
*Martin Luther's Morning and Evening Prayers taken from
the Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther.*

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REFLECTIONS

ADVENT

NOVEMBER 29 -
DECEMBER 23, 2020

HIGHER
THINGS[®]

DARE TO BE LUTHERAN[®]

Advent

NOVEMBER 29 - DECEMBER 23, 2020

Notes

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Make the sign of the Holy Cross and say:

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

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

Read "Today's Reading" if there is one listed.

Read the Daily Lectionary selections.

Read the Reflection for the Day.

Say the Apostles' Creed.

Pray the Lord's Prayer.

Pray one of these little prayers:

(In the Morning)

I thank Thee, my Heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Thy dear Son, that Thou hast kept me this night from all harm and danger; and I pray Thee to keep me this day also from sin and all evil, that all my doings and life may please Thee. For into Thy hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Thy holy angel be with me, that the Wicked Foe may have no power over me. Amen.

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

(In the Evening)

I thank Thee, my Heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Thy dear Son, that Thou hast graciously kept me this day, and I pray Thee to forgive me all my sins, where I have done wrong, and graciously keep me this night. For into Thy hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Thy holy angel be with me, that the Wicked Foe may have no power over me. Amen.

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

The First Sunday in Advent

NOVEMBER 29, 2020

Notes

Today's Reading: Matthew 21:1-9

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 5:1-25; 1 Peter 2:1-12

Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey.
(Matthew 21:4)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. He is coming! That's what the word Advent means. But, who is coming? Our God and King, of course. Is that necessarily good news? After all, why is He coming?

Fear not. In fact, all such fear over His arrival and His mission among us will be silenced at His birth when the angel announces, "Do not be afraid." But even now our fears begin to wane as He arrives every First Sunday in Advent "humble, and mounted on a donkey...a beast of burden." Yes, Jesus is our God and King.

Why so "humble"? That's the Good News. Jesus arrives "humble" because He is arriving for us, for every one of us, to bear our sin and be our Savior. Jesus arrives lowly because He is coming for all who have been laid low by sin. He arrives "humble" because, in fulfillment of God's Word, He is coming for all who have been humbled by sin. No sinner excluded. The burden of your guilt, the beast of your judgment, will all be upon Jesus now as He suffers and dies for you on the Cross. It's why the Father has prepared a body for His Son (Hebrews 10:5), soon to be born for you and me of the Virgin Mary. By the death of our own God and King upon the Cross, we will all be declared holy in God's sight—His children, forgiven of all our sins, heirs now to eternal life.

It's such an amazing promise; who would dare believe in it? God knows this fear of ours. It's why He is always speaking to it by how He sends us Jesus. In the past, to accomplish our salvation, God sent Him "humble, and mounted on a donkey." In the present, to deliver our salvation, God sends Jesus to us in plain words spoken to us by plain pastors who deliver the promise of His Cross in every Absolution and sermon we hear from them. He sends Jesus to us in simple water that promises the same now, and also in ordinary bread and wine that promise the same now: "for you, for the forgiveness of sins." So humble. As if to say, "I got this. And I got you. Do not be afraid." That makes the children's song to our God and King ours now to sing to Jesus every Sunday: "Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!" In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

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

Wednesday of the Fourth Week of Advent DECEMBER 23, 2020

Today's Reading: *Small Catechism:* Table of Duties, Widows
Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 43:25-44:20; Revelation 11:1-19

She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day, but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives. (1 Timothy 5:5-6)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. As we do every Wednesday, even the one before Christmas, we return to the *Small Catechism*. The focus on widows and their works and responsibilities should bring a smile to every reader. Talk about taking Jesus taking on our flesh and blood? This is that on steroids. By being born in human flesh, Jesus has taken every moment of ours and made it His, now. It counts, whatever it is. It's sacred. It's covered by His redeeming, sanctifying blood. Whether you are a baby in swaddling clothes or a widow of 92 years, you're His, now. Always His. He's got this. And, He's got you. Wherever you are in this life. The blood He will shed for you forever promises you that much.

What can a little baby ever do or contribute? Many an aged widow has asked the same of herself. With her kids all grown and gone, she wonders why in the world God doesn't just take her home. "Why am I still here, pastor? What can I possibly do or contribute? I'm just a burden to everyone around me." Fear not. Jesus' birth in human flesh means there is never a time now when God sees you that way. There is never a moment now when God is not present with you, smiling at you and calling you His own. Why, God is even waiting with bated breath now just to see what you do next, and to hear what you pray next. So promises Jesus' birth for you in human flesh.

The opposite of such faith, or course, is death. Supremely self-indulgent, death sees no reason at all to live for others. God's answer to death? God's response? Jesus. Always Jesus. Only Jesus. Remember, Jesus is the reason for the season.

You belong to God, now. To life, now. There is always a reason, a work, a thing you can do for others., even if all you do is pray for them. So alive are you, promises the Gospel. So alive are you, promises Jesus. So alive are you, promises Christmas. How merry! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Greet the rising sun, Shining with bright force, Like an athlete strong, Set to run the course; Birds soar high above, Wild-flow'rs bloom below; With the day's new light, Glad to work I go. Lord, I will today On Your love rely; Let no evil thought Cloud the clear sky. Joyful and content With life's simpler things, Knowing all I need From Your kindness springs.

("Greet the Rising Sun" LSB 871, st.1, 3)

St. Andrew, Apostle NOVEMBER 30, 2020

Today's Reading: John 1:35-42a
Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 6:1-7:9; 1 Peter 2:13-25

One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah." (John 1:40-41a)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. You can tell Andrew and Peter are brothers. Peter always seems to speak first and think later. True to family form, Andrew blurts out, "We have found the Messiah!" Oh, really?

Andrew did not find Jesus. The Gospel is this: Jesus found Andrew. Jesus travelled where Andrew travelled. Jesus walked where Andrew walked. He breathed where Andrew breathed, He lived where Andrew lived. Anything less, and Andrew never would have "found the Messiah." He found Jesus only when Jesus came to where he was and gave Himself to Andrew.

It's no different for us. In Baptism, Jesus finds us right where we are—where we walk, breathe, and live—and gives Himself to us, placing His Name on us, His righteousness on us, washing all our sin away. In the Gospel that is spoken to us in Absolution and sermons, Jesus is still walking where we walk, is still living and breathing where we do—speaking all our sin out of existence by the power of the Word by which He once called everything into existence. And at His Supper Jesus still travels right where we travel, still eats where we eat, putting into our mouths the promise of His sacrifice for us upon the Cross, "for you, for the forgiveness of sins."

The blind do not see, the lost do not find, and the sinner does not find or choose for himself a Savior. That's just not the Gospel. The Gospel is this: Jesus seeks; Jesus finds; Jesus chooses; Jesus saves. That is the promise of the Gospel, the faith St. Andrew would eventually grow into.

St. Andrew's Feast is always the first feast in the Church's new year, which begins every First Sunday in Advent. Fitting, for Andrew was the first apostle Jesus called. Fitting, also, for Andrew would taste death himself by way of a cross. In fact, as the cross on which he would be martyred for the Gospel came into view, Andrew cried out, "Hail, precious cross, you who were dedicated by the body of Christ; may He receive me through you, who redeemed me through you." In that cry, Andrew teaches us the promise of the Gospel: By His arrival and by His Cross, Jesus has found even us. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Almighty God, by Your grace the Apostle Andrew obeyed the call of Your Son to be a disciple. Grant us also to follow the same Lord Jesus Christ in heart and life, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.
(Collect for the Feast of St. Andrew)

Tuesday of the First Week of Advent

DECEMBER 1, 2020

Today's Reading: Jeremiah 23:5-8

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

And this is the name by which he will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."
(Jeremiah 23:6)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. "He certainly made a name for himself." When we say that about someone, it usually means they have made a reputation for themselves by something they have done. Well, what sort of name have you made for yourself? When others think of you, what comes to mind? Smart and intelligent? Or, not so smart and intelligent? Cool, or not cool? Friend, or foe? Good looking? Or something less flattering?

Trust me, not everyone thinks of you the way you fear they do. It's just that our fears sometimes get the better of us. That happens every time we foolishly magnify, in the thinking of others, what we don't like about ourselves. Imagine my surprise when, later in life, I learned only a few thoughts of me the way I feared most did. I just figured I never lived up to the name or reputation I wanted for myself. Well, guess what? When it comes to the name and reputation we desire before God, you and I have something better, far more superior than ourselves going for us. We've got Jesus going for us. What's His is ours, now. That's the promise of His death for us upon the Cross. His faith. His love. His life. His righteousness. Ours, now. It's the promise God makes to us in Baptism—clothed with Christ. It's the language of the preaching of the Gospel—Jesus Christ and Him crucified for us. It's the gift given at Holy Communion, "for you, for the forgiveness of sins."

Luther calls the Gospel "The Blessed Exchange." Jesus gets our sin, we get His righteousness. Jesus gets our death, we get His life. So the next time the devil, the world, or even your own conscience wants to trouble you about your righteousness before God, tell them to take it up with Jesus—because Jesus, not you, is your righteousness now with God.

Imagine that. The reputation we earn for ourselves, "much and daily" with our sin, forever exchanged before God with the reputation Jesus has earned for us. Perfect faith and love. Perfect life and righteousness. Don't just imagine it. Trust it. For this is the promise of the Gospel. Maybe you heard it like this last Sunday: "In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness'" (Jeremiah 23:6). In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Hark the glad sound! The Savior comes, the Savior promised long; Let every heart prepare a throne, And every voice a song.

("Hark the Glad Sound" LSB 349, st.1)

Tuesday of the Fourth Week of Advent

DECEMBER 22, 2020

Today's Reading: Revelation 1:1-6

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

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.
(Revelation 1:5b-6)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. As dark and terrifying as these days can be, Revelation is written to tell us that Jesus is so much bigger, so much more grand than any darkness. For the blood that courses through His veins courses there for you. This is God's blood. Blood to be born for you. Blood to live for you. Blood to die for you. Blood to rise for you. Blood to reign and rule for you. Marvel at the gift given at Christmas! Though seemingly so small and insignificant, this little Child's blood will forever settle God's heart, God's mind, and God's judgment toward you. For taking on your flesh and blood, Jesus has forever united Himself to you and you to Himself. He's got this. He's got you. And He's never letting go.

It's why Isaiah cries out to the captives, "But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: 'Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior'" (Isaiah 43:1-3).

It's why Revelation 10 shows that "mighty Angel," Jesus Himself, standing astride land and sea. He hasn't slipped and lost His footing. He's got this and nothing will cause Jesus to fall. Not some pandemic. Not some evil power or authority. Not some nation, foreign or otherwise. Not even some sin of yours. Jesus and the promise of His blood control all things, now. For you. Hear that promise for you in the manger. Hear it on the Cross. Hear it from the empty tomb. Hear that promise every day in your Baptism and in God's Word. Hear it every time you attend the Lord's Supper. For you. Jesus. God's got this. God's got you. And He's never letting go.

As dark and terrifying as these days can be, in revealing Jesus for us in these days the book of Revelation is one last way God's Word calls out: Your Jesus is so much bigger, so much more grand than the darkness. You are going to be okay. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Satan, hear this proclamation: I am baptized into Christ! Drop your ugly accusation, I am not so soon enticed. Now that to the font I've traveled, All your might has come unraveled, And, against your tyranny, God, My Lord, unites with me!
(*"God's Own Child, I Gladly Say It" LSB 594, st.3*)

St. Thomas, Apostle

DECEMBER 21, 2021

Today's Reading: John 20:24-29

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

*So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."
(John 20:25)*

In the Name † of Jesus. Amen. It must be Christmas already, for Jesus does not condemn Thomas for his unbelief. He simply chides him. Doesn't Jesus know unbelief damns? How dare Jesus be so indifferent about the sanctity of our believing? No, thank God for such indifference, because nobody believes as they should. No one believes their sins are always forgiven or that God is always kind and good. No one always thinks God is in control and not chance or fate. No one is righteous like that.

Does that make the promise and joy of Christmas less real for us? Absolutely not. For Jesus' resurrection is the Father's promise that Jesus' birth, Jesus' life, and Jesus' death have saved us from anything and everything we have ever been, ever are, or ever will be. All of our doubting, all of our questioning, all the sad proof and fruit of our unbelief has forever been hidden from God's judgment by Jesus' death for us.

Your faith does not provide God with the reason or power He needs in order to save you. Merry Christmas, everyone! Jesus does that for you. His birth for you, His life you, and His death for you. Jesus is the reason for the season. Not Thomas. Not you. Not me. Jesus. For whoever and whatever we are, Jesus was born to become that for us upon the Cross. And He rose from all of that. For you. For me. For Thomas. For everyone. What else would Jesus do, then, but chide poor Thomas? "It's not you, Tom, your smarts, your feelings, your works, your anything. It's Me, Thomas. All Me. For you." That is what makes and keeps you the Father's—Jesus.

Jesus, of course, isn't praising Thomas for his unbelief. He is saving him from it by speaking a word of pardon for it. "Peace be with you!" And did you know, that's the same promise Jesus speaks to you every day in Baptism? It's the same promise you hear from your pastor in every Absolution and sermon he speaks. It's the same promise Jesus feeds you with at His Supper, "for you, for the forgiveness of sins." "I got this. I got you. So, the Father does, too. Peace be with you." God knows your fears, your struggles, your unbelief. It's why He sends Jesus every day. For you. That's peace. In the Name † of Jesus. Amen.

*When Thomas first the tidings heard That they had seen the risen Lord, He doubted the disciples' word. Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!
("O Sons and Daughters of the King" LSB 470, st.5)*

Wednesday of the First Week of Advent

DECEMBER 2, 2020

Today's Reading: *Small Catechism:* Table of Duties, Workers

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 8:9-9:7; 1 Peter 4:1-19

*Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ.
(Ephesians 6:5)*

In the Name † of Jesus. Amen. Wednesday brings us back to the catechism and the Table of Duties. But how do we today make sense of Paul's encouragement for "bondservants," or "slaves," to obey their masters? By remembering the advent of our God and King. Having arrived in flesh and blood, Jesus is now at the Father's right hand in flesh and blood. And that's not geography. That's theology. It means God is ruling everything for us, all people, times, and circumstances by our flesh and blood Brother, Jesus.

Why would such a king allow slavery? We shouldn't blame Jesus for slavery any more than we should blame Him for war, poverty, or cancer. Jesus didn't create these. We did. Our sin is why the world is in the shape it is. But here's the thing. Two things, really. First, Jesus uses what already exists to accomplish His purposes. He doesn't wait on us. He uses us. That includes us not just in our strengths and smarts, but even in our sins and weaknesses. Even in trials and crosses. Yes, sometimes, even in slavery. It doesn't ever make slavery right for us. But it does encourage every slave to be faithful in his service. He's actually serving Jesus, now.

That's the second thing: "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:9). We will never comprehend in this life how Jesus uses "all things," let alone slavery, to accomplish the good that is His will for us. But remember Joseph's words to his brothers: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Genesis 50:20). We don't have to know the "how" of it all, just the "Who" of it all: Jesus, our God and King. The Coming One. The Crucified One. The Risen One. The One who is here with forgiveness, life and salvation now in His Word, in His water, and at His Supper. For all. Who is even at the Father's right hand for all. For slaves and for slave owners. Go figure.

Whatever it is, Jesus is the One who is in control, behind all of it. No, that doesn't always make all it feel right. But it does remind us who is in control. And that is what sets us free to love and to serve anyone and everyone—in the glad confidence it is Jesus, really, whom we are serving. In the Name † of Jesus. Amen.

Forth in Thy name, O Lord, I go, My daily labor to pursue, Thee, only Thee, resolved to know In all I think or speak or do.

("Forth in Thy Name, O Lord, I Go" LSB 854, st. 1)

Thursday of the First Week of Advent

DECEMBER 3, 2020

Today's Reading: Romans 13:11-14

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

Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep.
(Romans 13:11)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. "Besides this," writes Paul. Besides what? Paul had just written, "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law" (13:10). "Besides this...the hour has come for you to wake from sleep." The old Adam within always thinks the Law is about himself, his own goodness and righteousness, making his own way to God, who is so undecided about any of us. Such sleepiness! No, the Law is about our neighbor. And "Don't hurt him!" is its fulfilling.

Paul knows what we are really like on the inside. Earlier he wrote our "feet are swift to shed blood," "ruin and misery" are "in their paths," that no one knows "the way of peace" (Romans 5:15-17). Guilty as charged. I don't want to give, I want to take. I don't want to sacrifice, I want others to sacrifice. I don't want to yield, I want to control. I'd rather you serve me than I serve you. Everyone's that way (Romans 3:19-20).

See yourself on the Cross, then, because having been born for you, that is what Jesus became when He suffered and died for you on the Cross. He became you. Every one of you. No sinner, no sin left out. And by Jesus' death for you on the Cross, God has forever redeemed you, has forever declared you holy in His sight. You carry that promise with you now every day in your Baptism. In fact, Baptism promises that as the Last Day approaches, the fulfillment of our salvation also approaches. For we have a heavenly Father now who spends every day with us, calling us His own, loading us with benefits (Psalm 68:19). Why, He even has us engraved on the palms of His hands (Isaiah 49:10). What more do we need?

So, instead of seeing yourself, see your neighbor as the subject of the Law. Learn to love him according to the works that are given you to do for him. "But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" (Romans 13:14) is simply to say, live every day now in the power and promise of your Baptism. You don't need to take, be in control, or be served all the time. You have Jesus serving you all the time, now, which means your salvation is even a little closer to you now than when this devotion first began. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

The night will soon be ending; The dawn cannot be far. Let songs of praise ascending Now greet the Morning Star! All you whom darkness frightens With guilt or grief or pain, God's Radiant Star brightens and bids you sing again.
(*"The Night Will Soon Be Ending" LSB 337, st.1*)

The Fourth Sunday in Advent

DECEMBER 20, 2020

Today's Reading: John 1:19-28

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

They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"
(John 1:25)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Ever wonder why elves spend so much time putting tags on the presents that will soon appear under the Christmas tree? It's because they want us to know who the gift is from and who it is for. John the Baptist is one of those tags God puts on Jesus. So grand is the gift being given, God does not want anyone missing out. So, he sends a tag that announces—From: God. To: you.

John, of course, was not the Gift. Though Jesus would identify John as the greatest among those born of women, John would confess he was not even worthy to untie the strap on Jesus' sandal. Jesus is the Gift. Jesus alone is life as God created it to be. Jesus alone is love for God with all His heart, all His soul, and all His mind. Jesus alone is love for neighbor as for self. Jesus alone is holy. Though John could sacrifice himself a thousand times, his death could not atone for all sin, let alone for a single sin of his own. Or ours. Only Jesus' death can do that for us.

And it has. For God has taken our sin, all of our sin, and placed it on Jesus, the sinless One. Whatever would make God declare you unworthy in His sight, unworthy of His goodness, His love, even His sandal, Jesus atoned for it by His death for you on the Cross. You are worthy now, declares that death. In fact, that death promises you are now as much God's child as that Baby to be born later this week. For you. Jesus. He is the Gift.

When considering your worthiness before God, do not look at yourself. Look at Jesus. And while you look under the tree this Christmas, look also at the Tree of the Cross and see all God has promised you there: the One who died for you, the One born of Mary, the Son of God.

So amazing is the Gift being given, that God does not want anyone missing out on it. So He places tags on the Gift. One of those tags is Baptism. Another is Holy Absolution. Another is the preaching of the Gospel. Another is Holy Communion. And all announce—From: God. To: you. Yes, Christmas year-round for you, because of Jesus year-round for you. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

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

Adam and Eve

DECEMBER 19, 2020

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

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number... standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands. (Revelation 7:9)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Today the Church commemorates Adam and Eve, father and mother of the human race. Aren't they, though, the reason the world is in the mess that it is? Yes. But if Adam and Eve, created in righteousness, could cause such harm, how much more we who were conceived in sin? Perish the thought! No, perish My own Son, says God. For rather than lose you, God would redeem you by sending His Son, another Adam: Adam 2.0. The first Adam, because of sin, we can call death. The second Adam, because of righteousness, we can call life. This second Adam, from His conception to His final breath, lived a life of perfect holiness for you and me. His death on the Cross proves He lived it for you and me. For Jesus didn't have any sin of His own to cause His death. Our sin did that. But, here's the promise of the Gospel: In causing Jesus to perish, our sin has lost its power and authority to cause us to perish.

"Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins" (Isaiah 40:2). Jesus is the white robe promised to us in the Gospel. It's why we will cry out on that day, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Revelation 7:10b) Yes, you will be among that multitude who cannot be numbered, though Revelation 7 gives the number at 144,000. You will be among that multitude because that is the promise of the Gospel, of Adam 2.0. Jesus is the promise!

144,000 is just picturesque language playing off God's number, 12, and the number for all of time, 1000. God's Old Testament Church (12 tribes) multiplied by God's New Testament Church (12 apostles) multiplied by time itself (1000) equals 144,000. No matter how scary the time, wherever God has His 12, there God has His people. And no one is missing. No one is lost. Not even you! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Behold a host, arrayed in white, Like thousand snowclad mountains bright! With palms they stand; Who is this band Before the throne of light? These are the saints of glorious fame, Who from the great affliction came And in the flood of Jesus' blood Are cleansed from guilt and shame. They now serve God both day and night; They sing their song in endless light. Their anthems ring As they all sing With angels shining bright.

("Behold a Host, Arrayed in White" LSB 676, st.1)

Friday of the First Week of Advent

DECEMBER 4, 2020

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

And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. (2 Peter 1:19)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. While we were playing in our basement during a thunderstorm one night, the lights flickered and went out. The darkness paralyzed me with fear. I couldn't see anything. All I could hear was that fiery furnace where, as a little child, I knew the boogey man lived. I cried out. Help soon arrived as Mom came racing down the stairs, flashlight in hand. I could see her face, her smile. How sweet that rescue.

Like that basement, our hearts can be dark and scary places, too. We are quick to believe God is kind and good when things go our way, but not so sure when they don't. We are quick to think, "God has done everything He can to save us, but the rest is up to us now. The ball is back in our court, and we must return serve somehow and win salvation by showing God a righteousness of our own doing." Dark and scary, right?

Dark and scary is all there would be if all we had to follow were "cunningly devised myths" like these. But, we have more. So much more. Along with James and John, Peter had the Father's voice at Jesus' Transfiguration saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to Him!" (Luke 9:35). Peter says you and I have something even more solid than that—"the prophetic Word." The Word of God. The written down Word. And what does it say? It tells of Jesus' birth to bear our sin and be our Savior. It tells of His life for us, His death for us, His rising for us.

This Word says that, baptized into Christ, sunny skies or stormy, you and I are clothed with Christ now. Always a joy, then, to our heavenly Father. This Word says God has done it all for our salvation by Jesus' death for us on the Cross. A promise spoken in every Absolution and sermon we hear. This Word says no matter how things go, Jesus is always there for us at His Supper with His Body and Blood, "for you, for the forgiveness of sins."

And there I am, again, a little child, alone in that basement, dark and scary. Then, as if racing down the stairs with flashlight in hand, I can see Jesus, God's face, God's smile, God's love—all because of the Word. Thank God for His Word! How sweet the rescue. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Thy strong Word bespeaks us righteous; Bright with Thine own holiness, Glorious now, we press toward glory, And our lives our hopes confess.

Alleluia, alleluia! Praise to Thee who light dost send! Alleluia, alleluia!

Alleluia without end!"

("Thy Strong Word" LSB #578, st.3)

Saturday of the First Week of Advent

DECEMBER 5, 2020

Today's Reading: Introit for the Second Sunday in Advent
(Psalm 80:1, 3, 14, 17; antiphon: Isaiah 62:11b, 30:30, 29)

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 11:1-12:6; 2 Peter 2:1-22

*Say to the daughter of Zion, "Behold, your salvation comes."
(Isaiah 62:11b)*

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Tomorrow's Introit points the way: Jesus. He is our salvation. His works, not our works. His promises, not ours. He is our faith, our trust, before God. Jesus. That's the way.

Tomorrow you and I will hear the glad promise: "Behold, your salvation comes." That's because, when it comes to our salvation, God runs all the verbs for us. He washes and speaks and feeds Jesus to us. That is our salvation. Behold, His is all the giving, ours is all the receiving.

Your salvation first came to you in Holy Baptism, when God turned and looked down from heaven upon you and claimed you as His own. Clothed with Christ. Tomorrow, "The LORD will cause His majestic voice to heard," in the Absolution and in the preaching of the Gospel, Jesus Christ and Him crucified—and again we "will have gladness of heart." All our sin spoken away. And like a shepherd leading His flock, Jesus will "look down from heaven and see" the little lambs, you and me, whom He has led to His Table again to be made strong for us with His Body and His Blood, "for you, for the forgiveness of sins."

God does the giving, and we the receiving. God runs, we don't run. God wills, we don't will. We don't go and get our salvation. Our salvation comes and gets us. That's how our salvation works, because that's how our Jesus works. That's the promise of the Gospel.

Jesus comes to you in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger. Jesus comes to you under the Law, keeping the Law for you, fulfilling every commandment in your place. Jesus comes to you by giving Himself on the Cross for you, a holy sacrifice to God that causes God's face to shine on you, now, the lawbreaker. Jesus rises from the dead for you. Jesus comes to you, right where you are, every day with the promise of His Cross in Holy Baptism. Jesus comes to you every Sunday in His Word with the promise of His Cross. And Jesus comes to you with His Body and His Blood at His Supper. That's your salvation right there. Jesus. Jesus only. Jesus always. Like the Introit tomorrow says, that's the way. Jesus. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

*Satan, hear this proclamation: I am baptized into Christ! Drop your ugly accusation, I am not so soon enticed. Now that to the font I've travelled, All your might has come unraveled, And, against your tyranny, God, my Lord, unites with me!
(“God's Own Child, I Gladly Say It” LSB 594, st.3)*

Friday of the Third Week of Advent

DECEMBER 18, 2020

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

*And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence.
(Revelation 6:8b)*

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. When reading Revelation, always keep two things in mind. First, "no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation" (2 Peter 1:20-21). In other words, let Scripture interpret Scripture. If someone comes out of Revelation with a teaching found nowhere else in the Bible, no matter how popular it may be, it's "someone's own interpretation," not the Bible's. Ignore it.

Second, Revelation, like every other book of the Bible, is all about Jesus. It even opens with, "The revelation of Jesus Christ." Not of some blueprint for the end times, Revelation is one final revealing, one last spectacular showing forth of Jesus for our times, the End Times. And the book says, "Do not be afraid." Jesus is in control.

In the picturesque language known as the four horsemen of the apocalypse, Revelation 6 does tell of the end times. It tells of things like wars and rumors of wars (symbolized by a white horse carrying a bow), of things like the loss of lives and peace among people (symbolized by the bright red horse carrying a great sword), of things like the rise of inflation and starvation (symbolized by the black horse with a pair of scales in his hand), and of things like pestilence and plague (symbolized by the pale horse). In places like Matthew 24, Jesus tells us that not only will such signs always be present, but like birth pangs they will increase as the end nears. Accordingly, while in Revelation 6 only one fourth of mankind is affected, in an ensuing vision in chapter 8 one third will be affected.

The Good News? The hand governing it all is the hand of the Lamb whom God sent to sacrifice for us upon the Cross. God wants you to know that the hand which bears you no ill, no harm, or hatred in anything is the hand steering it all—every place, every time, every power, every circumstance. In fact, it's the same hand that is holding on to you now with the promise of the Cross in His Word, in His water, and at His Supper.

Don't be thrown by all the signs. While the world sees only an angry God behind them, you, by faith, see Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. It's all going according to plan. His! Look behind the signs, then, and trust this gentle Lamb. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

*With might of ours can naught be done, soon were our loss effected; But for us fights the Valiant One, Whom God Himself elected. Ask ye, Who is this? Jesus Christ it is, of Sabaoth Lord, And there's none other God; He holds the field forever.
(“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” LSB 656, st.2)*

Daniel the Prophet and the Three Young Men

DECEMBER 17, 2020

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

And I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. And one of the elders said to me, "Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals." (Revelation 5:4-5)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. December 17th marks the commemoration of the Prophet Daniel and the Three Young Men. The Book of Daniel tells how God rescued Daniel from the lion's den and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the fiery furnace. What were these men doing in such places? The answer gets to the heart of this day: Jesus.

In Revelation's typical picturesque-style language, Jesus is revealed as the One in control of everything. Not fate, chance, evil powers, or regimes. Not even sin or Satan. Jesus. That's the truth we are comforted with when we see it is only Jesus, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, who is found worthy to take possession of the seven-sealed scroll and reveal its contents.

Sin, evil people, the devil himself may have created places like the lion's den and fiery furnaces. But the only plans and purposes such places can carry out now are the Lord's, not theirs. Fear not. Jesus has His hand over all of it. He holds everything from yesterday, everything from today, and everything from tomorrow in His careful nail-scarred hands. Even lion's dens and fiery furnaces.

Why is Jesus alone worthy of such power? "For You were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9b). Why has the Father put everything in Jesus' hands alone? Because Jesus alone died for you upon the Cross, forever ransoming you from all your sin, from your own death, and from the devil. God's not going to lose you now! That is why He has put Jesus in charge. For you.

Like Daniel, or Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, you do not need to fear. Jesus has this. He has you. In fact, that's His promise to you now and every day in His Word, in His water and at His Supper. No matter the lions or the fire, the dens or the furnaces—He's got you. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Lord God, heavenly Father, You rescued Daniel from the lions' den and the three young men from the fiery furnace through the miraculous intervention of an angel. Save us now through the presence of Jesus, the Lion of Judah, who has conquered all our enemies through His blood and taken away all our sins as the Lamb of God, who now reigns from His heavenly throne with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

(Collect for the Feast of the Prophet Daniel and the Three Young Men)

The Second Sunday in Advent

DECEMBER 6, 2020

Today's Reading: Luke 21:25-36

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

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. (Luke 21:36)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. So much can trip us up. Troubles at school and home. People pick on us. Friends betray us. Things don't work out as we had hoped. Sometimes troubles pile up so high our hearts faint with fear. And Jesus knows this. "There will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity...people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world" (Luke 21:25-25). It's happening still in our day. But remember, Jesus also says, "Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (Luke 21:28). That is what is in store for you, my friend. Not God's wrath. Jesus. His redemption. Your redemption. It's His promise.

It's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that trials and troubles are signs of God's wrath toward us. Jesus knows we live with such fear because of our sin. It's why He always points us to the promise of our redemption, His sacrifice for our sin on the Cross. You may think God is hating on you, casting you away because of all that is happening to and around you. Jesus promises, you couldn't be further from the truth. God turned on Jesus when He died for you on the Cross. He will never now turn on you.

God seals that promise to you in Holy Baptism. He puts it in your ears with His Word, and into your mouth with His Supper, "for you, for the forgiveness of sins." God's got this. He promises you.

In today's Collect we pray for God to "stir up our hearts," not because we have any confidence in them, but because we don't. We know their poverty. We will never find courage or faith in our hearts. Only by Jesus' coming to us as our redemption in Word and Sacrament, and only by Jesus' coming to us on the Last Day as our salvation will our hearts be given faith and courage in our redemption, despite all our troubles.

Stay awake. Troubles are not proof of God's hatred. They're just proof we're not with Him yet, where we belong. God sent Jesus to accomplish that for us. He will send Jesus again to fulfill it. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Your only-begotten Son, that by His coming we may be enabled to serve You with pure minds; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. (Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent)

Ambrose of Milan, Pastor and Hymn Writer

DECEMBER 7, 2020

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 24:1-13; 1 John 1:1-2:14

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

(1 John 1:7)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. You've heard the saying, "Jesus is the reason for the season." He is also the reason we observe days like today: the Feast of St. Ambrose. If there was ever a word to describe the focus of this guy's preaching and hymn writing, it was Jesus. Ambrose was a Roman governor in Milan during a time of great controversy in the Church. Many in his time were saying that Jesus should not be considered true God. They claimed He was something less than "very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made" (Nicene Creed). If He was God, they said, it was with a small "g," not a capitol "G."

When the bishop of Milan, who supported this false teaching, passed away, Ambrose attended the meeting to choose his replacement, hoping to influence the outcome. Imagine his surprise when, by popular acclamation, he was elected bishop. God often uses those in the pew to defend the Gospel! Here is the opening stanza to one of Ambrose's great Advent hymns: "Savior of the Nations, come, Virgin's Son make here Your home! Marvel now, O heav'n and earth, that our Lord chose such a birth ("Savior of the Nations, Come" LSB 332). Yes, marvel! Jesus chose such a birth because God was entering our flesh to bear our sin and be our Savior. Ambrose's hymn goes on to describe how "in her womb this truth was shown: God was there upon His throne." Even here, in Mary's womb, is our God. He is just appearing now in flesh.

That means everything for us as Jesus is conceived and born for us. It means everything as Jesus lives for us under the Law. It means everything as Jesus dies for us on the Cross. And it means everything for us as Jesus comes to us with forgiveness, life, and salvation in His Word, in His water, and at His Supper. These are the works of God Himself. So as dark as the darkness gets, here is light for you and me: God's blood, Jesus' blood, still "cleanses us from all sin." In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

O God, You gave Your servant Ambrose grace to proclaim the Gospel with eloquence and power. As bishop of the great congregation of Milan, he fearlessly bore reproach for the honor of Your name. Mercifully grant to all bishops and pastors such excellence in preaching and fidelity in ministering Your Word that Your people shall be partakers of the divine nature; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. (Collect for the Feast of St. Ambrose)

Wednesday of the Third Week of Advent

DECEMBER 16, 2020

Today's Reading: *Small Catechism:* Table of Duties, Youth
Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 32:1-20; Revelation 4:1-11

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you. (1 Peter 5:6)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. What you do does not make you holy before God. In Luther's day, as in ours, it was popular to believe the opposite. No one, of course, could be holier than the pope. What he did made him the holiest person on earth. Next to him were cardinals, bishops, priests, monks, and nuns—people like that, whose work was the work of the Church. No other work, it was taught, could really make you holy in God's sight.

Then along came Luther who turned everything upside down. How? Jesus. For God's Word taught Luther that what we do doesn't make us holy at all in God's judgment. Only what Jesus does for us accomplishes that. And Jesus does it all. He is conceived for you. He is born for you. He is baptized for you. He lives for you. He dies for you on the Cross. He rises for you. He arrives even now for you with the promise of forgiveness, life, and salvation, the promise of His Cross, in His Word, in His water, and at His Supper. Jesus. That is what makes, or declares, you holy in God's sight.

You might be tempted to wonder what you could possibly do to make yourself holy to God. Well, good news—you already are holy. In fact, there is nothing you can do to make yourself any holier before God. Your sins are all forgiven. You are clothed with Christ. His Body and Blood have been placed into you. There is nothing for you to do in order to become something you are not. You are already holy to God. All because of Jesus.

No matter where God's mighty hand has placed you, then, walk humbly in the good works He has prepared beforehand for you to walk in (Ephesians 2:10). As you listen to your teachers and follow their instructions, as you honor and love your parents and other authorities, even the elderly, know this is pleasing to God—not because it makes you holy in His sight, but because you, the one doing this, are already holy in His sight.

And when pride gets in the way and causes you rebel and lash out at those who are over you, remember this: What you do does not make you holy in God's sight, it just shows you're still a sinner. But remember this, too: What Jesus does for you counts. Because that alone, and that always, is what makes and keeps you holy in God's sight. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Forth in Thy name, O Lord, I go, My daily labor to pursue, Thee, only Thee, resolved to know In all I think or speak or do.

(*"Forth in Thy Name, O Lord, I Go" LSB 854, st.1*)

Tuesday of the Third Week of Advent

DECEMBER 15, 2020

Today's Reading: 1 Corinthians 4:1-5

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

Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God. (1 Corinthians 4:5)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. See how Paul lives and moves in the joy of God's salvation. He knows there is a Judgment Day, yet he speaks of receiving "his commendation from God" on that day. His "praise." Big words from someone who once persecuted Jesus. How can the Lord who judges Paul also be the One who will commend him? Is not Paul a poor miserable sinner? Will the teacher commend the student who failed? Or the sheriff the one who stole? I think not! How can this be? Here's how: "Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns?" (Romans. 8:33-34) Faithful steward, this Paul. He is trusting for himself and for all the baptized that the judge will declare us righteous on that day because of Jesus.

You, too. When you see baby Jesus asleep in Mary's arms, wrapped in swaddling clothes, think "for you." When you see Him in the temple as a 12-year-old, think "for you." When you see Jesus loving God and neighbor, think "for you." When you see Jesus dying on the Cross and rising from the dead, think "for you." When you remember your Baptism, and listen to the Gospel from your pastor, and come to Holy Communion, think, "for you!" Because no matter who you are, or whatever it is that you think would silence God's praise for you on that day, that's what Jesus is for. From cradle to grave all the way to His Father's right hand, Jesus is always for you.

There will always be those who sit in judgment over the pastor. You must, in fact, sit in judgment over his doctrine. But over the purposes of his heart? That's God's call. And Paul is quite confident, because of Jesus, that God's grace and mercy will be large enough for you and your pastor on that day. But why must we judge our pastor's doctrine? Jesus. That's why. A pastor's doctrine is the Jesus he brings you. Is it the Jesus Who lived, died, and rose for you? Is it the Jesus whom God promises you in His Word, in His Water and at His Supper with forgiveness, life, and salvation for you? Because that is the Jesus who matters. The Jesus who saves. Faithful pastors always give us that Jesus! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes; Shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies. Heav'n's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee; In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me. ("Abide with Me" LSB 878, st.6)

Tuesday of the Second Week of Advent

DECEMBER 8, 2020

Today's Reading: Malachi 4:1-6

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

For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. (Malachi 4:1a)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. The mere thought of God's judgment can strike fear into our hearts. And why shouldn't it? Consider the evil we have done and the sins that have entangled us. How many times have we promised God we would improve, but never have? The liturgy has taught us our place. We always offend God. We justly deserve His present and eternal punishment. It would be the height of arrogance to ever confess otherwise. "'The day that is coming shall set them ablaze,' says the LORD of hosts, 'so that it will leave them neither root nor branch'" (Malachi 4:1b). On that day, our righteousness will be scorched earth.

How different the promise of the Gospel. "But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall" (Malachi 4:2). Picture this. All the joy, and strength, and energy. So it will be for us on that day. For someone has opened the gate for us. Jesus kept the Law perfectly for us. He then died a perfect death for us upon the Cross, covering all our sin with His own blood. Jesus then rose from the dead for us with "healing in His wings." And you have learned to trust in that healing, in that grace and forgiveness, because Jesus washes you in it every day now in Baptism, places it into your ears in the Absolution and sermons you hear in church, and even feeds you with it at His Supper with His Body and Blood, "for you, for the forgiveness of sins." There is your healing. There is your righteousness. For there is your Jesus. Remembering Moses and the Law, we despair over our own righteousness, over anything and everything we ever are, think, say, or do. Such despair is wholesome. For we now face that day in the glad and joyful confidence of Jesus. Not in ourselves—only in Jesus.

If the pandemic has taught me anything, it's that my righteousness isn't with me on earth but with Jesus, because He is my righteousness. He is yours, too. As if it was Christmas every day, Jesus comes to us with the promise of eternal life in His Word, in His water and at His Supper—promising we have our Father's welcome, forgiveness, love, and embrace on that day. And that strikes joy, now, in our hearts. Imagine all the strength and energy it will bring on that Last Day! In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

A banner of God's love unfurled, Christ came to suffer loss, That by His death a dying world Would rally to the cross.

("What Hope! An Eden Prophesied" LSB 342, st.3)

Wednesday of the Second Week of Advent

DECEMBER 9, 2020

Today's Reading: *Small Catechism:* Table of Duties,
Employers and Supervisors

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

Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him. (Ephesians 6:9)

In the Name † of Jesus. Amen. Last Wednesday the Table of Duties had Paul giving a word of encouragement to slaves. No matter how hard or bitter their lot, they had joy, for in serving their masters, they were actually serving Jesus. They could lift their sights higher than their masters and see, hidden even in them, the One born of Mary for them. What license to live a life of love for others, even if they don't always have our best interests at heart. Today Paul has a word of encouragement for slave owners: "There is no partiality with God." Just because someone "owns" more than others doesn't mean Jesus favors them above others. And just because you may have been given less in this life, that doesn't mean God thinks less of you. Unlike us, Jesus does not play favorites like that.

That's especially good news when it comes to His forgiveness and love. Here, too, Jesus does not play favorites. He died for all of us. The good and the bad. The right and the wrong. The slave and the slave owner. No sinner left out. God does not love you because you love Him. God loves you because of Jesus, born of Mary for you. God loves you because of Jesus, who exchanged the wood of the manger for the wood of the Cross for you. God loves you because of Jesus. God loves you whoever you are. That is the promise of the Gospel. It's the promise God makes with us every day in Holy Baptism. It's the promise He makes to sinners in Absolution and in sermons. It's the promise He gives you and me at His Supper with His Body and His Blood, "for you, for the forgiveness of sins." It's Jesus' promise to all. The bad and the good. The right and the wrong. The slave and the slave owner. True grace. For all. From God.

In a tract, "On the Freedom of a Christian," Luther wrote, "A Christian is an utterly free man, lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is an utterly dutiful man, servant of all, subject to all." Luther captures here the grace and harmony of life for the baptized. We live not in, but outside of ourselves. We live in God by faith, and in those around us by love. That's true freedom. In the Name † of Jesus. Amen.

Thee may I set at my right hand, Whose eyes my inmost substance see, And labor on at Thy command, And offer all my works to Thee.
(*"Forth in Thy Name, O Lord, I Go" LSB 854 st.3*)

Monday of the Third Week of Advent

DECEMBER 14, 2020

Today's Reading: Isaiah 40:1-11

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 30:15-26; Revelation 2:1-29

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. (Isaiah 40:2)

In the Name † of Jesus. Amen. I was thrilled when my parents decided to retire to Telluride, CO. I love the mountains. The peaks, valleys, winding, twisting roads. The rugged terrain. What fun! Of course, mountains can also be hard work to navigate. In fact, at such elevations it's hard work sometimes just trying to catch your breath. When it comes to navigating God? Isaiah says, "Breathe," as he cries out the promise of the Gospel: "Her warfare has ended." However mountainous your sin, however deep the depravity you've fallen into, God's got double forgiveness in Jesus to cover and fill it all. In Jesus, for you, all the twisting, winding roads have been made straight and all the rugged terrain made smooth. Heaven and earth may pass away, but never that word, never that promise.

God is sending His own Son to carry whatever sin would chase God's smile from you. Whatever would cause God's anger to burn against you, Jesus will take for and from you forever when He goes to the Cross to suffer and die for you. Though your righteousness withers and fades, "the word of our God will stand forever" (Isaiah 40:8). Jesus, God's righteousness, will never stop being your righteousness, too. "Fear not" (Isaiah 40:9). No more putting sin away or doing good works as if they were artillery aimed at toppling God. No saying prayers in the hopes of conquering God or giving your heart to Jesus in order to capture God. That warfare is over. "Comfort, comfort my people," says your God" (Isaiah 40:1). By sending Jesus for us, God has declared "peace on earth" and "good will" toward all. Even you, the reader of these words.

By all means, say your prayers. Work at putting sin away and doing good deeds. Just don't do all or any of that as warfare with God, because that warfare is over. Ended for you by Jesus. That's His promise to you every day in His Word, in His water, and at His Supper. God is carrying you. God is holding on to you. Breathe. You're not fighting anymore. You're not even navigating impossible heights anymore. You're just living now as God's rescued child. Living in the joy and gladness of Jesus, His promised salvation. In the Name † of Jesus. Amen.

"Comfort, comfort ye My people, Speak ye peace," thus saith our God; "Comfort those who sit in darkness, Mourning 'neath their sorrows' load. Speak ye to Jerusalem Of the peace that waits for them; Tell her that her sins I cover And her warfare now is over." (*"Comfort, Comfort Ye My People" LSB 347, st.1*)

The Third Sunday in Advent

DECEMBER 13, 2020

Today's Reading: Matthew 11:2-11

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

And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 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. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

(Matthew 11:4-6)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Picture the anticipation, the uncontrollable joy and excitement of a child on Christmas morning. Wouldn't it be wonderful if every day was like that for you and me? Never a sorrow. Never a fear. Never a worry. Only sunny skies above and happy days ahead. Sounds like heaven, right? The thing is, God never promised heaven in this life. In fact, "If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Corinthians 15:19). A Jesus who promises heaven today is a Jesus you will find offense with today. "Should we look for another?"

No. This is the Jesus the Father has sent you and me. The One in Mary's womb, but soon to be placed in a manger because there's no room for Him in the inn. The One who would be raised in obscurity by a carpenter and his wife. The One who would be ridiculed and rejected by most. The One who would go to the Cross for us to bear our sin and be our Savior. The One who would rise triumphant so He could reign and rule for us so that heaven remains ours forever, now.

This is the promise God washes over you every day in Baptism. "Clothed with Christ." It's the promise He speaks to you in the Absolution and in sermons. "I forgive you." It's the promise made at the Supper. "For you." It's the promise that says, "Yes, God delights in you, now. Yes, He smiles at every thought of you. It's the promise of the Cross. Why, God even has a picture of you on His heavenly refrigerator that makes Him smile every time He passes by it."

That it doesn't always, if ever, look like that in this life, doesn't mean it isn't true. Why, then, so many trials and troubles in this life? There is no greater wisdom for that than Jesus. The true Jesus who promises you forgiveness today, who promises you redemption today, who promises you that no matter what, is with you: washing you, pardoning you, saving you by God's grace. And He's promising you an eternal Christmas on the day He returns for you. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Behold the Lamb of God That bears the world's transgression, Whose sacrifice removes The devil's dread oppression. Behold the Lamb of God, Who takes away our sin, Who for our peace and joy Will full atonement win.
("When All the World Was Cursed" LSB, 346 st.3)

Thursday of the Second Week of Advent

DECEMBER 10, 2020

Today's Reading: Romans 15:4-13

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

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.
(Romans 15:4)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. The names of God in today's reading should put a smile on your face. "The God of endurance." "The God of encouragement." "The God of hope." "The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." That last one tells it all. God promises to endure us because of Jesus and His sacrifice for us on the Cross. God is always encouraged at the thought of you, because of Jesus and His death for you on the Cross. And God's plans for you and me forever include His love, His forgiveness, His salvation. Talk about the God of hope! Whoever you are, then, you can go to bed at night and get up in the morning in the glad confidence of God because of Jesus.

In his commentary on Galatians Luther writes of his father confessor, "I remember that Staupitz used to say: 'More than a thousand times I have vowed to God that I would improve, but I have never performed what I have vowed. Hereafter I shall not make such vows, because I know perfectly well that I shall not live up to them. Unless God is gracious and merciful to me for the sake of Christ and grants me a blessed final hour when the time comes for me to depart this miserable life, I shall not be able to stand before Him with all my vows and good works.'" Luther added, "This despair is not only truthful but is godly and holy."

Will God grant us a blessed end and receive us to Himself? That's the promise of Jesus being conceived for you in Mary's womb, lying in the manger for you, living for you, dying for you, rising for you, and coming again for you. It's the promise Jesus makes with you every day in your Baptism, in the Absolution and sermons you hear every Sunday from your pastor, and with His Body and Blood at His Supper, "for you, for the forgiveness of sins." For you, for that blessed end. What's an obvious good work we are then all called to? Love. We are all brothers and sisters of endurance, now, of encouragement and hope because of Jesus. Forgive. Love. Embrace those around you because of Jesus. God grant this for His sake. God grant we would all, one day, together, glorify the God and Father of Jesus. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

The One whom angels tended Comes near, a child, to serve; Thus God, the judge offended, Bears all our sins deserve. The guilty need not cower, For God has reconciled Through His redemptive power All those who trust this child.
("The Night Will Soon Be Ending" LSB 337, st.2)

Friday of the Second Week of Advent

DECEMBER 11, 2020

Daily Lectionary: Isaiah 28:14-29; 1 John 5:1-21

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him.
(1 John 5:1)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. I know it's been raining when the ground is wet. The wet ground did not cause the rain. It just showed it had been raining. It's the same thing when I see faith in God tied to love for others. We don't produce this any more than the ground does the rain. God does.

That is the meaning of the words, "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him." Whenever we see faith in Jesus and love for others, especially for that community gathered around the gifts that deliver and promise Jesus to all, we are seeing not the work of man, but of God Himself.

This is why Jesus' commands are not burdensome. Unlike Moses' commands, Jesus' commands are not our works at all, but are His. They are God's: Baptism (John 3:6), the Lord's Supper (John 6:54), and Absolution (John 20:23). And, says John, these all agree. "The Spirit and the water and the blood" (1 John.7:8). About what? That without any merit or work on our part, we sinners have been given Jesus. And with Jesus, eternal life.

"I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John.5:13). Yes, even believers struggle. Faith, says Jesus, is a work of God (John 6:29). Trouble is, when we think of faith we usually start thinking of ourselves—our own hearts and lives and choices. When we get turned in on ourselves like that, it's no wonder even we believers struggle.

That struggle is never resolved by looking inward, at ourselves, at our own hearts. It's resolved only by looking outward at Jesus and at His Gifts. Point your troubled heart, then, to the three witnesses on earth that testify to what God in heaven has done for you in heaven and on earth. He has given you Jesus. And with Jesus, eternal life. His Word, water, and Supper all agree as one on that. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Spirit, water, blood entreating, Working faith and its completing In the One whose death defeating Life has come, with life for all.
(*"Water, Blood, and Spirit Crying" LSB 597, st.5*)

Saturday of the Second Week of Advent

DECEMBER 12, 2020

Today's Reading: Introit for the Third Sunday in Advent

(Psalm 85:1-2, 6, 8; antiphon: Philippians 4:4-5)

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

Rejoice in the Lord always.

(Philippians 4:4)

In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen. Tomorrow's Introit sets the theme: rejoicing. The pink candle on the Advent wreath will even be lit to commemorate the theme. The Divine Service, as it unfolds, will point the way for us: "in the Lord always." That always makes all the difference in our rejoicing. Keep it anchored "in the Lord always." Never in us. Always in Jesus.

The baptized are not being urged to have plastic smiles plastered on their faces all the time. "Your dog died. Rejoice!" "You just failed. Rejoice!" "You're sick. Rejoice!" There are things in life we simply cannot, and should not, rejoice in. But no matter the circumstance, one thing always remains constant: Jesus "is at hand." That is always something to rejoice in. This life, of course, will never be perfect. In fact, far from it. But whatever it is you are going through, Jesus is there for you. Having been born for you, having lived, died for you on the Cross, and risen for you, Jesus is always there, for you. No matter where, what, when, or why.

Jesus is even washed over you now every day in Baptism, spoken to you in every Absolution and sermon you hear from your pastor, and fed to you at His Supper with His own Body and Blood, "for you, for the forgiveness of sins." Jesus hasn't walked away from you or forgotten you. Jesus is there with you, in the midst of it all. "The Lord is at hand!" Even when it looks like He is not? Even then. Rejoice "in the Lord always." "You forgave the iniquity of your people; you covered all their sin" (Psalm85:2). Tomorrow's Introit reminds us that whatever we are going through, it's not because God is hating on us. It's just that God's ways are hidden from us. God's ways are so far above ours, if God tried to explain Himself we wouldn't like it, or Him. It's part of His mercy that He hides His ways from us.

So when things go bad, or your hopes fizzle, and nothing goes the way you planned, don't think, "Why does God hate me?" Think, "Jesus is still at hand!" Let that promise wash over your troubles. He's got this. And He's got you. You are still holy to God. His child. No need to panic or lash out. It's all good. It's all going to be okay. It has to be, for "the Lord is at hand." That's the Good News tomorrow. It's the Good News always. In the Name ✠ of Jesus. Amen.

Rejoice, my heart, be glad and sing, A cheerful trust maintain; For God, the Source of ev'rything, Your portion shall remain.

("Rejoice, My Heart, Be Glad and Sing" LSB, st.1*)*