

# AWAKENING EXPECTATION



ADVENT & CHRISTMAS DEVOTIONAL 2024

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# INTRODUCTION

*While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness.*

– 1 Thessalonians 5:3–5

As I began designing this year's Advent devotional graphic, a single image continued to illuminate my thoughts: a flickering candle casting a warm, soft glow, breaking through the surrounding darkness. This image lingered as I reflected on the Nativity of Christ and our theme from 1 Thessalonians.

Some days, the hope of Christ's return feels just like that image of a candle—a small, fragile light against the deep, blinding darkness. The pain, sin, and suffering in the world feel overpowering, almost threatening to consume the glow of one small flame. **How do we, during Advent, hold together the excitement and anticipation of Christ's coming—the great light that broke into the darkness (Isaiah 9:2)—with the darkness we still see and feel in our world today?**

Christ came over 2,000 years ago as a light to a people who dwelt in darkness. But we know it doesn't just end there. This Advent season, I am reminded that as we anticipate Christ's arrival as an infant, we also experience Emmanuel—God with us in our present. He continues to be the light dwelling in our present darkness. A reminder of what has been accomplished and the promise of His return in Glory.

So, as 1 Thessalonians reminds us, we are now children of the light, bringing the tangible glow of Christ to a world dwelling in darkness. We carry His light so that others might catch a glimpse of the glory to come—the fullness of God's light like we see in Revelation.

*The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it.*

– Revelation 21:23–24

This Advent, may we reflect on what it means to live as children of the light, carrying the flame of Christ's love into a world that longs for His promised return.

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This year's devotional—entitled *Awakening Expectation*—draws on themes from 1 Thessalonians about the "day of the Lord" and the readings from 2 Peter concerning the second coming. It guides us through the Advent season as a time to reawaken our expectant hope for Christ's return. By reflecting on both the Nativity and the promised second coming, we renew our anticipation and spiritual preparedness, deepening our awareness of God's unfolding plan from Advent to Epiphany.

This devotional was created with contributions from 27 authors from the North American Lutheran Church (NALC), each bringing their own reflections and insights. The daily readings are based upon the lectionary provided in the NALC *Devoted to Prayer* daily prayer and reading guide, an adapted version of the daily lectionary in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*.

PDF copies of this devotional booklet are available for download from the NALC website for individual use or for distribution in congregations. Additionally, you may access the devotional electronically or sign up to receive it as a daily email or text message by visiting [thenalc.org/advent](http://thenalc.org/advent). May this devotional help awaken expectation and deepen our spiritual journey in this season of preparation and joy.

**Ariel Wicker**

Associate Director of Communications

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# THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

*Stir up your power, O Lord, and come.*

*Protect us by your strength and save us from the threatening dangers of our sins,  
for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

## December 1, 2024 | First Sunday in Advent

*Nicholas Ferrar, Deacon, 1637*

*Isaiah 1:1–9; 2 Peter 3:1–10; Matthew 25:1–13; Psalms 24 & 150 (AM); Psalms 25 & 110 (PM)*

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<sup>25:1</sup> "At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. <sup>2</sup> Five of them were foolish and five were wise. <sup>3</sup> The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. <sup>4</sup> The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. <sup>5</sup> The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

<sup>6</sup> "At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!'

<sup>7</sup> "Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. <sup>8</sup> The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.'

<sup>9</sup> "No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.'

<sup>10</sup> "But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

<sup>11</sup> "Later the others also came. 'Lord, Lord,' they said, 'open the door for us!'

<sup>12</sup> "But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I don't know you.'

<sup>13</sup> "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

– Matthew 25:1–13 NIV2011



Dear friends, greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus as we begin a new year in the life of the Church, and a new season in the Church's life.

The theme chosen for this year's devotional, *Awakening Expectation*, takes us from this first day in Advent—a time when we patiently wait for the celebration of our Lord's birth and look forward to His second coming—to the Day of Epiphany—that day when we remember our Lord's Baptism and are reminded that the fullness of God truly has been revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Throughout the entire witness of the Scriptures, the Old and New Testaments alike, the people of God were an expectant people. They were expecting the promises of God to be fulfilled. They were expecting the Messiah to be born and to be revealed. As a result, in spite of their repeated unfaithfulness, they waited patiently for that day to happen, knowing that when it happened, they would need to be ready.

The passage we read today picks up on those same expectant and anticipating themes. It's the first of three stories in chapter 25 of Matthew's gospel, that remind us that the Day of the Lord is coming, that the day when Jesus will return to this world (in person) and bring this world as we know it is coming. It's going to happen. So, stay awake in your life and be alert, because if you're not ready when it happens it'll be too late.

The story of ten maidens, waiting for the bridegroom. They were an expectant group. They knew the bridegroom was coming. It was going to be, for them, a day to celebrate and rejoice. But the bridegroom, Matthew says, was “a long time in coming,” so they all become drowsy and fell asleep.

When it finally happened and the bridegroom arrived, they all woke up and trimmed their lamps. But only five had planned ahead and were ready. The other five were not and were left behind. By the time they caught up and arrived at the celebration, it was too late. The door was shut, and they were not let in.

“Therefore, keep watch (Jesus tells us), because you do not know the day or the hour.”

All kinds of things in this life can cause us to be unprepared. All kinds of things in this world can keep us from being ready for the day of our Lord’s return. Advent serves as a reminder to all of us that it can happen suddenly, that it’s easy in this life to spiritually fall asleep.

As we begin this season of Advent, take the reminder and the warning to heart. We are an expectant people. We know that day is coming when our Lord will return again and call us all home. Keep your spiritual eyes open. Keep your faith eyes fixed on Christ. He is going to return, and when he does, it’s for you.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, we thank You for Your love and Your faithfulness, and for Your promise that the day is coming when You will return. Help us to remain an expectant people, assured in Your promises and certain of Your return. Amen.

*Devotion written by the Rev. Dr. Daniel W. Selbo (dselbo@thenalc.org)*

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## December 2, 2024 | Monday of the First Week in Advent

*Isaiah 1:10–20; 1 Thessalonians 1:1–10; Luke 20:1–8; Psalms 122 & 145 (AM); Psalms 40 & 67 (PM)*

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<sup>1:10</sup> Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom!

Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!

<sup>11</sup> “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD;

I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts;

I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.

<sup>12</sup> “When you come to appear before me,

who has required of you this trampling of my courts?

<sup>13</sup> Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me.

New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly.

<sup>14</sup> Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates;

they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them.

<sup>15</sup> When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you;

even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.

<sup>16</sup> Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;

remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil,

<sup>17</sup> learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression;



bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.

<sup>18</sup> "Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD:

though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow;

though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.

<sup>19</sup> If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land;

<sup>20</sup> but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

– Isaiah 1:10–20 ESV



As we prepare for the coming of Christ during this Advent season, Isaiah 1:10-20 reminds us of God's deep call for repentance and His gracious invitation. In these verses, God rebukes Israel for their empty rituals and calls them to true righteousness. Advent, too, calls us to prepare our hearts by turning away from sin and turning toward God in faith.

Verse 18 says, "Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool." Here, we see a powerful image of God's mercy. According to the Augsburg Confession in the *Book of Concord*, repentance involves two parts: "contrition" (the heartfelt sorrow over sin) and "faith" (the belief that sins are forgiven for Christ's sake). This passage from Isaiah reflects both—God's call to acknowledge our sin and His promise to cleanse us through grace.

In Isaiah, God warns against trusting in empty religious actions. The same warning is echoed in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, which emphasizes that outward works alone do not justify us before God; only faith in Christ can bring true righteousness. In Advent, we are reminded that preparation for Christ's coming means more than external actions—it requires a heart transformed by faith.

God's invitation to "reason together" in Isaiah resonates with the Lutheran understanding of justification by faith. As the Augsburg Confession teaches, we are not made righteous by our own efforts but solely by God's grace, which is received through faith. This grace, freely given, is the heart of the Gospel and the message we anticipate each Advent.

As we reflect on Isaiah's message and prepare for Christmas, let us come before God in true repentance, confident in His promise of forgiveness and transformation through Christ. Advent calls us to receive this grace anew, as we await the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises in the coming of Christ.

**Prayer:** Gracious and merciful God, we come before You in repentance, trusting in Your promise to make us clean through the work of Christ. Prepare our hearts to receive Your grace during this Advent season. Help us to live not by our works but by faith, knowing that in Christ, we are made righteous. In Jesus' name, Amen.

*Devotion written by the Rev. Tony D. Ede (tede@thenalc.org)*

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**December 3, 2024 | Tuesday of the First Week in Advent**

**Francis Xavier, Missionary to Asia, 1552**

**Jantine Auguste Haumersen, First Ordained Female Lutheran Pastor, 1967**

*Isaiah 1:21–31; 1 Thessalonians 2:1–12; Luke 20:9–18; Psalms 33 & 146 (AM); Psalms 85 & 94 (PM)*

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<sup>20:9</sup> And he began to tell the people this parable: "A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants and went into another country for a long while. <sup>10</sup> When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, so that they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. <sup>11</sup> And he sent another servant. But they also beat and treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. <sup>12</sup> And he sent yet a third. This one also they wounded and cast out. <sup>13</sup> Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.' <sup>14</sup> But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours.' <sup>15</sup> And they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? <sup>16</sup> He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others." When they heard this, they said, "Surely not!" <sup>17</sup> But he looked directly at them and said, "What then is this that is written: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone?"

<sup>18</sup> Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him."

– Luke 20:9–18 ESV



During Advent, we prepare for the coming of Christ—both His birth and His return. In Luke 20, Jesus tells the parable of the wicked tenants, where a landowner sends servants to collect fruit from his vineyard. The tenants refuse to give what's owed, beating and rejecting each servant. Finally, the owner sends his beloved son, but they kill him, hoping to take the vineyard for themselves.

This story reminds me of growing up on a farm. When you work the land, you understand the importance of stewardship. The land doesn't belong to you, but you're entrusted to care for it. You plant, water, and harvest, knowing that the fruit of the land is ultimately a gift from God. If my father, who owned our farm, sent me out to check on the hired hands and make sure everything was being managed well, it would be unthinkable for them to ignore or harm me. But that's what happens in this parable.

The tenants want to take over the vineyard as if it's their own. They reject the servants and, finally, the owner's son. This reflects how humanity often responds to God—we want control over our lives and resist His authority. Yet, in God's deep love, He sent His Son, knowing He would be rejected. Jesus, though cast aside and killed, becomes the cornerstone of salvation.

For those of us who grew up farming, we understand that a good harvest depends on the foundation of careful stewardship and reliance on God's provision. Jesus is our cornerstone—the firm foundation of our lives. Without Him, our efforts are fruitless. This Advent, as we prepare for His coming, let's make sure we are building our lives on Christ, trusting Him as the cornerstone of our faith.

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, we thank You for sending Your Son, even though we, like the tenants, often resist Your authority. During this Advent season, help us to remember that Jesus is the cornerstone of our lives and faith. Forgive us for the times we've tried to take control. Strengthen us to live as good stewards of Your grace, trusting in Your provision and sharing Your love with others. Prepare our hearts for Christ's return. In His name, we pray. Amen.

*Devotion written by the Rev. Tony D. Ede (tede@thenalc.org)*

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**December 4, 2024 | Wednesday of the First Week in Advent**

**John of Damascus, Priest, c. 760**

*Isaiah 2:1–4; 1 Thessalonians 2:13–20; Luke 20:19–26; Psalms 50 & 147:1–12 (AM); Psalms 53 & 17 (PM)*

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<sup>2,2</sup> It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it,

<sup>3</sup> and many peoples shall come, and say:

”Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob;  
that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.”

For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

<sup>4</sup> He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide for many peoples;

and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

– Isaiah 2:2–4 RSV

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I'm a mountain girl! I was born in Colorado and whenever I see mountains, I have this urge to climb up to the top of them. And so, whenever the Scriptures speak of the mountain of the LORD, I pay attention. Have you noticed that many important things in the Bible happen on mountains? God gives Moses the ten commandments on top of Mt. Sinai. Jesus is transfigured on top of a mountain, and He gives His most famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount, from the top of a mountain, just to mention a few.

More than once, the Bible refers to people of all the nations streaming to the mountain of the LORD, coming to worship God on His holy mountain. Today's reading says that many people are saying, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths..." This is not just any mountain. It is the mountain where God dwells, where the LORD may be found. Perhaps it is not a mountain at all, but the place where God's Word is proclaimed and where all people may come to learn the ways of the LORD that they may walk in them.

What are these ways? We often speak of the ways of love, but here the prophet Isaiah emphasizes God's ways of peace. How fitting for us during this time of waiting and expectation that, as we wait for the Prince of Peace, we prepare by learning to live according to our LORD's ways of peace.

There is a prayer in our Lutheran worship book that goes this way: give peace to your Church, peace among nations, peace in our homes, and peace in our hearts... There is a great need for peace in our world, especially among the nations at war. But there is also a great need and for peace in our own restless and anxious hearts. Let us then heed the prophet's call to come to the mountain of the LORD, for only in Him can true peace be found.

**Prayer:** O God, it is Your will to hold both heaven and earth in a single peace. Let the design of Your great love shine on the waste of our wraths and sorrows, and give peace to Your Church, peace among nations, peace in our homes, and peace in our hearts; through Your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*Devotion written by the Rev. Carol E. A. Fryer (cfryer@thenalc.org)*

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**December 5, 2024 | Thursday of the First Week in Advent**

*Clement of Alexandria, Priest, c. 210*

*Isaiah 2:5–22; 1 Thessalonians 3:1–13; Luke 20:27–40; Psalms 18:1–20 & 147:13–21 (AM); Psalms 126 & 62 (PM)*

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<sup>5:2</sup> For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. <sup>3</sup> When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! <sup>4</sup> But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; <sup>5</sup> for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness.

– 1 Thessalonians 5:2–5 NRSV



Ever tried to put together IKEA furniture without the instructions? You know that moment when you think, "I've got this, I don't need directions!"—only to end up with a wobbly bookshelf and extra screws? It's funny when it's furniture, but what about when we build our lives the same way? When we rely on our own strength, skip God's instructions, and then watch things fall apart?

In Isaiah 2, the people had confidence in their wealth and power, thinking they were secure. But Isaiah warns that on the *Day of the Lord*, all those false securities will collapse. Their idols—both literal and figurative—won't hold up under the weight of God's majesty. Their false sense of security will be revealed for what it is: fragile and temporary. During Advent, we're invited to *wake up* and *walk in the light of the Lord*, placing our trust not in what will fade but in what is eternal.

Paul builds on this theme in his letter to the Thessalonians, urging us to grow in *faith and love* as we prepare for Christ's return. Advent is a time of *expectation* and preparation, not just for Christmas but for the *coming kingdom*. The question is: where are we placing our trust? Are we preparing our hearts for Christ's return, or are we still clinging to things that can't last?

But here's the good news: even when we've trusted in the wrong things, *God's grace* meets us right where we are. In *Luke 20*, Jesus speaks of the resurrection, reminding us that our ultimate hope is in *eternal life*. No matter what falls apart around us, the God we serve is the *God of the living*, and through Jesus, we are assured of *new life—now and forever*. Even if everything else collapses, His promises remain secure.

**Prayer:** O Lord, our Instructor, plant in us the knowledge of Your truth. Purify our minds through Your teaching, that we may grow in likeness to You. Lead us to live in simplicity, as children of God, despising wealth that perishes and seeking what is eternal. Teach us to walk in the way of righteousness, that we may strive after true life and gain knowledge of You. You are the source of all truth and light, and in You, we find everlasting life. Through Christ our Lord, Amen (Adapted from the *Pædagogus* of St. Clement of Alexandria).

*Devotion written by the Rev. Dcn. Andrew S. Ames Fuller (aamesfuller@thenalc.org)*

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**December 6, 2024 | Friday of the First Week in Advent**

Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, c. 342

*Isaiah 3:1—4:1; 1 Thessalonians 4:1—12; Luke 20:41—21:4; Psalms 102 & 148 (AM); Psalms 130 & 16 (PM)*

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<sup>3:11</sup> Woe to the guilty! How unfortunate they are, for what their hands have done shall be done to them.

– Isaiah 3:11 NRSV

<sup>4:6</sup> [Let] no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister...because the Lord is an avenger...just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you.

– 1 Thessalonians 4:6 NRSV

<sup>12:38</sup> Beware of the scribes... They will receive the greater condemnation.

– Mark 12:38, 40 NRSV



Happy St. Nicholas Day! Today, we commemorate Nicholas of Myra (d. 343), who inspired the figure we know as Santa Claus. The historical St. Nicholas was known as a fierce defender of the orthodox faith at Nicaea and a generous giver to the poor. Yet today's readings may feel jarring, as they speak of God as judge, and His judgments are severe. Each passage reflects a biblical truth: we reap what we sow (Galatians 6:7–8). One writer wisely added, "...people not only reap what they sow but also sow what they reap."<sup>1</sup> This is not just true for individuals, but also for communities and cultures—for the whole human race. *We, all of us together*, sow what we reap and reap what we sow—both for good or ill. That is frightening because it is true.

But on St. Nicholas' Day, don't hear only bad news! Yes, when discord is sown, rotten fruit follows, but God sows good seed too. The Word of God is like a mustard seed—tiny, but when nourished, it grows and grows, more and more. In 1 Thessalonians we hear: "...walk to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more" (vs. 1). And again: "...you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another...but I urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more" (vss. 9–10).

When we sow God's Word, good things grow—*more and more*. My wife keeps a "memory board" in our kitchen with family photos and sayings. One is from St. Teresa of Calcutta: "*If you want to change the world, go home and love your families.*" Small, unnoticed, and seemingly insignificant acts of love in your own sphere of influence can bear fruit and transform this barren world...more and more.

As we near Christmas, what small ways can we secretly sow God's Word? St. Nicholas reminds us that even small, quiet acts of love and generosity bear fruit. Don't wait—just do it...more and more.

**Prayer:** Almighty God, in your love you gave your servant Nicholas of Myra a perpetual name for deeds of kindness both on land and sea: Grant, we pray, that your Church may never cease to work for the happiness of children, the safety of sailors, the relief of the poor, and the help of those tossed by tempests of doubt or grief; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen (Eric Milner-White, *An Anglican Calendar*, 1941, revised in *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*).

*Devotion written by the Rev. Dr. Eric M. Riesen (eriesen@thenalc.org)*

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**December 7, 2024 | Saturday of the First Week in Advent**

**Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, 397**

*Isaiah 4:2–6; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18; Luke 21:5–19; Psalms 90 & 149 (AM); Psalms 80 & 72 (PM)*

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<sup>4:13</sup> But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. <sup>14</sup> For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. <sup>15</sup> For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have

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<sup>1</sup> Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids and Apollon, Leicester, England, 1995) 69.

fallen asleep. <sup>16</sup> For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. <sup>17</sup> Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. <sup>18</sup> Therefore encourage one another with these words.

– 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 ESV



The loss of a loved one is always hard. Whether it comes in expected ways such as after a long life or illness or through an unexpected tragedy. No matter how it happens the reality is that It hurts—sometimes unbearably so. We are flooded with emotions such as sadness, anger, depression, loneliness, helplessness and doubt. This emotional roller coaster can be exhausting. In order to move beyond our grief one of two things must happen, we either adjust to the loss or fall into despair.

Some make this adjustment quickly—for others it can take years. One way people adjust is by keeping at least a part of their loved one present in their lives. They may place flowers at burial sites or share pictures or items as reminders of them. Emotionally, we can keep those who have passed present through the sharing of stories or memories. Sadly however, for those who live without faith, this is all they have. But as the people of God we have something much much better. We have hope.

Some people mistakenly believe that Christians should not grieve since we believe in God’s promise of life everlasting. We know that this isn’t true since Jesus himself grieved at the tomb of his friend Lazarus. In today’s Scripture the apostle Paul reminds the church in Thessalonica that as Christians we do grieve, but not as people without hope. Because of both the example and promises of Jesus we can mourn and celebrate at the same time. We mourn the passing of those who have gone before us because we will miss them dearly in this life but, at the same time, we celebrate Jesus’ promise that those who believe in Him will live eternally and someday we will stand before God’s throne with all the saints. The tears we shed when a loved one dies are a testament to our love for them. The joy and hope we express in times of loss are a testament to the love Jesus has for all those who cling to Him by faith.

**Prayer:** Good and gracious God, we pray this day for all those who mourn. Give them hope that just as You promised there will come a day when You will wipe the tears from our eyes and we will know a joy that will last forever and ever. We pray this in the name of Jesus who is the way, the truth and the life. Amen.

*Devotion written by the Rev. David F. Keener (dkeener@thenalc.org)*

# THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

*Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to prepare the way for your only Son.  
By his coming give us strength in our conflicts and  
shed light on our path through the darkness of this world;  
through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and forever. Amen.*



## December 8, 2024 | Second Sunday in Advent

*Isaiah 5:1–7; 2 Peter 3:11–18; Luke 7:28–35; Psalms 24 & 150 (AM); Psalms 25 & 110 (PM)*

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<sup>5:5</sup> Now let me tell you what I will do to my vineyard:

I will tear down its hedges and let it be destroyed.

I will break down its walls and let the animals trample it.

<sup>6</sup> I will make it a wild place where the vines are not pruned and the ground is not hoed, a place overgrown with briars and thorns.

I will command the clouds to drop no rain on it.

<sup>7</sup> The nation of Israel is the vineyard of the LORD of Heaven's Armies.

The people of Judah are his pleasant garden.

He expected a crop of justice, but instead he found oppression.

He expected to find righteousness, but instead he heard cries of violence.

– Isaiah 5:5–7 NLT



These are the words every child hates to hear, “Just wait until your father gets home!” When a child hears those words, one has to wait *all* day for the impending punishment, discipline, and words of disappointment. They are only imagined in the mind of the child, those actions of punishment and words of discipline and disappointment only grow harsher as the minutes and hours tick by.

I have a younger sister and brother. I fought most often with my younger sister with our favored weapons, me with my words that bruised her spirit and she with her hands and feet that bruised my body. Today I cannot even remember what those fights were about but most likely they involved some sort of “ownership.” There was no sisterly love or peace expressed in those moments. Our mom, agreeing with our dad, would exact immediate words of discipline and then swift punishment meted out by means of a wooden spoon. Both of us received what we justly deserved as punishment for the destruction of sisterly love and peace.

In these words of the prophet Isaiah, the Lord God is longing for His dearest children to be the sweet fruit of peace and justice among His people. Instead, in spite of all God's loving care, the children produced sour fruit, not useful for expressing God's loving care and grace. So the Lord metes out immediate judgement and punishment upon His dear children as they live as exiled people far from their beloved fruitful homeland. It is Isaiah's later words that offer hope of a promised Messiah that offers them hope and a return to their homeland. He speaks of this chosen One of God who will receive the punishment and take upon Himself all our sin. It is in Christ Jesus, God's anointed One that we have peace with God. Jesus is our Savior and it is only through Him that we may return to our homeland.

So then, how shall we live? The apostle Paul said that in Christ we are a new creation and the old passed away (2 Corinthians 5:17). In Christ we have peace with God, He continually shows us mercy and grace

and also disciplines us for our good, like a loving Father. He encourages us to live in brotherly and sisterly love, showing grace to each other just as we have been shown undeserved grace.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus Christ, all thanks and praise to You for Your suffering and death on the cross of Calvary to pay the debt of my sin, to take my deserved punishment. Yet daily You raise me to a new life in You so by Your Holy Spirit, teach me to live in Your grace and peace with each one I meet as You live and reign daily in my life. Amen.

*Devotion written by the Rev. Shelly D. Schultz (sschultz@thenalc.org)*

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**December 9, 2024 | Monday of the Second Week in Advent**

*Isaiah 5:8–17; 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11; Luke 21:20–28; Psalms 122 & 145 (AM); Psalms 40 & 67 (PM)*

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<sup>5:11</sup> Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

– 1 Thessalonians 5:11 ESV



My husband and I bought our house in 2009. At the time we thought it was perfect. It was newer and larger than our previous house and appeared to need little work. As time went on things needed to be done, as they always do. We built a patio, replaced windows, painted walls, and changed flooring over time. This year we decided to renovate the kitchen, it was a big job indeed. I am grateful for my husband and father and for the trades people who could do the work, even though I know it will never end, that is just part of owning a home.

Paul understood repairs and renovations in both practical and spiritual terms.

We as brothers and sisters in Christ need repairs and renovations too, we need to be encouraged and built up. We need our brothers and sisters to support us during difficult times, share in our sorrows, and celebrate our victories. We need our brothers and sisters to remind us of God's love when we feel weary and help steer us away from sin when we stray. But, to encourage others effectively, we must first draw close to the ultimate source of encouragement: our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is through our participation in the Sacrament, prayers and studying the Word that we are encouraged and strengthened so we can encourage one another.

I am reminded of a poem by Teresa of Avila:

*Christ Has No Body*  
Christ has no body but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
Compassion on this world,  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.  
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,  
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.  
Christ has no body now but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
compassion on this world.  
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

In this Advent season, the season where we are to reflect on the expectant hope for Christ's return, may we find the time to encourage others to do likewise.

**Prayer:** Dear Lord as we wait patiently upon Your return help us to be Your hands and feet, help us to be encouragers of one another and build one another up in Christian love. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

*Devotion written by the Rev. Teresa E. Peters (tpeters@thenalc.org)*

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## December 10, 2024 | Tuesday of the Second Week in Advent

*Isaiah 5:18–25; 1 Thessalonians 5:12–28; Luke 21:29–38; Psalms 33 & 146 (AM); Psalms 85 & 94 (PM)*

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<sup>21:29</sup> And he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. <sup>30</sup> As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. <sup>31</sup> So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. <sup>32</sup> Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place. <sup>33</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

<sup>34</sup> "But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. <sup>35</sup> For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. <sup>36</sup> But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

<sup>37</sup> And every day he was teaching in the temple, but at night he went out and lodged on the mount called Olivet. <sup>38</sup> And early in the morning all the people came to him in the temple to hear him.

– Luke 21:29–38 ESV



So much of our life is answering the question, “When is it coming? When does it need to be done.” In the busy world we live in, the clock and calendar become indispensable. With the many things we can control, that is a good thing. But with those that we can’t, the question ‘when’ can take our focus off what we should be centered on. That is what Jesus is teaching here in this discussion about when He returns in glory later.

Jesus makes a clear point that it is impossible for anyone to pin down to the very moment of His second coming (Mark 13:32, Matthew 24:36). He gives a vivid description of fantastic calamities and upheavals and says be ready. He uses the image of the olive tree, which like many plants sends out its leaves in a predictable way. We don’t tell it when to bud, but instead it shows us when the time is right.

It reminds me of when a baby is coming. No matter how precisely we try to know the due date, we’re not in control. I remember the story of the theologian Luke Timothy Johnson talking about sitting with his very pregnant wife playing gin rummy. He kept the score of the card game on one pad of paper and the time between contractions on another pad. He had no control over either outcome. When expecting a baby, we don’t want to get so caught up in the exact birth date that we neglect what we are to do now. We should arrange a nursery, have the showers, buy the baby clothes, and do what is necessary to welcome in the new child.

This Advent season, let us focus on what needs attention. The calendar for Christ’s return can take care of itself. Let us go to God’s Word and prepare ourselves today for the promised return to come. I pray that we be guided by His Word to contemplate the ‘what’ and leave the uselessness of ‘when’ behind. We can be confident when living in His Word and all the rest will take care of itself.

*Feelings come and feelings go,  
And feelings are deceiving;  
My warrant is the Word of God –  
Naught else is worth believing.*

*Though all my heart should feel condemned  
For want of some sweet token,  
There is One greater than my heart  
Whose Word cannot be broken.*

*I’ll trust in God’s unchanging Word  
‘Til soul and body sever,  
For, though all things shall pass away,  
His Word shall stand forever!*

*(Loosely attributed to Martin Luther)*

**Prayer:** Gracious Lord, Heavenly Father. We give You thanks for Your Word and the promises You bring to us. We pray that this Advent season we are focused on those things we can control and not be distracted into the things this world tempts us with. Please send Your Holy Spirit to guide us in living a life that is pleasing to you and impactful to those around us.

In Jesus name, Amen.

*Devotion written by the Rev. Marvin Combs (mcombs@thenalc.org)*

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## December 11, 2024 | Wednesday of the Second Week in Advent

*Lars Olsen Skrefsrud, Missionary to India, 1910*

*Isaiah 6:1–13; 2 Thessalonians 1:1–12; John 7:53—8:11; Psalms 50 & 147:1–12 (AM); Psalms 53 & 17 (PM)*

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<sup>8:5</sup> Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" <sup>6</sup> They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. <sup>7</sup> When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." <sup>8</sup> And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. <sup>9</sup> When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.

– John 8:5–9 NRSV



When I was young, I imagined this episode of Jesus and a woman caught in adultery as happening in the hinter lands, on a “dusty” road. But, no, it is in a very prestigious and holy place, the temple court. In fact, we can fill in some images here because thanks to the Temple Mount Sifting Project, we know what beautiful (yet dusty) stone floors Jesus wrote on.<sup>2</sup> But, as a pastor of the NALC, I’m supposed to help you “devote” in this season of Advent. So, what does this famous episode have to do with our waiting for Jesus to come...(He who is without sin, cast the first stone). My answer: the context is really about “bearing witness” or “giving testimony.” John 8 is set within a context where Jesus is grappling with giving testimony to what is true (read the text before and after). The Pharisees are on him. Why? I think because He is preaching a way for lowly people to get into God’s kingdom without passing a Pharisee test. Another offense is that He is so sure of himself. He doesn’t need a second witness. His Father is the second witness. And now, a bunch of “witnesses” have brought Him a woman, to test Him. I’m reading into it a little, but I think Jesus became a witness again, of the accusers’ sins! What was He writing in the dust?! Hmm, even the adulteress standing there can see it all—I imagine, not the Pharisees’ finest hour.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://library.biblicalarchaeology.org/article/what-the-temple-mount-floor-looked-like/>

The end to all this witnessing is a climax of Grace. There is no sacrifice of an animal, just the simple forgiving words of Jesus, “Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more.” The advent of Grace in the world is something we think about this week; Jesus’ first coming. But He came to empower us and enlighten us to be witnesses of Grace until His second coming. So, some good devotional questions today would be: What does my testimony, my witness, look like? Do my words point to forgiveness and reconciliation? Do I come off as grace-full, or as an accuser?

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, as Your disciples, help us to be Your witnesses in this world. Wickedness, pride, and sin are still swirling in our world. Help me, and all my brothers and sisters in Christ, be Your witnesses of forgiveness and Grace. Add Your Holy Spirit to our testimonies this week. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

*Devotion written by the Rev. Dr. Jesse J. Abbott (jabbott@thenalc.org)*

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### **December 12, 2024 | Thursday of the Second Week in Advent**

*Isaiah 7:1–9; 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12; Luke 22:1–13; Psalms 18:1–20 & 147:13–21 (AM); Psalms 126 & 62 (PM)*

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<sup>2:1</sup> Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, <sup>2</sup> not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. <sup>3</sup> Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, <sup>4</sup> who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. <sup>5</sup> Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? <sup>6</sup> And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. <sup>7</sup> For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. <sup>8</sup> And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming. <sup>9</sup> The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, <sup>10</sup> and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. <sup>11</sup> Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, <sup>12</sup> in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

– 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12 ESV



In the first letter to the church of the Thessalonians, Paul and Timothy and Silvanus write “concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you.” Well apparently, not unlike us, they did need some further assurance regarding their anxiety about the coming of the Day of Lord, which thus occasioned a second letter to the Thessalonians.

We learn from their letter that the church faced afflictions and persecution. While they are commended in their life locally for their love for one another and their steadfast faith, they appear to be anxious and alarmed about the global implications of the Day of the Lord. Has it come? Who is the lawless one? What is this secret of lawlessness? So too, we may have questions as well: who restrains this lawless one, who is keeping it secret?

Much of Paul's teaching about the end times is referred to in previous conversations with the Thessalonians but not expounded upon here or even in his first letter. The letter does refer to Jesus' words on the matter and his many allusions to the prophet Daniel. What Paul and company focus upon in this second letter is to assure the Thessalonians in their anxiety and alarm, as well as to provide a warning about getting caught up in the fever of false reports beyond their local ministry concerns.

At the heart of this letter's cautionary words, is the warning about God's mimic—the evil one. The power of the evil one is this attempt to mimic God and in so doing, to deceive. Paul even uses technical words in the Greek usually describing the work of Christ to show how Satan seeks to mimic God: words like “coming/*parousia*” and “activity/*energeo*” and “revealed/*apokalypto*” along with (false) “signs and wonders” and “power” (see verse 9). In framing Satan as God's mimic, this letter to the church of the Thessalonians assures us that this power of Satan in the end is no power at all, for at Jesus' “appearing” (in contrast to the appearing of the lawless one), Jesus will destroy simply by the breath of his mouth (see also Isaiah 11:1,4 regarding the stump of Jesse).

And so what antidote does Paul offer for such deception? First of all to trust in Jesus and His word and promise for He is Saviour and Lord (Christ centered). Secondly, to continue in the faith passed down (traditionally grounded). Thirdly, Paul brings to mind their love for one another and their faith that is growing abundantly, in effect, their local concerns as the church under the Lordship of Christ (congregationally focused). Fourthly; encouragement to not be idle, nor fearful or hunkered down (mission driven). Finally, even these apocalyptic events that are to unfold fall under the sovereign control of God, for Satan can only attempt to mimic and deceive -not control the unfolding of history. The chapter then ends with a warning: that those who are deceived do so under the motivation of ‘pleasuring in unrighteousness.’ The Thessalonians are reminded this is what really underlies the refusal to love the truth and so be saved.

Paul ends this section of Thessalonians with a good word for all who are alarmed or anxious concerning the Day of the Lord. It is a benediction from the end of this chapter: “Now may our Lord Jesus himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word” (2 Thessalonians 2:16–17).

**Prayer:** Lord keep us steadfast in your Word. Curb those who by deceit or sword would wrest the kingdom from your Son and bring to naught all he has done. Lord Jesus Christ your power make known, for you are Lord of Lords alone; defend your holy Church that we may sing your praise triumphantly. Amen (from *Lutheran Book of Worship* Hymn #230: text by Martin Luther, translated by Catherine Winkworth).

*Devotion written by the Rev. Kevin Ree (kree@thenalc.org)*

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**December 13, 2024 | Friday of the Second Week in Advent**

*Lucy, Martyr at Syracuse, c. 304*

*Isaiah 7:10–25; 2 Thessalonians 2:13–3:5; Luke 22:14–30; Psalms 102 & 148 (AM); Psalms 130 & 16 (PM)*

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<sup>22:24</sup> A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. <sup>25</sup> And he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. <sup>26</sup> But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. <sup>27</sup> For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.

– Luke 22:24–27 ESV



As I write this devotion, those of us living in the Carolinas are dealing with the catastrophic disaster resulting from Hurricane Helene. The same is true for many, many others living in the Southeast. What's more, hurricane Milton has just swept across Florida having spun-off numerous devastating killer tornadoes and doing additional damage to that already caused by Hurricane Helene.

However, by the time you read this I imagine the big news will be the results of this year's elections, and most of North America will have forgotten about these devastating hurricanes. After all, life moves on. But I assure you, those who have lost family and loved ones, lost their homes, and lost their businesses are living daily in this reality. It will take them years to recover; they need to be served.

In Jesus' name and by the power of the Holy Spirit our NALC Disaster Response ministry continues to do an incredible job of helping people. We are in this hurricane recovery for the long haul. We will be in affected communities for years to come. In today's Scripture Jesus says, "...But I am among you as the one who serves" (Luke 22:27b).

As we continue to anticipate the coming of Christ this Advent Season, we are filled with expectant hope. This hope is grounded in our belief in the meaning of the first coming of Christ as a baby born in Bethlehem. It is also grounded in our belief that one day Christ will come again to fulfill His kingdom. Each week in worship we get an inkling, a foretaste, of that glorious feast to come as Jesus comes to us in



the Holy Communion feeding us with His very body and blood. As we eat and drink, as we remember Jesus' promises, expectant hope is reawakened within us.

This hope moves us to heed Jesus' call to live lives of servant leadership. Why not prayerfully consider serving Christ by serving those who are still suffering from the hurricanes? How? Pray. Continue to pray for the people whose lives have been devastated by these storms. How else might we serve? Perhaps a monetary gift to NALC Disaster Response or a commitment to participate on a mission trip to one of the affected areas could be on your Christmas list this year. It's a given opportunity to serve by sharing the hope we have in Christ!

**Prayer:** Almighty and everlasting God, fill us with expectant hope as we anticipate Christ's coming. Empower us by Your Holy Spirit to bear witness to this hope by living lives of servant leadership. Inspire us by the same Spirit to be generous with our time and money in serving those who are truly suffering in this fallen world. We ask this in Jesus' name and for the sake of His gospel. Amen.

*Devotion written by the Rev. Dr. William E. White (bwhite@thenalc.org)*

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**December 14, 2024 | Saturday of the Second Week in Advent**

**John of the Cross, Renewer of the Church, 1591**

*Isaiah 8:1–15; 2 Thessalonians 3:6–18; Luke 22:31–38; Psalms 90 & 149 (AM); Psalms 80 & 72 (PM)*

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<sup>72:1</sup> Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness.

<sup>2</sup> May he judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice.

<sup>3</sup> May the mountains bring prosperity to the people, the hills the fruit of righteousness.

<sup>4</sup> May he defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy;  
may he crush the oppressor.

<sup>5</sup> May he endure as long as the sun, as long as the moon, through all generations.

<sup>6</sup> May he be like rain falling on a mown field, like showers watering the earth.

<sup>7</sup> In his days may the righteous flourish and prosperity abound till the moon is no more.

<sup>12</sup> For he will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help.

<sup>13</sup> He will take pity on the weak and the needy and save the needy from death.

<sup>14</sup> He will rescue them from oppression and violence, for precious is their blood in his sight.

<sup>18</sup> Praise be to the LORD God, the God of Israel, who alone does marvelous deeds.

<sup>19</sup> Praise be to his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen and Amen.

– Psalm 72:1–7; 12–14; 18–19 NIV2011



Save us, Lord! We are perishing! The sentiment echoes through our hearts, taking up residence as we feel the truth of it in our bones.

A broken economy threatens to choke us. Errant storms have wrecked our homes. Anxiety plagues us and our children. Fear reigns in a world of screams and shouts.

We are sick. We are worn out. We are discouraged. We are the needy who cry out in need of the God of Israel.

And we are embraced by the truth that our defender takes up our cause! This one who hears the cry of the needy and delivers the oppressed, cares for us.

Praise be! Indeed, “Praise be to the LORD God, the God of Israel, who alone does marvelous deeds” (Psalm 72:18).

Yet Advent demands something from us that we hesitate to give.

Advent demands that we step back, into uncomfortable space, to see ourselves not in the role of the needy, though we are that, and instead to stand on the opposite hill—in the place of the oppressor, the afflicter, the violent.

We stand with a sword—indeed, two swords. Our hands are filled with tools of our own devices. And we are certain. Certain that we are the noble few who will never, ever deny Jesus. Certain that we are the ones to save Him.

With such compassion our Lord looks at us. Such love in His gaze. His words ring out to us, though centuries divide... “I have prayed for you.”

Blessed be God, who has not turned His face from us, though we are violent as well as needy, afflicted as well as afflicter. Thanks be to our Savior for His persistent patience with us that though we deny yet He holds us, loves us, and prays for us—that our faith may not fail.

**Prayer:** Stir up our hearts O Lord, to prepare the way for your only Son. By his coming give us strength in our conflicts and shed light on our path through the darkness of this world; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (*Lutheran Book of Worship*).

*Devotion written by Shannon R. Ames Fuller (samesfuller@thenalc.org)*

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# THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

*Almighty God, you once called John the Baptist to give witness  
to the coming of your Son and to prepare his way.*

*Grant us, your people, the wisdom to see your purpose today and the openness to hear your will, that we may  
witness to Christ's coming and so prepare his way;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God now and forever. Amen.*

## December 15, 2024 | Third Sunday in Advent

*Isaiah 13:1–13; Hebrews 12:18–29; John 3:22–30; Psalms 24 & 150 (AM); Psalms 25 & 110 (PM)*

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<sup>3:22</sup> After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. <sup>23</sup> John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized <sup>24</sup> (for John had not yet been put in prison).

<sup>25</sup> Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification. <sup>26</sup> And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him." <sup>27</sup> John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. <sup>28</sup> You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' <sup>29</sup> The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. <sup>30</sup> He must increase, but I must decrease."

—John 3:22–30 ESV



John the Baptist's role in preparing the way for Jesus gives us a beautiful example of humility and anticipation. John knew His mission—to prepare people for the coming of Christ. When John's disciples expressed concern that people were flocking to Jesus rather than to him, John responded with deep joy: "He must increase, but I must decrease."

This passage challenges us during Advent to consider our own preparation for Christ's coming. As we look to the Nativity, we celebrate that God entered the world in humility, and we look forward to His return in glory. Advent, in essence, invites us to trust the process of God's plan.

I remember when I turned 25 and spent a good week or two planning out my next five years. I mapped out various goals for myself and wrote out a detailed plan. My hope was that everything would go exactly as I envisioned it. But year after year passed, and those plans started to fall apart. As I got closer to 30, I felt frustrated, powerless, and uncertain. When I looked back at the end of those five years, feeling a little defeated, I saw the unexpected journey I had taken. It was a path I had never planned, yet I couldn't help but see the Lord's hand in it all.

I think if we all do a little reflecting, we can think of similar experiences—times when our expectations weren't met, but in the end, we realized there were reasons we didn't go down the road we had planned. I remember feeling frustrated as my plans kept falling apart, but what I didn't realize at the time was that those unmet expectations were part of God's greater plan for my life. Slowly, I came to see that I was never supposed to be at the center. It wasn't my world to control; it was God's.

Like John the Baptist, we are not the center; Christ is. John understood that his role wasn't to hold the spotlight, but to point others to the Christ. This Advent, we are called to mirror John's humility and joy.

In our anticipation of Christ's second coming, we too must step aside, allowing Christ to fill every corner of our lives.

This Advent, let us make room for Christ, remembering that He came once in humility and will come again in glory. The Day of the Lord is not just a future event—it's a present call to surrender more of ourselves to Him and allow Him to have His way with us.

**Prayer:** Lord, during this Advent season, may we echo the words of John the Baptist. Help us to decrease in pride, distractions, and self-centeredness so that You may increase in our hearts and in the world. May we prepare joyfully for Your coming and live with expectant hope for Your return. Amen.

*Devotion written by Steven Neaton (sneaton@thenalc.org)*

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### December 16, 2024 | Monday of the Third Week in Advent

*Isaiah 8:16—9:1; 2 Peter 1:1–11; Luke 22:39–53; Psalms 122 & 145 (AM); Psalms 40 & 67 (PM)*

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<sup>8:16</sup> Bind up this testimony of warning and seal up God's instruction among my disciples.

<sup>17</sup> I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the descendants of Jacob. I will put my trust in him.

<sup>18</sup> Here am I, and the children the LORD has given me. We are signs and symbols in Israel from the LORD Almighty, who dwells on Mount Zion.

<sup>19</sup> When someone tells you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? <sup>20</sup> Consult God's instruction and the testimony of warning. If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn. <sup>21</sup> Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God. <sup>22</sup> Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness.

<sup>9:1</sup> Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan.

– Isaiah 8:16—9:1 NIV1984

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*I will put my trust in him.* Isaiah's words are bold. He writes this in the knowledge that God may turn His back on Israel—yet, Isaiah is willing to wait for the Lord to return because he knows and believes that the Lord is his sanctuary.

When we are riddled with anxiety and despair, we can find ourselves in darkness: a deep, dark hole, devoid of any sanctuary. A cancer diagnosis, ours or that of a loved one; unfaithfulness or marital abandonment, ours or that of a loved one; addiction to substances, food, gambling, pornography, or other spiritually

unhealthy behaviors, ours or that of a loved one; the death of a child in utero, ours or that of a loved one. We can bring to mind many dark things that can cast us into the hole of deep despair. It can be tempting to seek sanctuary in the wrong places or happiness from the wrong sources. Just like the people in Isaiah who were in crisis and consulting mediums and spiritists, we, too, seek help outside of our God's commands and His good news. We put our trust in people or things *outside/contrary* the Lord. We don't necessarily mean to do so and may not recognize it right away. The serpent is experienced in subtle methods, isn't he? His tricks are constant. When we seek answers from other sources, sources that are outside/contrary to the Lord, we will only find ourselves in deeper darkness and will not see the light. Indeed, we are in darkness when we are outside the Light of the world.

As we continue to walk in the shadow of darkness, our earthly pilgrimage, God's plan for His creatures continues to unfold. Our sanctuary is Jesus! Let's keep our eyes fixed on Him and, in the words of the prophet, *let's put our trust in the Lord*.

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, Great is Your faithfulness! You are faithful to Your people and You're faithful to me and I praise Your name. Even when I find myself in darkness, remind me that Your Son is my light. Illumine my heart and break the stone that blocks the light. Pull me out as only You can and send Your Holy Spirit to strengthen me and to give me the peace that is found only in Jesus. Help me to put my trust in You.

In the name of Jesus, my Savior and Lord.

*Devotion written by Rebecka Andrae Frontz (rfrontz@thenals.org)*

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December 17, 2024 | Tuesday of the Third Week in Advent

*O Sapientia/O Wisdom*

*Isaiah 9:2–7; 2 Peter 1:12–21; Luke 22:54–69; Psalms 33 & 146 (AM); Psalms 85 & 94 (PM)*

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<sup>9:6</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.

– Isaiah 9:6 ESV

One of the most fun things to do when expecting a child is to pick out a name. Do the initials spell anything? What horrible permutations will their elementary school classmates do to their name? What kind of nickname could be created? Will their name look good on a job application? There are so many decisions and so many possibilities!

Isaiah prophesied the coming of a Messiah during the time when the Israelites' world was fraught with fear and uncertainty—the Assyrians were besieging Jerusalem, and the Babylonians were coming. To hear that

the promised Messiah was on His way was a great source of comfort to them. But those names/titles he was given! Wonderful Counselor—Mighty God—Everlasting Father—Prince of Peace! They are more than names—they are a description of the God made flesh who came to save us not from worldly fears and circumstances but from sin and death itself.

Today, December 17, begins the last seven days of Advent. In the medieval church in Europe centuries ago seven “O Antiphons” were written to be used during Morning Prayer and Vespers before and after the Psalms to point to the second coming of Christ during these last days of Advent. Each antiphon begins with a title for Christ, today’s being *O Sapientia*, which means O Wisdom. The first name Isaiah gives to the coming Messiah, this coming son, is Wonderful Counselor—Wisdom.

In our own world which is filled with uncertainty, fear, and darkness we can cling to the knowledge that this Son, this great light who has been born unto us so many years ago will come again and bring with Him the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord.

**Prayer:** O Wisdom, Who didst come out of the mouth of the Most High, reaching from end to end and ordering all things mightily and sweetly: come and teach us the way of prudence (*O Wisdom Antiphon*).

*Devotion written by Robin Harris (rharris@thenalc.org)*

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## December 18, 2024 | Wednesday of the Third Week in Advent

*O Adonai/O Lord of Might*

*Isaiah 9:8–17; 2 Peter 2:1–10a; Mark 1:1–8; Psalms 50 & 147:1–12 (AM); Psalms 53 & 17 (PM)*

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<sup>1:1</sup> The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. <sup>2</sup> As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, “Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, <sup>3</sup> the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’” <sup>4</sup> John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup> Now John was clothed with camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. <sup>8</sup> I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

– Mark 1:1–8 ESV

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Patience has always been difficult for humanity, and Scripture often reveals this shared struggle: we see restlessness, impatience, and even anger in response to waiting for God’s promises to unfold. Yet here, we

witness the culmination of a long-awaited hope. Mark reminds us that God's promises, first given centuries earlier, were now being fulfilled through Jesus, the promised Messiah. And with the Messiah, there is a new promise—the Holy Spirit.

We could list particulars on the Holy Spirit, but I want to recall Ephesians 1:13–14.

*In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.*

We are baptized with the Holy Spirit—a foreshadowing of Christ's promise to return—the guarantee of our inheritance.

So, like those who awaited Christ's first coming, we find ourselves waiting too. But we wait with a living hope—sharing in the joys of what God has already accomplished through Christ, leaning on the Holy Spirit to do God's work in the here and now, and with the same anticipation God's people have always shared, we wait for the one whose full glory we will dwell in forever.

**Prayer:** O GOD and leader of the house of Israel, who appeared to Moses in the burning bush and on Mount Sinai gave the Law: Come to deliver us with your strong arm (*Saint Augustine's Prayer Book*, a Litany Based on the "O Antiphons").

*Devotion written by Ariel Wicker (awicker@thenalc.org)*

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**December 19, 2024 | Thursday of the Third Week in Advent**

*O Radix Jesse/O Root of Jesse*

*Isaiah 9:18–10:4; 2 Peter 2:10b–16; Matthew 3:1–12; Psalms 18:1–20 & 147:13–21 (AM); Psalms 126 & 62 (PM)*

<sup>3:1</sup> In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, <sup>2</sup> "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." <sup>3</sup> For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.'"

<sup>4</sup> Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup> Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, <sup>6</sup> and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

<sup>7</sup> But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup> Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. <sup>9</sup> And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. <sup>10</sup> Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.



<sup>11</sup> "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

– Matthew 3:1–12 ESV



Before and after—the Old Testament and New Testament passages for today show us that nothing has changed insofar as the way sinful humans treat one another. In the Isaiah passage the Lord condemns the wealthy and greedy for destroying themselves and the helpless. Twice Isaiah writes, "*For all this His anger has not turned away, and His hand is stretched out still*" (Isaiah 10:4). For their sin, God acts in judgment. Peter, in the New Testament passage, calls the wicked "*irrational animals, creatures of instinct, born to be caught and destroyed, blaspheming about matters of which they are ignorant, (they) will also be destroyed in their destruction, suffering wrong as the wage for their wrongdoing*" (2 Peter 2:10b–13).

In both cases, the unrepentant are judged and condemned for their sin. Now, between these two passages comes John the Baptist to prepare the way for the Christ to begin His ministry of reconciliation (Matthew 3:1–12). John is preaching repentance and baptizing people who have confessed their sins. But when the Pharisees and Sadducees start coming to his baptism, John questions their motive. Apparently, they wanted to be baptized without confessing and repenting of their sins. John says, in essence, it doesn't work that way. His was a baptism with water for repentance, but the Christ will come and baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire those who repent; but the unrepentant will experience the fire of eternal punishment. This sounds rather harsh, and it is for those who are unrepentant. But those who repent and receive the Holy Spirit become a new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). Titus 3:4–7 describes Christ's Baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire: "*But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.*" "*By the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit*" (Baptism), Christ comes to us (Advent) and saves us, cleansing us of our sin and regenerating us into children of God prepared for eternity! Thanks be to God! Come Lord Jesus!

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, I give You thanks and praise that through the water and the Word of Holy Baptism, You have come to me, washed me clean of my sin, saved me, poured out Your Holy Spirit on me, and justified me by grace that I might become an heir according to the hope of eternal life, through Jesus Christ my Lord. Amen.

*Devotion written by the Rev. Carl M. Haynes (pastorcarl82@gmail.com)*

December 20, 2024 | Friday of the Third Week in Advent

*O Clavis David/O Key of David*

*Katherina von Bora Luther, 1552*

*Isaiah 10:5–19; 2 Peter 2:17–22; Matthew 11:2–15; Psalms 102 & 148 (AM); Psalms 130 & 16 (PM)*

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<sup>11:2</sup> Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples <sup>3</sup> and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” <sup>4</sup> And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup> the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. <sup>6</sup> And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

– Matthew 11:2–6 ESV



I drive from my church in northern Minnesota, where I work five days a week, to my home and family in Winnipeg for two days of the week. I get gas in Lancaster, MN, and there’s a high schooler working at the gas station who one day was wearing a hoodie that says, “But God.” Just that.

But God. Two small words. What does that hoodie mean, “But God”?

Matthew records John the Baptist, languishing in prison, wondering if he got it wrong. Was Jesus truly the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world? Or was John mistaken? Was John just another false prophet without knowing it? Is Jesus the one, or should they be looking for another? *“But God, this is not according to plan, is it?”*

But God the Son said—look how I fulfill just what the prophet Isaiah said about God’s Christ.

Mary is told by Gabriel of the coming child to be born. “How can this be?” Mary says. “I have never been with a man.” Gabriel responds, *“With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”*

Sometimes things seem impossible. But God knows just what He is doing.

*But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons (Galatians 4:4–5).*

*But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved (Ephesians 2:4–5).*

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, You surprise us with Your grace and mercy, with Your slowness to anger, with Your steadfast love. We expect anger and rejection, but God, You open to us arms of forgiveness. We think some things are impossible, but God, with You all things are possible. Thank You. Amen.

*Devotion written by the Rev. Peter Lurvey (peterlurvey@gmail.com)*

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**December 21, 2024 | Saturday of the Third Week in Advent**

**ST. THOMAS, APOSTLE**

*O Oriens/O Dayspring*

*Habakkuk 2:1–4; Jude 17–25; Luke 3:1–9; Psalms 90 & 149 (AM); Psalms 80 & 72 (PM)*

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<sup>2:3</sup> For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. <sup>4</sup> Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.

– Habakkuk 2:3–4 NRSV

Have you ever ordered something online, and then it turns into the most agonizing waiting game of your life? You're glued to the tracking page: "Out for delivery!" But as the hours drag on, you start wondering, "Where is it? Did the delivery driver decide to take a coffee break or binge a whole season of *Jeopardy* before getting to my house?" At this point, you're pacing around the front door like it's a life-or-death situation, waiting for that package to magically appear.

Waiting is frustrating. Whether it's for a package or an answer to prayer, we've all been there—stuck in that tension of trusting and wondering when something will show up, even when it feels like it never will. In Habakkuk 2, the prophet stands in that same place. He looks at the injustice around him and asks God, "How long?" And God responds, "*If it seems to tarry, wait for it... The righteous shall live by faith.*" It's not just about waiting—it's about trusting God's timing, even when it seems like we can't see the full picture and the answer is taking its sweet time.

In Luke 3, John the Baptist adds urgency to that waiting, calling the people to repentance—to *prepare* the way for the Lord (3–4, 8). Advent is a season of waiting, but it's also a time to prepare our hearts for Christ's arrival. We are preparing not just for Christmas, but for Christ—and for His light to shine in our lives. Are we ready for Him, or are we too distracted by the things that keep us in the dark?

Here's the good news: even in our waiting, even in the darkness, God's grace is at work. As Jude reminds us, it is *God who is able to keep us from falling* (24). We don't wait on our own strength; we wait with the assurance that God's light is coming to transform our lives.

Where are you waiting today? Trust in God's grace—His light is on the way. Amen.

**Prayer:** O Dayspring, splendor of light everlasting, shine into the shadows of our waiting hearts. As we remember Your apostle Thomas, who sought the light of Your resurrection in his doubt, grant us grace to trust in Your promises, even when we cannot see the way ahead. Strengthen us to live by faith, and may Your light guide us always toward Your eternal glory. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

*Devotion written by the Rev. Dcn. Andrew S. Ames Fuller (aamesfuller@thenalc.org)*

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# THE FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT

*Stir up your power, O Lord, and come.*

*Take away the hindrance of our sins and make us ready for the celebration of your birth,  
that we may receive you in joy and serve you always;  
for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.*

December 22, 2024 | Fourth Sunday in Advent

*O Rex Gentium/O King of Nations*

*Isaiah 11:1–9; Ephesians 6:10–20; John 3:16–21; Psalms 24 & 150 (AM); Psalms 25 & 110 (PM)*

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<sup>6:10</sup> Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. <sup>11</sup> Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. <sup>12</sup> For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. <sup>13</sup> Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. <sup>14</sup> Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, <sup>15</sup> and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. <sup>16</sup> In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; <sup>17</sup> and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, <sup>18</sup> praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, <sup>19</sup> and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, <sup>20</sup> for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.

– Ephesians 6:10–20 ESV



With just a few days left before Christmas, are you ready for the day to arrive? Do you have your travel plans set, your dinner planned out, and all of your gifts purchased? There's a lot of things that we have to do in order to be ready to celebrate the annual festival of the birth of our Savior, Jesus, in Bethlehem's manger!

Since we are still in Advent, we are reminded that as disciples of Jesus, we anticipate a three fold coming of our Savior: His first coming into the world in the flesh and blood that's laid to rest in Bethlehem's manger and is eventually nailed to the wood of Good Friday's cross, His coming into our lives today through the means of Word and Sacrament, to deliver the gifts of forgiveness of our sin, and life everlasting, and finally, to be ready for Jesus' promised coming back at the last day. Advent gives us the opportunity to ask ourselves: are we truly ready for Jesus to return?

Satan would love nothing more than for the answer to that question be "no." He seeks to distract us from the coming of Christ into our lives. Thus, in today's reading from Ephesians 6, we hear the apostle Paul encouraging us to prepare for the coming of Jesus into our lives by encouraging us to put on what is referred to as the full armor of God, so "that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm." (Ephesians 6:13)

There are a lot of things in our life that threaten to distract us from the coming of Christ. As we stay in His Word each day, as we make our worship life in our churches a priority, as we seek to daily drown our

sinful nature by confessing our sin, and receiving anew God's gift of forgiveness through our crucified and risen Savior, Jesus, we are ready for the daily spiritual battle we engage in. We're ready for the arrival of Jesus on the last day, because the armor we put on doesn't come from ourselves, it comes from faith bestowed upon us by the work of the Holy Spirit. That is what makes us ready to celebrate the coming of Jesus, at Christmas, in our daily lives today, and when He promises to return on the last day!

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, forgive me for the times I have failed to make full use of Your Word and the Sacraments, and looked to things of the world to find security. By the power of Your Holy Spirit, help me to put on the full armor of God, stay in Your Word, and place my faith and trust in You so that I stand ready for Your coming into my life each day. Amen.

*Devotion written by the Rev. Christopher W. Martin (pastorcwmartin@gmail.com)*

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**December 23, 2024 | Monday of the Fourth Week in Advent**

*O Emmanuel/O Come, Emmanuel*

*Thorlak, Bishop of Skalholt, 1193*

*Isaiah 11:10–16; Revelation 20:1–10; John 5:30–47; Psalms 122 & 145 (AM); Psalms 40 & 67 (PM)*

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<sup>11:10</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</sup> He will raise a signal for the nations and will assemble the banished of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.

– Isaiah 11:10–12 ESV



Humans like to look backwards; we like to see where we have been, where we have come from. For better or worse, this impulse to look at the past only seems to increase as we age. Advent, however, is a season that looks to the future, to the one who is to come, hence why the Scripture readings assigned by the lectionary during this season point to the so-called “End Times.” Despite this, ironically, there is a tendency among Christians to treat Advent as merely a season to get excited about Christmas—a season that looks backward to the birth of the Saviour of the world.

Now Christmas is a wonderful season, and we should as Christians look back on the miracle of the Incarnation with great joy—that God was born for us, that the Word became flesh as we read in John 1. That said, when we do this, we are missing something valuable. We are missing out on our eschatological hope, which is the believer's confidence and anticipation about the return of Christ: His second coming.

The Prophet Isaiah declares that we should expect the return of the “root of Jesse” to gather His people, a phrase that the apostle Paul links directly to Jesus in Romans 15. This return will be one marked by a display of great power, and the faithful remnant of Israel, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob shall be gathered from the corners of the earth. As Christians, we interpret the words of the Prophet Isaiah as referring to those who believe in Jesus. After all, the apostle Paul makes it clear in Galatians 3 that the true children of Abraham are those who believe as he did. Finally, the “signal” the Prophet Isaiah refers to which has been raised for us is first the Cross, and second, the resurrected Jesus. Thus, may we spend this Advent looking forward to He who is coming again soon!

**Prayer:** Dear Father, we ask that this Advent season we would spend time looking forward in hopeful anticipation at the return of Your Son, our Saviour and Lord, Jesus Christ. As He taught us to pray: may Your kingdom come, may Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. O Jesus, Great Shepherd of the Sheep, gather Your people into one flock and prepare us for the glorious resting place of eternity which You will guide us to upon Your return. Amen.

*Devotion written by the Rev. Roland Weisbrot (pastorroland@victorylutheran.ca)*

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# THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD AND THE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

*Almighty God, you made this holy night shine with the brightness of the true Light.  
Grant that here on earth we may walk in the light of Jesus' presence and  
in the last day wake to the brightness of his glory;  
through your only Son, Jesus Christ our Lord,  
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

December 24, 2024 | Tuesday of the Fourth Week in Advent

**THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD: CHRISTMAS EVE**

*Isaiah 28:9–22; Revelation 20:11—21:8; Luke 1:5–25; Psalms 33 & 146 (AM); Psalms 132 & 114 (PM)*

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<sup>146:1</sup> Hallelujah! Praise the LORD, | O my soul! \*

I will praise the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God while I | have my being.

<sup>2</sup> Put not your trust in rulers, nor in any | child of earth,\*  
for there is no | help in them.

<sup>3</sup> When they breathe their last, they re- | turn to earth,\*  
and in that day | their thoughts perish.

<sup>4</sup> Happy are they who have the God of Jacob | for their help,\*  
whose hope is in the | LORD their God;

<sup>5</sup> who made heaven and earth, the seas, and all that | is in them;\*  
who keeps his prom- | ise forever;

<sup>6</sup> who gives justice to those who | are oppressed,\*  
and food to | those who hunger.

<sup>7</sup> The LORD sets the prisoners free; the LORD opens the eyes | of the blind;\*  
the LORD lifts up those who | are bowed down;

<sup>8</sup> the LORD loves the righteous; the LORD cares | for the stranger;\*  
he sustains the orphan and widow, but frustrates the way | of the wicked.

<sup>9</sup> The LORD shall | reign forever,\*  
your God, O Zion, throughout all generations. | Hallelujah!

– Psalm 146 LBW



The baby Jesus will be born with these verses echoing in His heart. Isaiah prophesied, Mary sang, and faithful Jews were praying them week after week. “The LORD sets the prisoners free; the LORD opens the eyes of the blind; the LORD lifts us those who are bowed down. [He] gives justice to those who are oppressed and food to those who hunger.” In His tiny baby cries we hear the suffering and longing of every child. Through the embrace of His mother we receive a glimpse of Him who, in turn, embraces us all. For the one who made the heavens and the earth is the same one who keeps His promises forever. Tonight we will remember his birth in human flesh, how He comes into our lives in a way that we, like His mother can receive him, the LORD God almighty. For as an infant He is vulnerable, in need of shelter, hungry and poor in the things of this world. His presence calls us into love.

Through the praying of this psalm we also catch a sense of a pattern for the ministry of Jesus. He will unroll the scroll of the prophet Isaiah when He begins His public ministry. His Sermon on the Mount will begin with the Beatitudes that open us to understand the beatitude here, “Happy are they who have the God of Jacob for their help, whose hope is in the LORD their God.” He will touch the eyes of the blind man, feed the 5,000, and heal a woman who has been bowed down for 18 years. His resurrection is foretold as all of

this is given on this night. For His birth, His ministry, His death and rising are all of one piece, as the faithful proclaim. “The LORD shall reign forever, your God, O Zion, throughout all generations.”

**Prayer:** May the child born for us grow in our hearts. May His authority shape our lives and our world. And may His justice and righteousness transform our sorrows and our fears. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, whose reign is forever and whose love is everlasting. Amen.

*Devotion written by the Rev. Dr. Amy C. Schiffrin STS (acschiffrin@gmail.com)*

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**December 25, 2024 | THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD: CHRISTMAS DAY**

*Zechariah 2:10–13; 1 John 4:7–16; John 3:31–36; Psalms 2 & 147:1–12 (AM); Psalms 98 & 96 (PM)*

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<sup>2:10</sup> “Shout and be glad, Daughter Zion. For I am coming, and I will live among you,” declares the LORD. <sup>11</sup> “Many nations will be joined with the LORD in that day and will become my people. I will live among you and you will know that the LORD Almighty has sent me to you. <sup>12</sup> The LORD will inherit Judah as his portion in the holy land and will again choose Jerusalem. <sup>13</sup> Be still before the LORD, all mankind, because he has roused himself from his holy dwelling.”

– Zechariah 2:10–13 NIV2011



Merry Christmas! It is truly a joy to be with you on this glorious day when we remember and celebrate our Lord’s birth. The incarnation of God. God in the flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. Christians all around the world are celebrating the birth of our Savior, because the birth of our Savior is the clearest and most powerful reminder in this life that God is here with us, and will never leave.

As we consider the passage offered on this Christmas Day, from the Old Testament prophet Zechariah, before speaking to the passage itself, it’s helpful to remember the context. Zechariah was a prophet of God, like so many of God’s prophets, sent to a people that had strayed from the Lord. The nation of Israel, chosen by God to be His people, they had forsaken their calling, chosen to follow other gods and, as a result, the Lord was rightly angered.

And yet, in spite of His anger, God’s love and faithfulness remained true. “Return to me,” the Lord declared, “and I will return to you.” Come back to the one to whom you belong, and the one to whom you belong will be there for you.

And so, they did. They repented of their sin. They turned from their evil ways. And God kept His promise, as He always does. He made true on His word, and He forgave their sin and claimed them, once again, as His own.

The verses we read today are one of the many Old Testament prophecies and promises that point to the coming and the birth of Christ. They speak of that day when God will live with them, that day when Jesus will be born and live among us.

All throughout the Old Testament, the people lived in expectation that it would happen. They knew that the Word of God could be trusted, and they were right. The promises of God, in spite of the people's unfaithfulness, were never withdrawn and removed. It was God's plan, from the beginning of the world, as the apostle Paul puts it, "to save the world in Christ." And so, He did, and so He does, and so His Word, made real in the person of Jesus Christ, is saving and secure.

My friends, today is the day when we celebrate the culmination of God's prophetic promises and the Old Testament people's hope-filled expectation. Jesus is here. He is alive and with us every day. In that, you and I find our hope.

May God be with you this day, as we celebrate our Lord's birth, and may His presence in your life every day fill you with assurance and comfort and peace. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

**Prayer:** Almighty God, Heavenly Father, on this day when we remember and celebrate the birth of Your Son, remind us that we are loved eternal by You in Him. Keep us faithful in our living, certain in our hope, and secure in Your presence with us in all of life. In Jesus' name. Amen.

*Devotion written by the Rev. Dr. Daniel W. Selbo (dselbo@thenalc.org)*

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**December 26, 2024 | Second Day of Christmas**

**ST. STEPHEN, DEACON AND MARTYR**

*Jeremiah 26:1–9, 12–15; 2 Chronicles 24:17–22; Acts 6:1–7; 7:59–8:8; Psalms 116 & 147:13–21 (AM); Psalms 119:1–24 & 27 (PM)*

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<sup>7:51</sup> "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. <sup>52</sup> Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, <sup>53</sup> you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."

<sup>54</sup> Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. <sup>55</sup> But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. <sup>56</sup> And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." <sup>57</sup> But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. <sup>58</sup> Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. <sup>59</sup> And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." <sup>60</sup> And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

– Acts 7:51–60 ESV



We first hear Stephen's name in Acts 6:5, where he is described as "a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit" (ESV). It was by the power of the Holy Spirit that Stephen was able to do "great wonders and signs among the people" (Acts 6:8). By the working of the Holy Spirit, this deacon proclaimed and defended Jesus Christ to Jews in some of the synagogues in Jerusalem (see Acts 6:9–14).

When Stephen was brought before the council, he was able to respond to his accusers because the Holy Spirit gave him the words to speak (see Mark 13:11). Although his words were met with rage, Stephen was not distracted from the vision which the Spirit enabled him to see, a vision of "the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:56).

Stephen's testimony about seeing the risen, ascended Christ in heaven was the last straw, and the council responded by stoning Stephen to death. But even as this deacon was being pelted with the rocks that would make him the first martyr for Christ, the Holy Spirit was still at work in him. Stephen prayed to the Lord Jesus twice, echoing some of Jesus' own words as He was dying on the cross.

As we read Acts 6 and 7, we hear the story of how the Holy Spirit gave Stephen the gifts of faith, wisdom, zeal, courage, and compassion to serve the Lord Jesus as one of His disciples. Because we are baptized, we are blessed to have this same Spirit dwelling in each of us!

**Prayer:** Dear Father in heaven, we thank You that, in Baptism, You have bestowed upon us the same Holy Spirit that You bestowed upon the deacon Stephen. As You so will, may we follow the example of Stephen, who did not resist the Holy Spirit, but employed the Spirit's gifts to him to serve your Son by proclaiming the Gospel in word and deed. As Stephen entrusted his life to Your Son, may we do the same, all for the sake of Your glory. We pray all this in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen!

*Devotion written by the Rev. H. Brian Triller (briantriller@protonmail.com)*

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**December 27, 2024 | Third Day of Christmas**

**ST. JOHN, APOSTLE AND EVANGELIST**

*Genesis 1:1–5, 26–31; 1 John 5:1–12; John 13:20–35; Psalms 34 & 148 (AM); Psalms 19 & 121 (PM)*

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<sup>121:1</sup> I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?

<sup>2</sup> My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

<sup>3</sup> He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.

<sup>4</sup> Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

<sup>5</sup> The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your right hand.

<sup>6</sup> The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.

<sup>7</sup> The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.

<sup>8</sup> The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.

– Psalm 121 ESV



As we celebrate the third day of Christmas and the Feast of St. John, apostle and evangelist, Psalm 121 offers a profound message of comfort and hope. The psalmist begins by lifting his eyes to the hills, asking, “Where does my help come from?” (Psalm 121:1). The response is both simple and deeply theological: “My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth” (Psalm 121:2). In this season of celebrating the birth of Christ, we recognize that our true help has come from the Lord in the most profound way—through the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

For Lutherans, Psalm 121 reflects God’s grace and care, themes central to our understanding of faith. The Lord is our keeper, who does not slumber nor sleep (Psalm 121:3-4). Just as God’s watchfulness is unceasing, so too is His grace toward us, shown supremely in the coming of Christ. The feast of St. John, the beloved disciple who bore witness to Christ’s light, further reminds us of the importance of that divine Word made flesh (John 1:14). John’s Gospel declares that the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it (John 1:5), a truth echoed in Psalm 121’s assurance that God will guard us both day and night (Psalm 121:6).

On this day, as we reflect on both the incarnation and the faithful witness of St. John, we are reminded of the enduring promise of God’s protection. He will keep our lives, guarding our going out and coming in, now and forevermore (Psalm 121:8). As Lutherans, we cling to the certainty that this promise is fulfilled in Christ, who came to dwell among us, revealing God’s unwavering grace and truth.

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your constant watch over us, as proclaimed in Psalm 121. As we celebrate the birth of Your Son and the witness of St. John, remind us of Your unfailing grace and protection. Guard our hearts and minds, and guide us as we walk in Your light. Help us to trust in Christ, our true help and salvation, today and always. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

*Devotion written by the Rev. Tony D. Ede (tede@thenalc.org)*

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**December 28, 2024 | Fourth Day of Christmas**

**THE HOLY INNOCENTS, MARTYRS**

*Jeremiah 31:15–17; Isaiah 54:1–13; Matthew 18:1–14; Psalms 2 & 149 (AM); Psalms 110 & 111 (PM)*

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<sup>31:15</sup> Thus says the LORD: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.

<sup>16</sup> Thus says the LORD: Keep your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work, says the LORD: they shall come back from the land of the enemy;

<sup>17</sup> there is hope for your future, says the LORD: your children shall come back to their own country.

– Jeremiah 31:15–17 NRSV



“I certainly hope so!” Have you ever said this? Have you ever heard someone say this? In my life and ministry, this phrase is usually employed at times when the future seems unclear—when the coming hours or days or weeks seem foreboding and even forbidding. It might be spoken by a bride, hoping for sunshine as she sees the less than encouraging weather forecast only a few days before her planned outdoor wedding. It may be spoken by a person awaiting the results, positive or negative, of a recent medical test or procedure. This might be heard from the mouth of a concerned voter, concerning their preferred outcome leading up to an important election.

The word ‘hope’ is defined as “a feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen” and “a person or thing that may help or save someone.” I’m drawn to the great hymn of the Church, which testifies: “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.” Jesus is the ‘person or thing’ toward whom we must turn in and for hope.

Wishing upon a star or consulting the horoscope is to place our hope in some portion of creation, while ignoring the Creator Himself. Jeremiah 31:17 simply states “there is hope for your future, says the Lord.” We are, and are to be, people of hope! Here, only a few days after celebrating the birth of Jesus, we are reminded of the source of our hope—God’s gift, wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. A present we can unwrap, love, and enjoy all year long!

As we move through this Christmas season, living and serving on the threshold of an entirely new year, may we lean heavily into the hope that is Jesus and invite others to do the same. “There is hope for your future, says the Lord.”

**Prayer:** Gracious Father, about whom we have often sung “He’s got the whole world in His hands”, help us to face our future with the hope that can only be found in You. Enable us to move ahead as an automobile, looking occasionally in the small rearview mirror for what has been, but mostly focusing our sight through the much larger windshield before us. May we proceed care-fully and faith-fully, shining the Gospel light through our words and our deeds. You have great things in store for all who believe. Help us to believe it! In Jesus’ name, Amen.

*Devotion written by the Rev. Daniel M. Powell (pastordanielm.powell@gmail.com)*

# THE FIRST WEEK AFTER CHRISTMAS

*Almighty God, you wonderfully created  
and yet more wonderfully restored  
the dignity of human nature.*

*In your mercy, let us share the divine life of Jesus Christ  
who came to share our humanity,  
and who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and forever. Amen.*



December 29, 2024 | First Sunday after Christmas / Fifth Day of Christmas

*Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, Martyr, 1170*

*Isaiah 62:6–7, 10–12; Hebrews 2:10–18; Matthew 1:18–25; Psalms 96 & 150 (AM); Psalms 132 & 97 (PM)*

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<sup>6:6</sup> On your walls, O Jerusalem, I have set watchmen; all the day and all the night they shall never be silent.

You who put the LORD in remembrance, take no rest,

<sup>7</sup> and give him no rest until he establishes Jerusalem and makes it a praise in the earth.

<sup>10</sup> Go through, go through the gates; prepare the way for the people; build up, build up the highway; clear it of stones; lift up a signal over the peoples.

<sup>11</sup> Behold, the LORD has proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say to the daughter of Zion, “Behold, your salvation comes; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.”

<sup>12</sup> And they shall be called The Holy People, The Redeemed of the LORD; and you shall be called Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken.

– Isaiah 62:6–7, 10–12 ESV



Have you ever stood at the base of a mighty wall and looked up? Have you ever stood on the top of a mighty wall and looked down? Try and imagine these different points of view, and more especially imagine this great wall encompassing the Holy City of Jerusalem. Isaiah foretold of the coming of the LORD, his recompense before Him, and his reward with Him. The coming of a promised Savior, one who would seek out this holy city, would fulfill the prophecy that proclaims the holy people would not be forsaken! For a moment, consider the watchmen on the wall. A necessary job, to be sure, but this prophecy speaks of them in constant action, never silent. The urgency with which this prophecy must be considered is held in the necessity of the watchmen, so eager for the coming of the LORD and never silent upon His approach, sounding a great alarm to the city, its holy people, and all who would hear. Now consider the other point of view, those to whom Isaiah directs to enter through the gates, to prepare the road for the people, and make ready a highway for what is coming!

These two different yet vital roles in the Isaiah prophecy should spark within us an urgency that can only be understood as if we're sounding the alarm of His coming, seeing the beginning of this arrival from high atop the wall, or as if we see the great multitude and have begun clearing the road for a long-awaited arrival. Now, neither of these jobs would be easy, clearing a highway or watching without rest, but they are necessary and, in the suffering, and weariness found therein, we might better understand the necessity of the suffering endured by this coming Savior on our behalf! Because He took on humanity at the Incarnation, the coming Savior knows well the depth of sin and death.

Having won the battle with sin and death at His glorious resurrection, the long-awaited Savior will come again. But, for us, it seems like that time is far off. The urgency with which those who kept watch and those who cleared stones seems to have dissipated with time. But suffering builds endurance, and maybe, just maybe endurance is that highway prepared for those who follow the Savior. Perhaps endurance is keeping

awake those who watch, those who have seen the salvation prepared in the very sight of the people, and who sound the alarm of his coming!

Everything we do can fulfill the necessary roles of this Isaiah prophecy. Each action of those who put the LORD in remembrance, holding at the forefront of the mind His coming, contributes to the work of preparation. From the confident faith Joseph gathered after the visit from the holy angel to name the child Jesus, and marry and protect His mother to the unwavering faith of the great Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Becket, who faltered not in his devotion to Christ Jesus as he was struck down in martyrdom in 1170 AD.

We don't have time to waste. We must remain steadfast in our faith. The Savior is coming again! His recompense has healed the brokenness brought about by sin, His the reward is with Him—the great reward of eternal life for those who kept the remembrance of Him and by faith have seen His glory!

**Prayer:** Jesus, our Savior, You came by way of the womb of the blessed Virgin Mary to take on our humanity and bring it to the fullness of the Father's plan, help us to remain vigilant like the watchmen to see Your coming on the horizon in glory and power, and by the Holy Spirit help us to proclaim Your majesty to all the world. Amen.

*Devotion written by the Rev. Dr. Nathan Corl Minnich STS (ncminnich@gmail.com)*

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## December 30, 2024 | Sixth Day of Christmas

*Isaiah 25:1–9; Revelation 1:9–20; John 7:53—8:11; Psalms 93 & 145 (AM); Psalms 89:1–18 & 89:19–52 (PM)*

<sup>25:6</sup> On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.

<sup>7</sup> And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations.

<sup>8</sup> He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.

<sup>9</sup> It will be said on that day, "Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation."

– Isaiah 25:6–9 ESV



We are on the sixth day after Christmas. Many have taken their decorations down and life goes on. The Christ child in the manger scene fades in the background to be brought out again next year. But not so for the church whose Savior has come among us, lived, died, and is risen. Jesus is no longer the babe, but a risen king, "*the ruler of kings on earth*" (Revelation 1:5).

The words of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah proclaim the coming of the Lord Almighty when all things are made right and good. Jesus came and conquered death. In this we have hope, hope that lives, which looks forward. The prophets foretold Jesus' birth, and it came to be. His return is spoken of by the prophets, and it will come to be. We are resurrection people living in this hope of a Savior who has not left us to fend for ourselves but is with us always in the love and power of the Holy Spirit who is able to keep us in the faith and hope of Jesus Christ. We look forward in hope even as our world and our own lives may be in turmoil. Cling to the one who can and will help us all our days. *Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him* (Revelation 1:7). In the meantime, we look to Jesus and receive His grace abundant to live in faith.

**Prayer:** Lord, God Almighty, keep us ever in Your care. Give us the hope of life to come. Help us to see above the darkness of a world without hope. Let the light of Christ shine on our path with heavenly hope. Make the Church ready for Your coming again as we Your kingdom people live the Gospel drawing all to Jesus. Thank You for salvation and life. In Jesus' name. Amen.

*Devotion written by the Rev. Pamela J. Thorson (pjthorson78@gmail.com)*

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## December 31, 2024 | Seventh Day of Christmas

*Isaiah 26:1–6; 2 Corinthians 5:16—6:2; John 8:12–19; Psalms 98 & 146 (AM); Psalms 45 & 96 (PM)*

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<sup>5:16</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.

– 2 Corinthians 5:16—6:2 ESV



One evening, in the city of David, angels sang a new song, announcing to bleary eyed shepherds that God was born in flesh and blood, and everything began to change. The world viewed these shepherds with old eyes as lowly and oft forgotten, but when the new creation began, the heralding of angels announced their place around the Lord's cradle.

That same night, a star rose. In the first moments of creation, God hung it as an invitation not to the decedents of Abraham, who were forbidden to look to stars for answers, but to the nations who had not yet learned His name. The world viewed these men in the flesh as foreign soothsayers and irreconcilable enemies, but when the new creation began, a star rose as an ambassador inviting all the nations to the Lord.

When Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, that “the old had passed away; behold the new has come,” he knew this held transformative promises for shepherds, wise foreigners, and himself, a persecutor of Christ redeemed to be a faithful apostle. By His birth, Christ took the old, perishable flesh that we once wore and transformed it into a promise of reconciliation. In the manger, something new has come to us, for us, and within us. When Jesus arrives, it is an announcement that we will no longer be separated from God or one another because He will take sin upon himself and defeat it. As a result of His birth in a manger, we regard ourselves and our neighbor with grace. On this Christmas day, and every day, all who have been baptized into the life of Christ may rest in the assurance that the poor become princes, the stranger becomes a brother, and sinners become saints. This is the day of salvation; let all the world rejoice.

**Prayer:** Lord almighty, you have ushered in the day of salvation. Give us eyes to see the new creation you have brought about in us and our neighbor. As angels sing of your arrival and heaven rings of your victory, join our voices to the chorus so we may be your ambassadors to a world searching for hope. All this we pray in Christ, who has reconciled himself to us, and lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*Devotion written by the Rev. Taylor M. Rister-Stempniak (ptmarie96@gmail.com)*

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**January 1, 2025 | Eighth Day of Christmas**  
**THE CIRCUMCISION AND HOLY NAME OF JESUS**  
**New Year's Day**

*Numbers 6:22–27, Exodus 34:1–8; Colossians 2:6–12; John 16:23b–30; Psalms 98 & 147:1–12 (AM); Psalms 99 & 8 (PM)*

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<sup>2:9</sup> For in [Jesus Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, <sup>10</sup> and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. <sup>11</sup> In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; <sup>12</sup> when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

– Colossians 2:9–12 NRSV

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Have you ever tried naming something, like a baby, a pet, a plant, or even a car, and realized how *ridiculously* hard it can be? You'd think it'd be easy, right? But no—naming your cat turns into a heated debate, and

suddenly “Fluffy” doesn’t seem to capture the full majesty of your furry little lion. Names matter. We put so much thought into them because they’re supposed to mean something, to capture identity and purpose.

Today, we celebrate the Circumcision and Holy Name of Jesus, the name that isn’t just a label but a declaration. *Yeshua*—meaning “the Lord saves”—was divinely chosen and revealed to Mary at the Annunciation, but it was formally bestowed upon the Son of God during His circumcision on the eighth day after His birth, in keeping with Jewish tradition.<sup>3</sup> In that name, we see God’s mission and purpose: to bring *salvation* to the world. This name, chosen by God, carries the fullness of God’s presence, grace, and peace.

In Numbers 6—often used in our liturgies today—we hear the ancient blessing: “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you.” That blessing finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus. He is the very *face of God* shining upon us, offering grace and peace in a way that no one else can.

And in John 16, Jesus reminds us that when we pray in His name, we are heard. His name isn’t just a tagline at the end of a prayer—it’s the power and presence of God at work in our lives. It’s an invitation to live in the reality of God’s love and grace.

As we enter this new year, let’s walk in the confidence of His name, trusting that through Jesus Christ, we have come to fullness in Him, receiving all the blessing, peace, and grace we need.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, in Your holy name lies salvation, grace, and peace. May Your name, which is above every name, be the source of my strength and comfort. As I walk in this world, help me trust in the power of Your name, for You are always with me. Grant me the grace to live in Your light, the peace to rest in Your presence, and the courage to proclaim Your name to all the earth. In Your name, I pray. Amen.

*Devotion written by the Rev. Dcn. Andrew S. Ames Fuller (aamesfuller@thenalc.org)*

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## January 2, 2025 | Ninth Day of Christmas

*Johann Konrad Wilhelm Löhe, Pastor, 1872*

*Genesis 12:1–7; Hebrews 11:1–12; John 6:35–42, 48–51; Psalms 48 & 147:13–21 (AM); Psalms 9 & 29 (PM)*

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<sup>12:1</sup> Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup> And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

<sup>4</sup> So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. <sup>5</sup> And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother’s son, and all their

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<sup>3</sup> *Yeshua* (יֵשׁוּעַ) is the Hebrew-Aramaic name of Jesus, derived from the longer name *Yehoshua* (Joshua), meaning “The Lord saves” or “The Lord is salvation.” In Greek, the Septuagint translators and New Testament writers transliterated *Yeshua* as Ἰησοῦς (*Iēsous*), which later became *Jesus* in English.

possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, <sup>6</sup> Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. <sup>7</sup> Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

– Genesis 12:1–7 ESV



On this ninth day of Christmas, we reflect on God's call to Abram and the promise of blessings that extends to all people. Abram's story reminds us of how God often calls us to trust in His promises, even when we cannot fully see or understand His plan.

In Genesis 12, God calls Abram to leave everything familiar—his country, his relatives, and his father's household—and go to a new land that God would show him. It's striking that Abram, at seventy-five years old, responds with immediate obedience. He gathers his family and belongings and sets out, not knowing exactly where he's going, but trusting in the promise of God. God promises to bless Abram and make his name great, but the most significant part of the promise is that through Abram, "all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

For those of us serving in rural, farming communities, Abram's journey might remind us of the challenges and risks farmers face. Planting each season is an act of trust—trusting that the rains will come, that the land will produce, and that the harvest will provide for the future. Like Abram, we don't always see the results of our labor immediately, but we trust in God's faithfulness to provide.

In the same way, Christmas reminds us that God's greatest blessing has come to us through Abram's line—Jesus Christ. Just as Abram trusted God's promise, we too are called to trust that God's plan for our lives is good. Jesus, the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise, came into the world to bless all families of the earth with salvation and eternal life.

As we continue celebrating Christmas, let us remember that, like Abram, we are called to trust in God's promises and step forward in faith, knowing that His blessings come in His perfect time. Amen.

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, we thank You for the example of Abram’s faith and trust in Your promises. As we celebrate the gift of Jesus this Christmas season, help us to follow Abram’s example by stepping out in faith, even when the path is uncertain. Strengthen our trust in Your plan, and remind us that through Christ, all nations are blessed. Guide us to be faithful stewards of the blessings You give. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

*Devotion written by the Rev. Tony D. Ede (tede@thenalc.org)*

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**January 3, 2025 | Tenth Day of Christmas**

*Charles Porterfield Krauth, Teacher, 1883*

*Genesis 28:10–22; Hebrews 11:13–22; John 10:7–17; Psalms 111 & 148 (AM); Psalms 107 & 15 (PM)*

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<sup>10:11</sup> I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. <sup>12</sup> He who is a hireling and not a shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. <sup>13</sup> He flees because he is a hireling and cares nothing for the sheep. <sup>14</sup> I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, <sup>15</sup> as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. <sup>16</sup> And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd. <sup>17</sup> For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again.

– John 10:11–17 RSV



I recently read a beautiful memoir called *The Shepherd’s Life: Modern Dispatches from an Ancient Landscape* by James Rebanks, published in 2016. The author is a shepherd living and working in the Lake District, a mountainous region in North West England. The climate there is probably very different from the climate of Galilee, but I’m guessing that sheep are sheep, no matter where they are. And shepherds are shepherds too!

We Americans may have somewhat romantic notions about shepherding sheep, but I can tell you that, based on Rebanks detailed description, being a shepherd is not for the faint of heart! In fact, it is very demanding work that requires complete commitment to the sheep. They have to be tended day and night, in all seasons and every kind of weather, and kept safe from predators. The ewes are especially vulnerable when they are giving birth to the lambs.

The shepherd knows all the sheep. He knows their lineage, their strengths and weaknesses, their character and their quirks. And he knows them all by name. A shepherd must absolutely devote his or her life to taking care of the sheep. And so, it is no wonder that our Lord Jesus identifies himself as “The Good Shepherd” who is prepared to lay down His life for the sake of the sheep.

We have just celebrated Christmas, the birth of our Lord Jesus. It is fitting that the rejoicing angels burst forth in the night sky where the shepherds were tending their sheep. It is fitting that the shepherds hurried to see this baby, lying in a humble manger. He is one of them. Indeed, He is the best one of them, by far. In fact, Jesus is their shepherd too!

Notice that Jesus says, “I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So, there shall be one flock, one shepherd.” Jesus, the Good Shepherd, will not rest until His flock is complete. While tending to us, His flock, Jesus continues searching for the lost and wandering lambs. And yes, He has laid down His own life to save His beloved sheep, even you and me, and now lives to be our Good Shepherd forever and ever. Thanks be to God!

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, You sent Your only beloved Son into the world to be our Good Shepherd who freely gives His life for us, His sheep. We give You thanks and praise for Jesus and for His ever-present tender loving care. We pray that all Your sheep may be gathered together into one flock so that all people and nations will know Your love and give honor and praise to Your name. May our Christmas celebrations be filled with joy as we rest secure in the mighty and gracious arms of our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.

*Devotion written by the Rev. Carol E. A. Fryer (cfryer@thenalc.org)*

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## January 4, 2025 | Eleventh Day of Christmas

*Exodus 3:1–15; Hebrews 11:23–31; John 14:6–14; Psalms 20 & 149 (AM); Psalms 93 & 97 (PM)*

<sup>3:11</sup> But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”  
<sup>12</sup> He said, “I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.”<sup>13</sup> But Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”<sup>14</sup> God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

– Exodus 3:11–14 NRSV

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Five years ago today, my wife Shannon and I stood together, exchanging vows, just before the world changed with COVID-19. The joy of our wedding day was filled with hope and expectation, but we had no idea what the coming months would bring. Navigating those early days of marriage through a pandemic, finishing seminary, walking through the grief of a miscarriage—all of it—was a reminder that we can never fully predict what lies ahead, but we *can* trust that God is with us.



In Exodus 3, Moses was simply going about his life when everything in his world was unexpectedly about to change. Tending sheep in the wilderness, he encounters God in a burning bush that wasn't consumed. God reveals His eternal name, "*I AM WHO I AM*," and calls Moses to lead His people out of slavery. Moses feels unworthy and inadequate for such a task, but God reassures him: "*I will be with you.*"

This moment of divine revelation changes everything for Moses. What was once ordinary is transformed by God's presence. Like Moses, we often feel unprepared for the challenges we face. But God's revelation—whether in the burning bush or in the person of Jesus—reminds us that we are never alone.

In John 14, Jesus reveals Himself as *the Way, the Truth, and the Life*. Just as God called Moses to trust in His presence, Jesus calls us to trust in Him. He is the ultimate revelation of God's love and grace, guiding us through life's uncertainties.

As we prepare for Epiphany, we are invited to reflect on how God reveals Himself to us today. Just as He called Moses, God calls us to live in faith and expectation, trusting in His presence and promises. What ordinary moment in your life is God transforming today? Will you trust in His grace and follow where He leads?

**Prayer:** Almighty God, You revealed Yourself to Moses in the burning bush and called Him to lead Your people with the assurance of Your presence. We thank You for revealing Yourself to us through Jesus Christ, our Way, our Truth, and our Life. Help us to trust in Your grace and guidance, especially in times of uncertainty. Transform our hearts to follow where You lead, and give us courage to walk in faith. In Your holy name we pray, Amen.

*Devotion written by the Rev. Dcn. Andrew S. Ames Fuller (aamesfuller@thenalc.org)*

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# THE SECOND WEEK AFTER CHRISTMAS

*Almighty God, you have filled us with  
the new light of the Word  
who became flesh and lived among us.  
Let the light of our faith shine in all that we do;  
through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord,  
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and forever. Amen.*

January 5, 2025 | Second Sunday after Christmas / Twelfth Day of Christmas

**VIGIL OF THE EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD**

Kaj (*pronounced KYE like "sky"*) Munk, Martyr, 1944

*Deuteronomy 33:1–5; 1 John 2:12–17; John 6:41–47; Psalms 99 & 150 (AM); Psalms 96 & 110 (PM)*

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<sup>33:1</sup> This is the blessing with which Moses the man of God blessed the people of Israel before his death. <sup>2</sup> He said, "The LORD came from Sinai and dawned from Seir upon us; he shone forth from Mount Paran; he came from the ten thousands of holy ones, with flaming fire at his right hand.

<sup>3</sup> Yes, he loved his people, all his holy ones were in his hand; so they followed in your steps, receiving direction from you,

<sup>4</sup> when Moses commanded us a law, as a possession for the assembly of Jacob.

<sup>5</sup> Thus the LORD became king in Jeshurun, when the heads of the people were gathered, all the tribes of Israel together..."

– Deuteronomy 33:1–5 ESV



According to a recent Gallup Poll, in the year 2000 about 73% of adults in the United States belonged to a church, synagogue, or mosque. Today, that number is less than 60% and over 30% of Americans say that they have no religious affiliation.<sup>4</sup> It gets worse.

In a major 2005 study of American teenagers who claimed to be Christians, sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton noted the striking rise in what they coined as *Moralistic Therapeutic Deism*. A few of the core beliefs of *MTD* are:

1. A god exists who created the Universe.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other.
3. A main goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about yourself.
4. Good people go to heaven when they die.

Obviously, you don't need to go to church to be a follower of moralistic therapeutic deism. You don't even need a savior! However, sooner or later people will begin to realize how spiritually and intellectually bankrupt such pseudo-religions are. This is a wonderful mission opportunity for us!

The best way forward in these days of decline is *for the Church to be the Church*. What I mean is that the Church should be true to itself as the singularly unique place in which the Gospel is proclaimed and the Holy Sacraments administered according to the divine Word. The answer to the problem of dwindling membership and resources is for the Church to be the place where hungry and hurting people encounter

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<sup>4</sup> With thanks to the website *God Questions: Your questions. Biblical answers.*

the reality of God in Jesus Christ—the bread of life. Everything we do needs to be laser-focused on that purpose.

Throughout the Scriptures God elects and calls together a people. Out of the nations He called Israel, and extends and universalizes that call through the Church. Israel is called to bear the light of Torah. The Church is called to bear the light of Jesus whom we confess as Israel's Messiah.

Israel has survived persecutions, pogroms, and the Holocaust and yet always maintained their unique calling as God's people. Israel never quite *fit* into the world because, *however imperfectly*, they "followed in [the LORD's] steps, receiving direction from [the LORD]" (Deuteronomy 33:3).

There is much we learn from our elder brothers and sisters of Israel. We shouldn't try to *fit* into the world either because "...the world passes away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:17). We will never reach the world by becoming more like it. Rather, we reach the world by becoming more like Christ. Let the Church be the Church.

**Prayer:** "Gracious Father, we pray for your catholic Church. Fill it with all truth and peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error; direct it; where in anything it is amiss, reform it; where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in need, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ, your Son our Savior" (*Lutheran Book of Worship*).

*Devotion written by the Rev. Dr. Eric M. Riesen (eriesen@thenalc.org)*

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# THE EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD

*Lord God, on this day you revealed your Son  
to the nations by the leading of a star.  
Lead us now by faith to know your presence in our lives,  
and bring us at last to the full vision of your glory,  
through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord,  
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and forever. Amen.*

January 6, 2025 | THE EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD

*Isaiah 6:1–6, 9; Revelation 21:22–27; Matthew 12:14–21; Psalms 72 & 145 (AM); Psalms 100 & 67 (PM)*

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<sup>14</sup> But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.

<sup>15</sup> Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there. And many followed him, and he healed them all <sup>16</sup> and ordered them not to make him known. <sup>17</sup> This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah:

<sup>18</sup> "Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.

<sup>19</sup> He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets;

<sup>20</sup> a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory;

<sup>21</sup> and in his name the Gentiles will hope."

– Matthew 12:14–21 ESV



I remember as a child being on a family vacation in New England. This was before GPS and my father was one of those men who didn't like to ask directions. On one occasion it became apparent to everyone, but my father, that we were hopelessly lost. My mother suggested that we stop at a service station and ask for directions. While they were arguing about what to do a car passed us at a fairly high speed and my dad said, "Let's follow that guy, he looks like he knows where he is going." My father was right, he did know where he was going but the problem was that we didn't know if that was where we wanted to be. When we are lost it is a wonderful thing to have someone to follow, but it is equally important to know something about the one who is doing the leading.

Today is the beginning of the season of Epiphany. It is during this season that we read in the Scriptures the stories of how Jesus revealed who He was and what He came to do. It is traditional on this day to read the story of the wise men who followed a star to Bethlehem and gave Jesus gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Today's text, however, reminds us that our guiding light is incarnational rather than celestial. Jesus is the "Bright morning star" that will lead us to God's eternal kingdom (Revelation 22:16). He is the one we must follow if we are to have any hope of reaching our heavenly home. To a people who are lost the season of Epiphany whispers in our ears, "Follow that guy, He knows where He is going and where it is that you need to be."

**Prayer:** Gracious God, we are a people who often lose our way and are tempted to follow the ways of the world rather than You. We ask for You to light our path and guide us through the darkness of this world into the glory of Your heavenly home. We pray this in the name of the one who is the Bright Morning Star, Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen.

*Devotion written by the Rev. David F. Keener (dkeener@thenalc.org)*

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