

A bright, multi-colored star (blue, white, and yellow) is positioned at the top center of the page, set against a dark, starry night sky background. The word "LIGHT" is written in a large, white, outlined, serif font, centered below the star.

LIGHT

2020 Advent Devotional

December 1- 25, 2020

University Lutheran Chapel
Ann Arbor, MI

Graphic Design:

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Cover Photo:

The bright star in the photo is Deneb, a blue-white supergiant star in the constellation Cygnus. Deneb forms the "head" of the Northern Cross, a well-known asterism in the Northern hemisphere. Deneb is approximately 2,620 light years from Earth and its diameter is approximately 200 times that of the sun.

Photo Credit:

Dr. Timothy Polk, taken in Lutherville, MD on November 6, 2020, using a Skywatcher Esprit 100 telescope and ASI 1600 mm Pro astronomy camera.

“I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness;
I will take you by the hand and keep you;
I will give you as a covenant for the people,
a *light* for the nations,”
(Isaiah 42:6)

Thank you to the many writers who contributed their wisdom, insight, and love for God’s Word to this ULC Advent Devotional.

Thanks especially to Pastor Gabe who provided guidance through the process. May the reflections enrich your Advent season and draw you closer to the One True Light of the World!

Editors,
Margaret Baker and Norma Polk

Mark 13:33-37

“Stay Awake” | Pastor Gabe Kasper

Happy New Year! Today marks the start of a new church year and the beginning of the Advent season. During Advent we remember Christ’s birth, and we look forward to Christ’s return to redeem and restore all things.

In this passage from Mark 13, Jesus talks about his return. He talks about, in the words of R.E.M., when it will be “the end of the world as we know it,” the day when Jesus returns and God’s healing rule and reign will be on earth as it is in heaven. But! Jesus makes it a point to say that no one knows when that will be. So he adds, *“Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come”* (v. 33).

Jesus says to us today, “The end is near and you don’t know when it’s coming. So, stay awake.”

You were made for more than to simply pursue your version of the American dream. Stay awake.

You were made for more than to merely satisfy your carnal urges. Stay awake.

There is a God, who will one day judge the living and the dead. Stay awake.

There is a greater reality than just what you see. Stay awake.

Don’t get sucked into the trinkets and the toys and the false narratives our world throws at you. Stay awake.

John 1:1-5

“Almost Gone” | Janette Haak

In today's reading, John is telling us that Jesus is the Word of God, and we have the opportunity to shine that light and bring peace to others. And “others,” including the children in our lives. Indeed, it is our special responsibility to share God's word with the children.

Years ago, my views were changed about the importance of teaching young children God's word. I always knew it was important, but I didn't realize how much our culture was changing and influencing our children at a young age. This change came about after I read *Almost Gone* by Ken Ham. This book showed me the importance of the validity of God's infallible word. If young children do not understand that God's word, ALL OF IT, is true, then they are missing out. We need to remember to talk about Bible “accounts,” not Bible “stories.”

George Barna's book, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions*, contains some alarming statistics on this subject. “We discovered that the probability of someone embracing Jesus as his or her savior was 32% for those between the ages of 5 and 12; 4% for those between the ages of 13–18 age range; and 6% for people 19 or older. By age 13, your spiritual identity is largely set in place.”

Barna then goes on to remind us that we are not alone raising our children: “[W]e have to remember that it is not we who cause transformation but the Holy Spirit working through us that brings about such inner change. Our responsibility is not to do it all and to perform with perfection but to be available and diligent in our personal spiritual growth and

John 1:6-9**“Don’t Worship the Messenger”** | Todd Baker

Have you ever heard a sermon that really strengthened your faith in God? Are there people in your life who have helped you in your faith walk to know God better? Personally, I could make an endless list of people, experiences, places, and talks that served to challenge and grow my faith in God.

Now it would certainly be inaccurate to claim that the people who spoke to me were, in fact, God, or even that it was through their words and strength alone that God spoke to me. They may have been messengers of the Lord sent to me from Him with specific direction in a specific time of need, but my error would be to look to them and their human wisdom, rather than to the One who sent them.

Throughout history, in fact, people have fallen away from God by devoting their lives to just such messengers rather than to the One who sent the messenger. God does speak through others as they bear witness about Him, just as John the Baptist spoke to bear witness for Jesus. John makes the distinction very clear, however, *“John the Baptist himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light”* (v. 8).

Jeremiah 33:14-16**"Our Righteous Branch" | Eddie Godbold**

One of my favorite moments in C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* comes just after Aslan and the White Witch have a private discussion. They are meeting to determine the fate of the boy, Edmund, a traitor who, according to the law, is to be put to death.

After reaching an agreement with Aslan and preparing to leave, the Witch turns to Aslan and asks, "But how do I know this promise will be kept?" Aslan (the story's Christ-figure) simply responds with a roar, an almighty symbol of his faithfulness and justice.

Like Aslan, our God is faithful and just. He keeps his promises. In today's reading, we see God speak through the prophet Jeremiah to remind His people of this unfailing faithfulness: "*I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah*" (v. 14). It is worth remembering that the Israelites had not exactly been keeping up their end of the deal so far. Quite the contrary. In fact, they had consistently been breaking their covenant with God by partaking in idolatrous and unjust practices. Despite Israel's rebellion, though, God promises to remain faithful to the covenant and deliver His people.

How frequently do we fail to trust that God will deliver on His promises? How often are we, like Edmund and the Israelites in the stories above, unfaithful? Often, I imagine, as is the case for me. What a relief then, are the words that close today's reading: "*The Lord is our righteousness!*" (v. 16). Righteousness is not our promise to God. It is not something we must present before Him. Instead, God promises and presents His righ-

Isaiah 6:1-7**“Before the Throne of God Above”** | Paul Chamberlain

God is about to send Isaiah forth as a prophet to call the people of Israel to repentance and share the glorious hope of the coming Messiah who takes the form of a suffering servant. But first, God reveals himself to Isaiah and shows him a glimpse of his glory.

God is so glorious, the train of his robe fills the temple. The angels cry out, *“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!”* (v. 3). As Isaiah sees God’s incredible majesty, he cannot help but feel ashamed, lamenting both his sinfulness and the sinfulness of his people. Isaiah knows that he is unclean, and that his sin separates him from God. He knows he does not belong in God’s presence, nor do the people of Israel. But the story does not end there.

God takes away Isaiah’s guilt and atones for his sin. Here, Isaiah is cleansed by an angel with a burning coal from the altar, but our true and final atonement for sin comes from Jesus, the Lamb of God, who offers himself as a sacrifice on the altar of the cross to cleanse our guilt, take away our shame, and reconcile us to God.

Before God sends us out to do his kingdom work, we need to emulate Isaiah by experiencing his presence, understanding our immense debt of sin, and allowing ourselves to be redeemed by the “burning coal” of the Gospel.

This Advent, let’s remember Jesus’ incredible glory, and how he emptied himself to be born as a human, live a perfect life, die, and rise again so that we might live (cf. Philippians 2:5-11).

Romans 15:5-13**"You Got Chocolate in My Peanut Butter!"** | Dan Dolsen

I'm not sure when it happened, but one of the most cataclysmic events in human history occurred when chocolate and peanut butter collided. The world has never been the same. And we are all the better for it. All of us, that is, except for my dear Californian friend, Dave. He loves chocolate. He loves peanut butter. But for Dave, the two together is nothing less than *anathema* (his word, not mine)!

I am sharing this story with you not because I love the combination of chocolate and peanut butter (although I do!) but to connect us with the reality that this is the way the church can be when it comes to differences. We often separate on Sunday mornings based upon differences in theological perspectives, political views, race, socio-economic level, or something as simple as our taste in music. No matter the difference, the result is the same: disunity and a clear message that, "You don't belong here."

This divisive perspective is certainly contrary to Paul's message to the church in Rome. His view is that the church is an inclusive church. All are welcome! He plainly states that we should live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together we may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (v. 6). "*Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God,*" he admonishes the church of all generations (v. 7).

Psalm 43:3-5

“Light” | Shelby Kurz

Light cannot be hidden, it is revealing. All things seen are seen by reflections and cascades of light. I think the idea of light may be integrally connected to our capacity to hope: to hope the darkness around us may someday be filled with light. Both light and darkness are not only seen, but felt, this year, more strongly than either has been felt in quite some time. Darkness feels heavy to us, a burden. Light feels “light,” in a more vibrant sense, perhaps, than it ever has.

Advent is the Christian’s season of reflection and remembrance. It can serve as a time to unload on God the heaviness of the darkness we have been carrying, our holy sacrifice. When I think of the association of God to light, I think of these truths:

- God is in some way connected to all the little “lights” in our lives (the sun rising in the morning, the light of a beloved’s face, feelings of belonging).
- God’s light is infinite and for us all. He does not exclude. He fills the Advent season with love and light and hope for all men.
- Darkness will pass, and somewhere, whether or not I can see it today, the true light shines. This is our peace.

Psalm 27:1-5**“God Is All Around Me—I Will Not Be Afraid”** | Mary Kay Liston

I have always enjoyed reading the newspaper. Before going to church on Sunday, in fact, my goal is to at least start reading the New York Times Sunday edition. I call it my “mind candy.”

Yes, I am fully aware that the goal of any newspaper or TV show is to present just enough programming to keep people coming back to help sell advertising. How am I so sure? I spent over 25 years working in television! I know for a fact that programming is simply the fluff between the commercials.

The nice thing about reading a newspaper versus watching TV or listening to the radio news is that I can choose to pay attention to those articles which appeal to me. And there are no printed commercials. Admittedly, it is not as much fun to read as it used to be.

So here we are in 2020. If you choose to live in fear, there is plenty to worry about. Covid-19. Violence in our streets. Uncertainty. Racial discord. And all this is just in our homeland. Is there another way to live?

Consider our Bible verse Psalm 27:1-4

The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? (v. 1)

It is my enemies and foes who will stumble and fall (v. 2)

My heart will not fear (v. 3)

*My I seek only to dwell in the house of the Lord all the days
of my life (v. 4)*

Ps. 119:105-106

“Your Word Is a Lamp to My Feet” | William Cannon

Some of the fondest memories of childhood are going on “night hikes” with my dad. These excursions are exactly what you would imagine: my dad and I walking through some woods in the dark without flashlights. The darkness would often seem to be too much, making it impossible to move forward. Every time, though, my dad would remind me that eventually our eyes would adjust and we would see that there was enough light to make out the path.

Walking by faith is similar. There are times the darkness around seems to obscure the path forward. Your eyes have not yet adjusted to the light around you. The psalmist in this passage gives us a promise to hold during these times of uncertainty: God’s word is a light for us as we live in this world of darkness. He then follows that comforting promise with a somewhat strange statement: *“I have taken an oath and confirmed it, that I will follow your righteous laws”* (v. 106). What does he mean?

In this phrase, the psalmist is expressing his complete and utter obedience to follow the path through this world that the Lord himself has laid out and for which He has also provided the light to see. God has not shed light into this world for us to blaze our own path, but to willingly choose to follow His. Psalm 119 is a prayer expressing love for and obedience to God’s commands. Despite the darkness around us, God’s light shines—we only need to allow our eyes to adjust.

John 12:35-36

“Overtaking the Darkness” | Tony Creeden

Darkness is a funny thing. Mostly because it’s not a thing at all. Similar to the idea of something being empty, meaning “nothing is in it,” describing a place as, “dark” simply means that it “lacks light.” We know this because if you open the door to a dark basement, darkness does not come flooding into the room. Instead, the light from the room you are in illuminates the darkness. That is the way it always works; light overtakes the dark. So why is Jesus concerned about the darkness overtaking His followers? Simply stated, they were confused.

Old Testament passages such as Psalm 89:4, and 110:4, and Isaiah 9:7 all speak of a Messiah who will remain forever. Yet, the Messiah has just explained that He is going to die (v. 32). See the confusion? Jesus’ words left the people wondering, “Have we had it wrong this whole time? Who, then, is the Messiah?” To complicate things further, Jesus’ answer is equally confusing, *“Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you.”*

You can almost hear them murmuring, “OK, OK...interesting. How does that answer our question?” Moreover, what they did not know at the time was that things were about to get very dark, indeed. Jesus would be arrested and killed in what would appear to them to be a very unmessiah-like fashion, tempting them to abandon their faith in Him. So, before those dark days are upon them, Jesus invites them to stick with Him, the Light, so that they would believe and become, “sons of light,” that is, those who inherit the light.

Ephesians 5:6-14

“Playing With Fire?” | Adela Baker

If you spent quarantine bingeing “Tiger King,” the Netflix true crime documentary series that premiered March of this year, you were not alone. Ten days after its release, the show had garnered 34 million views. In fact, a quick survey of American genre trends in entertainment and media reveals a broad fascination with true crime. I love my playlist of murder podcasts as much as the next neighborhood power walker, but I have often wondered if our cultural obsession with human evil is playing with fire, inviting this darkness to take up dwelling space in our minds and hearts.

In this Ephesians passage, Paul makes clear how we as Christians should position ourselves in relation to these “fruitless deeds of darkness.” As far away as possible, while exposing them for their corruptive nature (v. 10). It strikes me, though, that this can be a difficult balance. How might fearlessly proclaiming evil creep towards an obsession with identifying and dwelling on this evil? When does relentless exposure turn into morbid fascination? As C.S. Lewis puts it in *The Screwtape Letters*, “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them.”

So how are we to navigate this tightrope walk and avoid Lewis’ “excessive and unhealthy interest” in the things of darkness? Paul points us to the only possible solution: by aligning our hearts with the Lord. By finding out what pleases the Lord and intentionally tuning our actions to His desires, we ensure that our work to expose evil in our midst is for His glory, not our entertainment. Only when we allow Christ to shine upon us

1 Peter 2:4-9

"An Unprecedented Peace" | Abby Haggard

If you're anything like me, you've grown tired of hearing the terms "unprecedented" and "uncertain" when referring to the various tragedies of 2020. Most emails and updates I get use these terms to describe what's going on before alerting us of yet another change in these "unprecedented times."

However repetitive it may be, these are the right terms to use. Our lives, worldviews, and opinions have shifted in a million directions this year in the midst of a global pandemic, incidences of injustice, and a contentious election. It feels as though nothing has remained the same.

Amid the chaos that is this year, however, there is a marvelous peace that we as Christians get to cling to. It is the living stone, our cornerstone, as Peter puts it in this passage. It is a peace that comes from the fact that Christ came down from heaven, was born and laid in a manger on that holy Christmas night, and then humbly lived and died as a man. He suffered with our sins pinned against him but rose again in glorious light, so that we may spend the rest of eternity with him.

While we dwell in this world for now, know that this is not our forever home. Our Heavenly Father has made us his own, claimed us as citizens of his kingdom, and reminded us that we are not alone. We live as members of His family, a holy nation! We get to rest in His unchanging grace, mercy, and faithfulness every day. While we are here, cling to the fact that He is our cornerstone, and that nothing in this world can ever change that. The story of our redemption will never be taken away from us because the battle is already won. He has won it for us.

Isaiah 60:1-3**"Telling Good Tidings to Zion (and Beyond)!"** | Margaret Baker

When I read Isaiah 60:1-3, I cannot help but hear the corresponding alto solo and chorus from Handel's "Messiah" burst forth from the page: "O thou that tells good tidings to Zion, say unto the cities of Judah, behold your God." This is good news, music at its finest, and these first three verses of Isaiah 60 are nothing if not Good News.

As with so many prophetic passages in Isaiah, this passage has multiple fulfillments. When the Israelites were delivered from Egypt, for example, the Lord's bright glory rose in their midst, a "pillar of fire," enabling them to travel by day or by night (Exodus 13:21). At the first Christmas, the light of the glory of God showed up in human history, in a Bethlehem manger, into a world submerged in the "thick darkness" of Roman rule and oppression. Of that event, Isaiah even adds the remarkable details that would come to pass some 700 years afterwards: "*The riches of the nations*" would come to this divine light, proclaiming His praise, bearing "*gold and incense*" (v. 5-6). The Magi!

And right now, this passage is true as well. How we need the reality of the glory of the Lord rising upon us, as we wander in a confusing, sometimes tragic, often dark world. We know this glory, the glory of the One and Only. We have been freed from sin. We praise Him that His light is here, no less bright than it was when it shone for the Israelites or in Bethlehem.

And herein lies our challenge. Isaiah tells us that in times of hopelessness—and this era certainly qualifies—nations will come to this light, even "Kings" to the brightness of His dawn. Are we ready to prepare a testi-

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

“From Blindness to Light” | Thad Polk

Who doesn't love Ann Arbor? We have terrific schools and universities, excellent hospitals, wonderful restaurants, and world-class arts and culture. We have...well, um, had...a great football team. The local population is diverse, highly educated, and prosperous. We've got a lot to be proud of.

The Corinthians in Paul's day also had a lot to be proud of. Corinth was a critical route between Europe and Asia and therefore a very important city, visited by many. Like Ann Arbor, Corinth had a diverse, educated, and prosperous population. The Corinthians highly valued Greek philosophy and would probably have considered themselves relatively wise.

But that worldly wisdom was of no help in seeing the truth of the gospel. In fact, in this passage we see that putting trust in their own wisdom blinded their minds, veiled the gospel, and kept them from seeing the light (vv. 3-4). As Paul explained to this same audience in 1 Corinthians 2:14: *“The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”*

Sounds like Ann Arbor, don't you think? We have some amazingly smart people in our community: Nobel laureates, Pulitzer Prize winners, and the very best students from all over the world. But despite their impressive intellectual achievements (indeed, perhaps partly because of them), many of these people lack spiritual discernment. The truth of the gospel is thus veiled to them, and “the things of the Spirit of God” appear to them as “folly.”

I John 1: 4-7**“Staying the Course of Truth = Complete Joy”** | Julie Piazza

The message of faith in God is simple. And yet we often find ways to make it more complicated and stressful. From the words of John come this simple truth: *“God is light, in Him there is no darkness at all...If we walk in the light...we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus purifies us from all sin (and darkness)”* (vv. 5,7). God has not shed light into this world for us to blaze our own path, but to willingly choose to follow His.

In our current uncertainty, divisiveness, and an international pandemic, these words ring true. We need our Savior now more than ever to get through these challenges and pain. And we need one another to be “Jesus” with skin on in the world, offering fellowship with our communities and families (safely with masks and virtually!). Sharing His message of truth and hope yields complete joy. It becomes a full circle of joy for us too. When we are walking with God and seeking His guidance we are on a course of refinement (sanctification).

Joy is preceded by suffering, and clearly we all are experiencing in that in some measure this year. Yet we know that God is on the move through our daily reminders of His presence: life experiences, times of sweet fellowship and answered prayers.

We have all learned new paths as we have navigated illness, Zoom logistics, and safely-distance gatherings and work spaces. These pivots have not been easy and have caused grief losses from cancellations,

John 3:16-21**"For Me" | Becky Johnson**

A secret meeting at night. A member of the ruling council talking to Jesus under cover of darkness. In the middle of this private, personal conversation, Jesus speaks the words that are now known around the world—*"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son...."* This isn't just a generic message of love, but a personal one. Jesus spoke these words that summarize his mission to one struggling Pharisee. For God so loved you, Nicodemus. This message that has been trivialized and taken for granted, is both personal and global. For God so loved me that he sent his one and only Son. For me.

But do I really need this message? Am I really that bad? This is the verdict: we love the darkness because our deeds are evil, and we do not want the truth exposed. That is not just a judgment on others; it's on me as well. Have you ever been caught doing something wrong? Someone calls you out for gossiping or losing your temper or harboring unforgiveness. They shine light on that sin. What is your response? Is it, "Thanks so much for helping me see my sin?" No, more often, we attack the one pointing out our sin, blaming, excusing, denying—not wanting our deeds exposed to the light.

We are no different from the Pharisees who sought to kill Jesus. We hate to have our sin exposed. Why? Could it be that I have not truly believed this message that God has sent His Son into the world not to condemn it, but to save it? Could it be that I, too, need to receive again this truth, *"For God so loved me that he gave Jesus so that I might not perish but have eternal life?"* As I allow that message to sink into my soul,

Isaiah 40:1-11**“What Is a Herald Anyway?”** | by Larry Frank & Margaret Baker

At Christmas, we all love to sing, “Hark the herald angels sing.” What exactly is a herald, and how can pondering this enrich our faith? Merriam-Webster tells us that a herald is an official messenger who brings good news. Obviously, in this case, the herald angels were those sent specifically with the joyful task of announcing the good news of the birth into human history of the Redeemer. “Glory to the newborn King!” they cried out exuberantly.

Does this good news still enthrall us here in 2020? Think of the most exciting news you ever received. What was it about? Have you ever welcomed a “king?” Stood by the side of the road while “a herald” announced his coming? Were there others waiting on that road too? What were you or they cheering for? Do you receive the Christmas news with the same excitement?

We should! We are welcoming a king, and not just any king, but the King of the Universe. Does this news comfort you, carry you closer to His heart? If not, what needs to happen to open your heart up? What, in your life, needs leveling or shoring up before He comes? How can you prepare the way for Jesus to come into your life, or help others prepare the way for Him to enter theirs?

These are the days in Advent that we Christians get to prepare by singing, harmonizing at the tops of our voices with the angels:

John 9:1-7

“On Blindness” | by Mark Liston

The story is certainly one of the more memorable of Jesus’ healing accounts. The disciples see a blind man and inquire as to whether it was his sins, or perhaps his parents’ sins, that caused him to be born blind. Jesus puts mud on the man’s eyes then tells him to wash it off. Suddenly, he can see! Everyone should have been glad for the blind man. He was blind, but now he sees. It seemed so simple.

But the following verses from John 9 tell the proverbial “rest of the story.” And it was not simple. Here is what transpired next:

- Neighbors did not believe. They even conjectured that the healed person was merely someone who resembled the blind man. (v. 8)
- He was brought to the Pharisees, whose rude interrogations indicated that they did not care that they had, in fact, seen a miracle, and that this formerly blind man now had sight (v. 15)
- The Pharisees, in fact, were more concerned that the healing had happened “illegally,” on the Sabbath (v. 16).

Most everything that Jesus did caused great angst with many observers, and especially with the Pharisees. They were not interested in His potential identity. Instead, they hoped to “catch” Him in what they deemed to be legal transgressions. Remember their anger when Jesus healed the crippled man on the Sabbath? Or their indignation when the man then walked away, healed! They could only quibble about the “crime” of him carrying his mat, another Sabbath infraction. They were focused on what was “wrong” and refused to see the amazing good that was occurring.

Luke 3:1-6

“Prepare the Way of the Lord” | Zane Simon

Christian musician Jeremy Riddle describes the season of Advent perfectly in his song “Prepare The Way Of The Lord”: “Make straight paths for His feet. Clear a way in the streets. Prepare your hearts to meet the One who is coming.” Throughout Scripture, we see these three themes repeated over and over again. As His people, we are called to make straight paths for His feet, clear a way in the streets, and prepare our hearts to meet the One who is coming.

When we look to the first coming of Christ, we see each theme expressed. John the Baptist preached in the wilderness that the Messiah was coming. Through calling the people to repentance, John the Baptist made straight paths for Christ’s feet. The people of Jerusalem then literally cleared a way in the streets during the Triumphal Entry (Matthew 21:1-11). For us, to clear a way for Christ is to clean our “streets” spiritually, by removing negative influences that might be obstacles between us and Christ. The Parable of Ten Bridesmaids (Matthew 25:1-13), which Jesus tells late in His earthly ministry, similarly reminds us to prepare our hearts for our final presentation before God, when we will meet Him face-to-face.

This preparation is the heart of the season of Advent. We all should prepare the way of the Lord by reflecting on His suffering, death, and resurrection. His ultimate act of mercy, completed by following with perfect obedience the path which was prepared for Him by the Father, and delivered through the words of the prophets, gives us assurance of the forgiveness of our sins, so that we may be brought blamelessly before our God.

Isaiah 11:1-10

“Celebrating Two Advents” | Elisabeth Komurka

Isaiah 11:1-10 opens with the promise of the Coming Messiah, Jesus Christ (v. 1), and ends with the promise that He shall restore all of creation to God (vv. 6-10). It is a lovely and happy and very nice Christmas story for us to rejoice in, because it reminds us of the promise Jesus Christ fulfills.

However, there's something between the Coming and the Restoration which was skipped over in the first sentence of this devotional. What was it again? Right, the judgment of the earth and slaying of the wicked (Isaiah 11:4). This is a bit dark, and at first glance does not seem appropriate to ponder on in the typical Christmas season.

Yet, it is critical. The restoration of creation to God will be messy. This will not be a peaceful, democratic process such as drawing straws or picking teams in a gym class. Jesus himself says, *“Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword”* (Matthew 10:34). The restoration will be difficult and painful. And this can be uncomfortable to think about. To get to the age of all creation being made right with God, all of creation must first be judged, no exceptions.

Isaiah tells us that He will not judge on the basis of words or deeds (Isaiah 11:3). While we should reflect Christ's love for Man to our neighbors in our thoughts, words and deeds as an expression of our thankfulness for receiving God's forgiveness and grace through our faith (James 2:17-24, 26), it is not by those thoughts, words or deeds that God will judge us. How then will we be judged? By faith: we are reconciled to God

and made righteous to him through our faith. This great truth is demonstrated beginning with Abraham, as related in Genesis 15:6, *“And Abram believed God, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.”*

This righteousness is extended to all those with faith, regardless of background: *“For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith”* (Romans 4:13).

To the faithful of Jesus Christ, the judgment between Jesus’s First Coming and the Restoration is truly a message of hope. Because of our faith in Jesus Christ, we do not need to fear this coming judgment: *“Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”* (Romans 5:1). God has invited us into a personal relationship with Him, an invitation literally embodied by Jesus and His arrival on the first Christmas. And we, like the faithful virgins who do not waste the oil for their lamps (Matthew 25:1-13), wait in this Second Advent until we can celebrate His return. It is for that reason that we can rejoice in two advents this holiday season, one for each Coming of Christ.

Reflection:

Ponder the two Advents. What does it mean to wait faithfully?

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Zephaniah 3:14-17**"Taking Away, Giving Rest" | Logan Davis**

It is only a few days before Christmas! It is such an exciting time, as people prepare to give each other their presents. But it is this action that has us so entangled. On every poster, in every advertisement, within every store there is some sort of push to get people to buy "that perfect gift" to give. "Giving," after all, is the proverbial "Meaning of Christmas," at least as the commercials and stores, would have us believe. And truly, many do love to give presents more than to receive them. But what if the true meaning of Christmas was not about giving, but rather about taking? Today's reading from Zephaniah is making precisely this point. The theme that recurs over and over again is the theme of Jesus taking away our sin. He takes away first, then gives.

Jesus came into this world not to give us all different rules that we need to live by, or things that we need to do in order to be saved. No! Rather He has come into the world to take away our judgments, our enemies, our fear of evil. And in taking these things away, He gives rest. God did not leave us alone with the things that entrap us, but rather loves us so much that He sent His Son into this world to take away these things and free us from bondage to them.

As we continue in this season, remember that God gave to us the most valuable gift, His Son, and that He had to first take away our sin so that we could receive this gift. As we enjoy both giving and receiving presents this Christmas, above all, may we all find freedom and life in Him.

Matthew 1:18-25

“Immanuel, God with Us” | Ashleigh Creeden

Most often it seems that Luke’s account receives the spotlight in the telling of Jesus’ birth, but as I dig into this text from Matthew, I am struck by his arresting writing of the account of Joseph. Here, in all of its rawness, I see an account of a juxtaposition of wills. As a reader, I experience an almost visceral moment where the will of man and the will of God collide. Joseph has his plans to divorce Mary quietly, thinking he is doing the right and honorable thing. But ironically, his plan is not right at all. Once the angel of the Lord illuminates God’s plan of redemption through his family, Joseph abruptly and remarkably abandons his previous perspective and plan, and obediently follows God. He remains with Mary and claims this baby as his own, naming him Jesus as the couple had been directed.

One look into our own lives, and we see a similar tension between our will and God’s. Unlike Joseph, we do not often have an angel of the Lord appear to us to direct us so clearly in the way God would have us go. However, what we do have is highlighted for us right in this text, bringing to generations across the ages an abundance of peace: *“And they will call his name Immanuel” (which means, ‘God is with us’)* (v. 23).

Jesus, Immanuel, changed everything. We have a God who is with us. A God who is working in our lives through every step and is present with us through suffering and deliverance alike. In times as tumultuous, uncertain, and stressful as this year has been, to know and hold dear this living reminder that we have a God who is actively with us is something that ultimately brings peace in our sufferings, comfort in our uncertainty, and guidance amidst our stress.

Luke 2:8-20

“Responding in Faith” | Norma Polk

When I was a teenager, stargazing was one of my favorite pastimes. My father made me a map of the constellations so I could find them in the sky. I still enjoy looking at the sky at night, especially in a field when it's pitch dark; God's creation is amazing and beautiful!

Now imagine those Bethlehem shepherds watching over their flock at night in a vast grazing field. As there was no light pollution around, it would have been quite dark. They were probably admiring the stars and constellations, which they undoubtedly knew well. They may have even seen some falling stars. As they gazed upwards, an angel of the Lord appeared, and the glory of God shone around them. Suddenly, it was so bright they were terrified! They saw and heard this heavenly angel bringing good news, the best news ever: *“Unto you is born today in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord!”* (v. 11).

The angel also informed them that they would see a sign, *“a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger”* (v. 12). Apparently, this good news required even more light, for next they were treated to an appearance by *“the great company of the heavenly host praising God!”* (v. 13). What an event! A dark sky turned really bright, an angel of the Lord showing up, the good news communicated, and a promise of peace, heard.

Now what? The text tells us that the shepherds agreed to go to Bethlehem, the city of David, to see that baby. This was, of course, not an ordinary sign made by men, but a sign that God gave them, a miraculous sign. The shepherds told the people there about what had happened

Matthew 4:14-16

“There’s No Place Like Home: From Dwelling in Darkness to Finding Rest in the Light of Christ” | Kyle Gontjes

When asked about her adventure in the Land of Oz, Dorothy famously declared, “If I ever go looking for my heart’s desire again, I won’t look any further than my own backyard.” She learned, “There’s no place like home.” All along, it turns out, Dorothy was looking for her heart’s desire “in all the wrong places,” as country artist Johnny Lee famously opined. Are we sometimes like Dorothy or that hapless singer?

Today’s passage, Matthew 4:14-16, provides context for this idea, as it describes Jesus moving His ministry back to Capernaum, the “Galilee of the Gentiles.” The Jews and Gentiles in this region are described as *“dwelling in the land of the shadow of death,” “living in darkness”* (v. 16).

What could this mean? How can one be dwelling in darkness? Perhaps it is more helpful to ask how—without Jesus—one could dwell in anything *but* darkness? For without Him, that is exactly where we dwell: in restless, pitch-black darkness.

Today’s passage reminds us, however, that through Jesus’ ministry, we are graciously shown a great light that seeks to reclaim and re-orient our hearts, away from the shadow of death and towards rest in Christ! Saint Augustine reminds us of this process with these words: “You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” We are made for Him, and only in Him, can we find the rest we crave.

Celebrate and rejoice, my brothers and sisters, for the coming of Christ shines a great light that overpowers the shadow of death and

Isaiah 2:1-5

“Shalom” | Pastor Marcus Lane

Maybe you have heard this word before. In the Old Testament it is often translated, “peace.” This word carries a lot of meaning. It means wholeness or a state of health. When there is shalom, things are as they were meant to be: no warfare, sickness, death, poverty, or hunger. Shalom means that things are set right. The story of Scripture ultimately asks, “How can the world, which is so evidently flawed and broken, be set right? How will God bring about his shalom?”

There is no question that we still long for shalom. Endless wars, hatred and violence, centuries old wounds of racism still have not been properly attended to, and sickness and disease are ever-present. If we take an honest look at the world, cynicism seems more appropriate than hope. While creation groans, we ache for shalom.

Now, you might have noticed the word “shalom” never appears in Isaiah 2:1–5. Although Isaiah does not say the word, he gives a picture of it. War between nations is replaced by a unified allegiance to the one true God. Instead of learning violence, people learn the way of Yahweh. Tools of death and destruction are refashioned into tools of restoration. The world will not be ruled by force, but by the just rule and instruction of Yahweh. The world as we know it will be turned upside-down. And this brings us back to the central question of Scripture: “How can the world, which is so evidently flawed and broken, be set right? How will God bring about his shalom?”

If shalom is upside-down, it must come from a king who is upside-down, who comes not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ran-

