desert. Our darkness is deep, and our anguish is consuming.

We need a Savior... and we have One.

This text says this child, our Savior, is for YOU. This child is not for "her," or "him," or "them." This child is for me, for you, for US! God's Son overcomes the deep darkness in our lives with heavenly, wonderful light. He is our Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

When we experience darkness, we can call out to our Light, our Counselor, our Peace, our Hope. We can call out to our Savior, Jesus.

Isaiah 11:1-9

Seeing Like the Savior

by Linda Conzelmann

Throughout Scripture, Jesus sees and acts beyond the exterior. He consistently surprises his listeners and us because He does not see things as we do. According to Isaiah, "He will consider more than what meets the eye." In our complex, conflicted world, what does this mean?

Because He is a loving, all-knowing God, He has the vision to see *internally* and *eternally*. He knows very well that a wolf will naturally devour a lamb, but He also knows that in the Kingdom of God, "*the wolf will live peacefully with the wobbly-kneed lamb.*" He casts this vision for a future time when the earth is redeemed.

However, as the redeemed people of God, we don't need to wait until heaven to have Jesus' perspective. Through His Spirit, we can embrace His vision now. Just as the mighty do not threaten the weak in these verses, we too can live peacefully with those who have been marginalized or with others whom we may not understand or agree with. We need to re-see those who are homeless, illegal, imprisoned, elderly, liberal/conservative, or identify as LGBTQ.

Like Jesus, we need to have the fear of the LORD rather than the fear of "the Other." As Christians, perhaps we need to have the unexpected response to those different from us. This Christmas season, may we find hope as we allow

Isaiah 11:10-16

God's Deepest Desire: Gathering His People

by Deaconess Norma Polk

In Isaiah chapter eleven, God reveals His heart—His deepest desire. And what is that desire? To gather people from all backgrounds and from every corner of the world into His Kingdom!

In v.10 God promised, *“In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious.”* The root of Jesse refers to the Messiah, Jesus, who was nailed to the cross as a sign of His love for us. His compassion is shown in v.11: He extends His hand to recover the remnant of His people. St. Paul in Romans 11:5 wrote, *“So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.”*

I grew up as a practicing Muslim in Indonesia which has the single largest population of Muslims in the world. In the early 1980s, a miracle happened in my family: two of my siblings and my parents became followers of Jesus. They told me that I was a sinner and needed to repent. At first, this made me angry and indignant! But one night, at the end of my nightly prayer as a Muslim, there was a drive within me to say, *“This is my last prayer as a Muslim.”* God gave me a vision of a light at the end of the tunnel, and I had an unstoppable desire to follow it. The next day I spoke to my brother who told me about Jesus. He gave me a Bible and

Isaiah 39:5-40:11

A Love So Grand

by Eddie Godbold

God's entrance into our world is grand.

In contrast, life in an imperfect world doesn't usually feel so grand. Though we may calmly try to maintain a sense of self-importance and control, we inevitably feel the pain and disappointment of life in this broken world. The Advent season can be an especially difficult reminder of this reality. Cold nights, end-of-semester stress, performance-review shortcomings, and social media posts can serve as reminders of how we wish we were celebrating the holiday season and leave us feeling empty, afraid, and alone. If left to fend for ourselves, we are helpless to do anything about our condition.

But we have a God who isn't okay with that reality. We have a God whose love for us is so deep that He enters into our world and meets us where we are. He comes to give us comfort. He comes to be our Rock and our sure Hope. He comes to care for us as our Shepherd and to die in our place as our Savior. He grants us more forgiveness than we will ever need. Yes, we have a God we can depend on—a God who is faithful, even when we are not.

God's entrance into our world is grand.

Oh, what a love this is!

Isaiah 52:1-12

Awake, Awake and Rejoice! The Lord has Come!

By Angela Knickelbein

Have you ever felt like you were stuck in a bad dream? Isaiah, an Old Testament prophet, speaks to God’s people who were spiritually sleeping. They had turned to despair and away from God and His promise to send a Savior who would destroy sin, death, and the devil.

Isaiah reminds the people of the work God has already done through his Word and how through his Word they will be awakened. God’s Word, found in Christ, is the good news of His promise to send a Savior who would awaken the people. Paul, an apostle for Christ in the New Testament (Romans 10:11–17), echoes Isaiah’s words to encourage Christians to awaken from their spiritual slumber and listen to the Word of God because through the Word of God comes faith. Faith awakens us to a new life, and in this new life of joy, we are fully awake in Christ through his resurrection, rejoicing in the work of God and proclaiming his Word of deliverance to others.

This Advent season remember this promise—you have been awakened from your bleak lives of sin. Because Christ “slept” and “awakened” to new life, you too will sleep in death only to be raised with Christ. May you rejoice and share this joy with others because God daily wakes you from your sin. What better reason do we have in our lives to rejoice?

Isaiah 61:1-4

Redemption and Restoration

by Sarah Ryan

Crisp crunching underfoot, a white blanket of snow, tiny leaves pushing through thawed soil, long warm nights chasing fireflies.... No matter which is your favorite season, you can't wait to cherish each moment when it comes. Although the change is expected and certain, we still don't quite know when the first snowflakes or leaves will fall.

Isaiah proclaims there is One who has been blessed and anointed by God, chosen to preach, to heal, and to free the poor, brokenhearted, and enslaved. The anointed One brings an end to the seasons of grief, captivity, mourning, weakness, and despair. The pain in our lives will come to an end, either here in earthly time or there in heavenly eternity.

Just thinking about that kind of complete restoration catches my attention. When the year of the Lord's favor is declared, we will have comfort because He has replaced our sorrow with joy, beauty, gladness, and praise. Out of the abundance and completeness which fills us, we can't help but repair and restore brokenness around us.

We can be certain that restoration is coming and not just for a season: we will be claimed and restored as His people for eternity. Come quickly, Lord Jesus!

Galatians 4:4-7

Advent Potentials

by Ted Jungkuntz

Paul's use of words impacts me like the expectations of a pregnant woman (a good Advent topic). What's this baby going to be like?

Based on the Scripture, other questions come to mind.

“fullness of time”: Is someone in control?

“woman”: A virgin or an adulteress?

“under the law”: Protective or restrictive?

“adoption”: With the status of an heir or an illegitimate son?

“slave”: Of Satan or of God?

The story of Advent *is* ultimately that of God in Jesus Christ taking the evil of this world to the cross, thereby transforming it into the Gospel of His resurrection.

Reflection:

Do the thoughts that dominate your mind day and night represent an explicit Christian worldview?

- Growing old sucks
- Cancer is the pits
- Death will be a welcome end—period
- Marriage is for the birds and so are kids

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

"Written is the Story"

by Melissa Kasper

"Death is all around us. We are not afraid. Written is the story. Empty is the grave."

These are the words to one of my favorite worship songs, which is typically sung at Easter. I love the bold, fearless proclamation that we do not need to fear death because God's Story is already written. We, as God's people, know the story and the hope that is to come.

This story started when God, Himself, was born as a baby in a manger. God's people were waiting for a rescue. Jesus arrived to give them hope. He lived the perfect life to show us how to live. He died the perfect death to give us forgiveness from our sins. He rose again to give us freedom and power over sin and death. And He will come again to set the world right and bring His perfect kingdom to us here on earth.

Let us remember, this Advent season, the story unleashed when Jesus was born—the story that was written to save us from sin and death and give us hope as we wait for the arrival of God's kingdom here on earth.

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Something Worth Waiting For

by Corissa Mattson

Advent—it's a time of waiting. Not only are we waiting for the celebration of the birth of Jesus at Christmas, but also for his second coming when everything will be made right again. However, nobody particularly likes waiting. Whether it's waiting for a boring week to be over so you can get out of town or waiting in dread for the right moment to tell your child that a grandparent has cancer, it's not a comfortable position to be in. Quite often, stuck waiting, we neglect to live in the present, or conversely, we act impulsively, not willing to wait.

But God doesn't call us to passively wait for Christ to return, nor does he want us to give up hope in His timing. Instead, He calls us to be alert and not fall into the worldly belief that the peace and security we might be able to create for ourselves is good enough. Furthermore, we are called to support our brothers and sisters throughout the wait. It may not be an easy wait, but God's promises to us are not something that should be set aside even for a moment. Christ is coming soon, so Advent should serve to remind us not to wait in dread or indifference but with joyful anticipation and preparation as we share the good news with those around us.

1 Corinthians 15:20–28

We Know How It Ends

by Kristin Rathje

Not long ago, my granddaughter asked me to watch a “scary movie” with her. When I told her that I don’t like scary movies, she said, “It’s ok, Oma, I will sit next to you and cover your eyes if you get really scared.” So, figuring that I’d probably be ok if a four year old was coaching me into bravery, I agreed. Throughout the movie, just before each scary part came up, she put her little hand on my glasses so that I wouldn’t get too frightened. Toward the end of the movie, the scariest part of all, she narrated for me ahead of time exactly what was going to happen, so that I would know in advance that everything was going to be ok in the end.

And isn’t that what Paul does in this passage? I can almost hear him saying, “Look, things are going to get pretty dicey, and you might be tempted to freak out, which would make sense if Christ had not risen from the dead, but listen—Christ has risen from the dead!” And, as if he knows that’s not enough, Paul says, and “*so also in Christ shall all be made alive.*” We are all going to be made alive, just as Christ was made alive.

This past fall, early in Pastor Gabe’s series from Exodus, we heard the words of NT Wright, encouraging us to read Scripture “in order to be refreshed in our memory and understanding of the story within which we ourselves are

Colossians 1:15-20

God's Love for Us

by Marilyn Rothberg

When a baby is born, relatives say: He looks like his uncle, or he looks just like his brother. It says in the Bible that Jesus is the image of the invisible God. Jesus looks exactly like his Father.

We read about the attributes of Jesus: He has created all things, He is all powerful, and He existed before time. Christ is supreme over all, and He is in control.

As we celebrate the birth of Christ, we remember the traditional Christmas hymn, "Hark the Herald Angels Sing." As I recently sang the words, "Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled," I had an aha! moment. We are reconnected to God through Jesus!

Through the life and death of Jesus is God's plan for redemption and reconciliation for those who believe in His Son.

2 Peter 3:3-13

"The Days of Our Lives"

by Larry Frank

What did you do yesterday? No, seriously, what did you do yesterday? Get a pencil, write it all down, right here in the margin or the space provided in this booklet. Now ask—Was it important to you? To your family? To your church family? Did it help others in your community? Were any of the activities or things you were doing useful to your faith walk?

Questions, questions, there are a lot more questions—they abound, don't they? Or, are they just requests for "reflection"? A deeper search for "understanding"? So, how do these questions come upon us?

Do we overlook their origins in our lives? With our answers, do we think that our one day is but part of the "Lord's thousands of days"—and we will catch up later?

Scripture says repent, not next Sunday, now—why? (Read the passage again.)

Reflection:

Jesus came for you just yesterday! Jesus came next to you as you read this! Jesus will be there with you for all the other questions you have!

Mark 14:60-65

Whom Do You Love? Whom Do You Follow?

by Marv Fox

So, I'm listening to a comedian talk about advice he had been given by his grandmother regarding love and commitment. The advice was, "Don't stand on nothing you won't die for." To put it another way, be careful about the people you associate with and the causes you stand for because your love and commitment may be tested in ways that you are not prepared for.

His grandma had good advice because, as humans, we do proceed with caution. While we want to be willing to stand with those we love through adversity, that price is sometimes higher than we want to pay.

How blessed are we as believers that we get unlimited access to Someone who believes in and loves us so much, that he was willing to die for us. He knew what was coming, had the power to stop it, but knew we'd suffer in the end without his sacrifice. Thank you, Father, for allowing your only Son to die for our sins, so that we would not perish but have everlasting life. Praise God!

Jeremiah 33:14-17

The Hope of Christ in Our Daily-ness

by Angela Post

Oftentimes, the focus of the hope of Christ is the big picture: the birth of Christ, His death, His resurrection, and His second coming. However, the hope of Christ can, and should, permeate our day-to-day moments, even when it's not the Christmas season.

In those moments of pure joy, we remember that God has made *“a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line”* (v. 15a). In those moments of unspeakable heartbreak, we remember that Christ was born to *“do what is just and right in the land”* (v. 15b). In those moments when we are lying in our beds, listening to the rain pouring down, and binge watching the latest and greatest our favorite streaming service has to offer, we hold onto the truth that all Jesus, *“The Lord Our Righteous Savior”* (v. 16b) has, is, and will do for us is the truest and greatest testament to God’s love, mercy, and faithfulness to His people.

Micah 5:2-5

"But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah"

by Margaret Baker

This storied village, land of lush olive groves and shepherds' fields, has been woven into the salvation story brocade by our loving God. It was in Bethlehem, after all, where Naomi and Ruth sojourned, and where Boaz, a kinsman-redeemer of the Type who was to come, married Ruth adding her name to the genealogy of the future King. And there, another young king, David, ancestor of the One to come, enjoyed his boyhood, caring for his father's sheep on those very hills.

Then a millennium later, above those same hills, the doors of Heaven opened and God's heavenly angels sang for the gathered shepherds—terrifyingly and wonderfully—the song of a boy Savior, who is Christ the Lord, born in that little village. And finally, it was to that same village that the Gentile stargazers from the ends of the earth traveled, guided by Micah's very words of 700 years prior, to pay homage to that Savior King, the "ruler over Israel" to whom they were led by heavenly astral phenomena that He had arranged to guide them.

Bethlehem, "*small among the clans of Judah,*" that hallowed place where Emmanuel the king appeared to all. And still He shepherds His wayward flock. It is His joy to make us secure, for He came to be our peace. Even yours. Especially yours.

Ezekiel 34:11-31

The Good Shepherd

by Justin Beemer

Have you ever been to a shopping mall in December? The sea of people seems endless—crowds of people getting their last minute holiday shopping in. It's loud, chaotic, and confusing. It's quite easy to find yourself disoriented by the masses running from store to store.

Much like the shoppers in the crowd, we are all lost and overwhelmed. Separated from God by our sin, we walk in darkness and struggle to find our way through life. Without someone to guide us, we are hopeless. How thankful we are, then, that God himself has promised a Shepherd to rescue us, to seek us out, and to find us when we are lost.

That promise was fulfilled one night in Bethlehem a long time ago. Jesus is the one Shepherd who God promised to set over his people. In Him, we have a new covenant of peace and security. We are His people, and He is our God. What an incredible gift for us to celebrate this Christmas season!

Zechariah 8:1-8

Reconciled at Christmas

by Marcus Lane

Most of my memories of celebrating Christmas are associated with family. Whether traveling to Iowa as a child to my grandparents' farm or returning home as an adult to my parents' house to spend Christmas, I've always prioritized family during the Christmas season. But, have you ever experienced tension within your family during holiday gatherings? Whether it started with a political argument that led to shouting and name-calling or with your mom making a thoughtless comment about your sister's new boyfriend, the resulting discomfort overshadowed the joy of the season, didn't it? When individuals harbor anger and resentment toward one another, reconciliation is necessary in order for the celebration to be truly joyful.

Reconciliation was exactly what was taking place in Israel during the time of Zechariah. Returning to Jerusalem from their exile in the Babylonian Empire because of their worship of idols, the Israelites certainly felt discomfort over past failings. Fear of God's judgment and their own shame over their idolatry made joy and celebration impossible. Yet, into that fear and discomfort, God speaks the promise of reconciliation to his people: *"Behold, I will save my people from the east country and from the west country, and I will bring them to dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness"* (Zechariah 8:7-8).

Zephaniah 3:14-17

Shout Aloud and Rejoice

by Makayla Wyly

It is the holiday season! As family comes into town, gifts are bought, and cooking is finally coordinated, and there is an excitement in the air. Too often, though, our natural tendency is to become stressed, exhausted, and full of anxiety for the season of Christmas.

However, Zephaniah says that we should spend time doing the opposite of stressing—embracing intense joy along with relief because Jesus bore our punishment. This is a time to rejoice! God has provided this season: our punishment is removed, the enemy is turned back; the Lord our God is with us; Jesus is mighty to save; He delights in us; He sings over us. It's a holiday that is meant to have passion and singing, not stress.

This holiday season, let's approach each day with a new sense of zeal and vigor. Our enemy is defeated, the punishment is lifted, and the Mighty Warrior is born.

Isaiah 7:10-17

The Sign of Immanuel

by Mary Kay Liston

10 Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, 11 “Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.”

12 But Ahaz said, “I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test.”

13 Then Isaiah said, “Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? 14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and[e] will call him Immanuel. 15 He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, 16 for before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste. 17 The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah—he will bring the king of Assyria.”

Reflection:

Have you ever had the feeling of impending doom? What if God could send you a sign! Many times, we are facing a really challenging situation, and we want reassurance from God that we will be fine, but we are scared to test our faith

Matthew 1:18-25

Obedience... is a "Get To" not a "Have To"

by James Piazza

"Beloved son, please pass me the mallet and hold these two boards together so we can attach them"...words Jacob, Joseph and Albert, my father, likely shared while being culturally obedient, teaching their sons the carpentry trade.

"Happy to help, beloved father," may have been words Joseph, Jesus, and James shared when working with their earthly fathers, learning the carpentry trade and being obedient to the fifth commandment, "*Honor thy father and thy mother.*"

Joseph chose spiritual obedience when the angel of the Lord spoke the words, "*Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.*"

When our beloved Jesus was mounted upon the two attached boards, He chose heavenly obedience to his Father while also honoring the fifth commandment.

Luke 1:26-38

Relying on the Holy Spirit

by Becky Johnson

In these verses, Mary was being called to serve God in a unique way. She wonders how it will happen as she is unmarried and can't become pregnant on her own. Gabriel announces that God will and can do what she cannot. The Holy Spirit will fill her and conceive in her the very Son of God. For nothing is impossible with God.

This passage came alive to me thirty years ago when I was about to graduate from EMU with a teaching degree. All my life I had wanted to be a teacher, and I was about to reach that goal. However, shortly before graduation I was asked to consider working on staff for University Christian Outreach, a missionary organization working on the U of M campus. While I was honored by the offer, I felt afraid and intimidated. Do evangelism on U of M's campus? Share the Gospel with students in the dorms? God, what are you thinking? How can I do this ministry? Don't you know that Lutherans don't do this kind of evangelism?

As I prayed and sought God's direction, I opened to this passage of Scripture. Suddenly the words of this familiar passage took on a new meaning. This job was too big for me. But it wasn't too big for God. He promised that He would give the Holy Spirit to those who ask. He promised that nothing was too hard for Him. He could take this nervous Lutheran girl and teach her how to share Jesus with

Luke 1:39-56

The Excitement

by Tandy Mazak

Do you remember the excitement of waiting for Christmas? You made your list, you were 'extra' good during the month of December, and you felt like you were going to explode with anticipation. Then finally Christmas Eve arrived, and you were allowed to open that one present—which was always pajamas—so that on Christmas morning, everyone looked their best for pictures. What a feeling! All the built-up excitement and then the day was finally here.

As we have been reading the Scriptures throughout this season, we see that God has been building that excitement for us. He promised a Savior, our Savior Jesus Christ, and He is coming! So, when Elizabeth welcomes a visit from Mary, she is so overcome with joy and excitement at seeing her that she cries out, not just a little, but LOUDLY! Elizabeth and the baby she's carrying, John the Baptist, are filled with the Holy Spirit, and John leaps inside Elizabeth's womb. John the Baptist is so excited that he leaps! The time has finally come. What a feeling! Years of waiting for the coming Savior, and the day is finally here!

As we gather for Christmas and the excitement is building, let's remember that the Christ of Christmas is the reason for our excitement. The joy that our Savior has arrived and blesses us with gifts is the most blessed excitement.

Matthew 1:18-25

Listen Carefully

by Mark Liston

Guys, think about this.

You are engaged!

She is perfect. Then you find out she is pregnant!

Wait, allegedly not by another guy, then how?

You are hatching a plan for how she could move away for nine months, return home, and you tell people things “just didn’t work out.” You fall asleep that night trying to figure out how to pull this off. You have a dream that an angel, yes...an angel, comes to you and tells you to chill. All is fine. The baby will be the Savior of the world and you should name him Jesus.

You decide not to tell anyone about this because no one would believe it anyway. Besides, if this whole thing is true, what a ride the two of you are in for!

On your wedding night you let your wife know that you’ll wait until the baby is born to have relations with her—but that you can’t wait to spend your life with her.

I’m not sure the last time an angel appeared to any of us in the middle of the night, but I’d really have a tough time with this one in the morning!

Thank you!

Thank you, Pastor Gabe, for suggesting this project!

Thank you, to the authors who willingly prayed, thought, and wrote devotions to share with our ULC family.

Thank you, Norma Polk, for the beautiful cover design and creative layout!

Thank you, Hannah Maxey, for printing and assembling each book!

Lent is Coming! If you are interested in writing a devotion for the upcoming ULC Lenten devotion book, please contact any of the following:

gabekasper1@gmail.com

amytrobson@gmail.com

krathje66@gmail.com

Editors, Amy Robson and Kristin Rathje