

Advent Devotional Booklet 2019



"You are the light of the world." Matthew 5:14



Dear Friends,

For many centuries, the Church has identified the beginning of the Christmas celebration as a time for quiet reflection called Advent. The word 'advent' derives from the Latin 'adventus,' meaning arrival. It is at this time that we eagerly anticipate the day when we can celebrate the coming of Christ our Lord.

As we navigate the busyness that comes with our modern holiday season, it is important to think about how Jesus's message speaks to our hearts, and how we live out his gospel.

Liberty Lutheran's relationship with congregations and ministry partners is at the center of our mission to faithfully accompany individuals and families who are facing life-changing situations through an empowering approach that honors their choices and wellbeing. Together, inspired by God's grace, we've been able to positively impact nearly 34,000 people across Pennsylvania this year with services and offerings that enrich and empower the mind, body, and soul.

Within this Devotional you will find reflections, prayers, and stories of the people who make a vital difference throughout and alongside Liberty's programs and services. We hope that their words bring you inspiration, comfort, peace, and joy during this Christmas season.

Advent Blessings,



Luanne B. Fisher

CEO, Liberty Lutheran

**Each day's Devotional will be available online at
<http://lutherancongregationalservices.blogspot.com>**

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Sunday, December 1, 2019

In the days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains.

Isaiah 2:2

From Mountain to Manger

Today's reading is part of a promise. When God spoke through prophets like Isaiah, mountains portrayed majesty and might. They were valued as majestic guardians of nations, respected as sources of mighty natural forces.

Isaiah calls this highest of the mountains the place where people learn to walk God's way. On this mountain, people shall learn of war no more. Emphasizing God's way of peace, Isaiah uses an image beloved by many in our time: "...they shall beat swords into plowshares...spears into pruning hooks...nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn of war anymore."

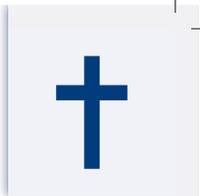
In our time, we are also confronted with images of war. These images include children and the elderly running for their lives amid explosions, caused by powerful machines of warfare that fly, or float, or propel projectiles that destroy dwellings, hospitals, and schools.

In contrast, Advent boldly raises Isaiah's prophetic promise of God's way of peace, anticipating a manger, not a mountain. The manger will cradle a way of peace that transforms all creation.

The hope of God's people is stirred by the odd majesty and might of this manger. Stirred, so that we pray "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus;" so that we embrace the beleaguered and dying singing "Comfort, Comfort Now My People;" so that, as we wait, we "Light One Candle to Watch for Messiah."

Mighty and majestic God of all creation, may we be stirred to new confidence in you by the birth of Jesus in a lowly manger.

The Rev. Dr. Samuel R. Zeiser is Bishop, Northeastern PA Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.



Monday, December 2, 2019

**If it had not been the Lord who was on our side,
when our enemies attacked us,**

**Then they would have swallowed us up alive,
when their anger was kindled against us;**

**Then the flood would have swept us away,
the torrent would have gone over us.**

Psalm 124: 2-4

Where would you be without God? Have you ever thought about that? What would your life be like if God was not pouring out on you his constant care and protection? It can conjure up some rather scary thoughts. We would be overwhelmed by life's hardships and troubles if we tried to face these things on our own.

In Psalm 124, David lets his people know that they could not have overcome their enemies without God's help—he lets them know it was God who delivered them from their enemies. We all have struggles and go through times of trial, but for those of us who depend on God, knowing fully we are his own, we can be rest assured that he will intervene as he has in the past and will do in the future.

If you are struggling at this time with health matters, financial matters, your spirituality, or trials of any kind, remain confident that God will continue to be on your side as he always has been. The waters may rise, and evil may surround you on all sides, but God is on your side. Knowing God and trusting in him makes all the difference. What more could you possibly need?

Loving Jesus, thank you for your constant protection and help. Amen.

Chris Naessens is Administrative Assistant for Human Resources at Liberty Lutheran and a member and deacon at Oreland Evangelical Presbyterian Church.



Tuesday, December 3, 2019

When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.

Genesis 9:16

Catastrophic hurricanes, devastating tornadoes, blustery storms...these words can describe the tumultuous weather we have experienced across the earth over the years. Together with our faith in God and humankind, regions such as Puerto Rico, the Bahamas and countless other nations have survived the devastating effects of these acts. People have proven themselves to be resilient, and over and over again, have displayed the will to survive and band together. Donations have poured in and volunteers have answered their call to action.

The passage above reminds us that through pain, there is happiness, through adversity, there is opportunity, and through severe storms, there are rainbows on the other side. After the storm, when we look up and see a rainbow, we are reminded that God is with us, and has kept his promise to all living things, to help guide us through the storm, and give us the strength to endure, rebuild, and prosper.

God thank you for giving us rainbows to help us remember that you are always with us. Amen.

Robyn Fine is Director of Community Life, The Manor at York Town, a Liberty Community.



Wednesday, December 4, 2019

**For the mountains may depart
and the hills be removed,
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,
says the Lord, who has compassion on you.**

Isaiah 54: 10

Beautiful mountains and hills are a true asset of living and traveling around our great state of Pennsylvania. They are immense and small. But regardless they bring eye-catching appeal. Wow, the fall colors we have just seen! What if they were gone? Or, what if we lost our sight and had to rely on memory to enjoy this vision? Boy, this would be a test of our faith, wouldn't it?

Moreover, we all have times of loss, big and small; mountainous tragedy, and nagging, petty, grievances. Sometimes the petty things test our faith as much as the tragedies, don't they?

Well, if we step aside from the riptides of our trials for a moment, close our eyes, and think of one of our favorite sights, and at the same time think of this passage, hopefully we can assimilate this appealing visual with the promise of God paraphrased right here in this verse.

What a great pairing to renew faith and remember God's promise to be steadfast and true; just team up our most beautiful scenes of mountains, hills, or cities, or whatever makes you smile inside your mind, with a little whisper in your head stating God's commitment to stick with us, providing love that won't depart and peace that won't go away even if our favorite "things" do. And let the smile from your mind show on your face, even if just for you.

Dear God, when our mountains crumble, often times in the merriest of seasons, let us relish the compassion you provide to us through unconditional, steadfast love and peace through our faith in you. Amen.

Dave Deluca is Director of Real Estate for Liberty Lutheran.



Thursday, December 5, 2019

**May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice.**

Psalm 72:2

Behind everything we do at Liberty is a feeling of ethics and morality, right and wrong, compassion and caring, whether it is in the board room, in a resident's room, at our senior communities, or in the living room of a patient's home. That philosophy permeates our employees and our being. It's not taught, it's just felt by our staff and, hopefully, by everyone they serve; and it's genuine. I listen to staff describing an event or process, an activity or projection, or read a letter from a loved one's family, and I know how deep this is within Liberty.

Do we do this because we want to be judged? It's because it is the righteous thing to do. Our job at every level is to support that effort, those actions, those people, as best as we can with thoughts, actions and deeds in as many ways as we can consistent with the talents embodied in each of us individually. Some provide compassionate care, some provide organizational direction, and others provide financial support, all coming together to make Liberty a special organization.

Dear Lord, guide us every day in what we do, and how we do it in support of those we serve. Amen.

Jim Himler has been a Liberty Lutheran Board member for eleven years. He is a member of Saint Luke Lutheran Church, Devon, PA.



Friday, December 6, 2019

And as John was finishing his work, he said, "What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but one is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of the sandals on his feet."

Acts 13:25

Hope, anticipation, expectation, wandering... these are all Advent themes. They can be the emotions and feelings that occupy our thoughts and minds as we work our way through this incredible season. We sit in darkness searching for the light. We look around us and feel that something better has to come. We ponder in silence what God has in store and then we burst forth in singing, "Joy to the World! The Lord has come!"

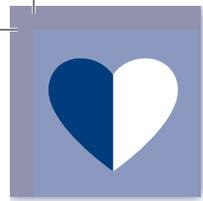
This single verse is from Paul's sermon in Antioch, recorded in the book of Acts, in which he recounts the saving acts of God, the salvation history of God's work among God's people. Paul quotes John the Baptist whom he lifted up for his work of preparing the people for the coming of the Christ. Paul shows how John, in making this statement, was pointing his followers and all who would hear his words, to our reason for hope, the fulfillment of our anticipation, the greatest answer for any expectation and the only direction to end our wandering – Jesus, the Christ.

For over two decades I have had the privilege of doing disaster response work and for the last five years, coordinating the Lower Susquehanna Synod Lutheran Disaster Response Network. The themes of Advent ring true in the ears of those recovering from disaster. For many, the only source of hope they see, at times, comes in the form of willing hands to help them rebuild and willing arms to offer a hug of reassurance. I am thankful that I am able to witness God at work in such powerful ways!

God of hope, fill us with your love, hope, mercy and strength that we may share those gifts with everyone around us. Amen.

The Rev. Glenn A. Beard, Jr., is Director of Church Relations & Pastoral Care at Luthercare and Coordinator of the Lower Susquehanna Synod Lutheran Disaster Response Network.





Saturday and Sunday, December 7 and 8, 2019

This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

Matthew 3:3

Each season of Advent we talk about John the Baptist, and I wonder what on earth would make someone want to live in the wilderness? But, then I realize that many people experience times in their lives when wilderness is all around them and they don't know how to find their way out of it. They look and listen for someone who will help them turn things around. They might even settle on the advice of someone with a prickly personality who is dressed in very strange clothing.

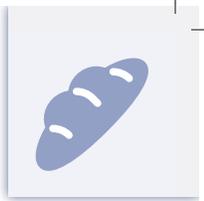
John's message to us is one that offers hope and repentance – opportunity to turn things around in our lives. He proclaims that the kingdom of God has come near, that even people who are surrounded by wilderness will be empowered to make changes. The One who is coming after him will help us learn to live kingdom lives and will accompany us as we dream about a more hopeful future.

What is it that we dream about? What do we hope for? Maybe it's that a torn apart family or friendship can be reconciled, or that we can survive a Christmas with an empty place at the table. Maybe it's that restoring a flood-damaged home might be a memory by this time next year, or that we might begin a new year filled with increased joy.

My dream is that the promise of the coming One ignites a fire within us to imagine a more peaceful and loving world and then stirs us to take one small step along the straightened path to help make it happen.

O loving God, help us to notice signs of your kingdom in the world. Empower us to change our lives so we might follow your straight paths out of the wilderness and into the hope of a new future with you. Amen.

The Rev. Paulette Obrecht is interim pastor at St. Mark's Community Lutheran Church in Reeders, PA, and serves on the Advisory Committee of Lutheran Congregational Services.



Monday, December 9, 2019

From the ends of the earth we hear songs of praise, of glory to the Righteous One.

Isaiah 24:16

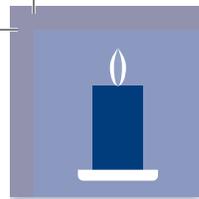
At the time of the writing of this passage, Judah was moving toward devastation. The prophet Isaiah described hearing songs of praise from distant lands even though the temple would be destroyed, the people of the land dispersed, and the land of Judah would see widespread desolation. The people of Judah were called to be a light to the nations despite and through their tribulations. Today, we continue to face difficult times, feelings that our world is spinning out of control due to natural disasters, illness, political strife, and international disputes. Like the people of Judah, we are called to raise our voices in songs of praise and glory to our God.

During this season of Advent, we are reminded that difficult times existed prior to and at the time of Jesus' birth. Not even the Son of God was spared. The wisemen followed the star to find the baby Jesus, the light of the world. It was this light in the form of a baby that brought hope to people of the time and will continue to bring hope to people around the world forever.

Today and through the ages, we are reminded that troubled times do not separate believers from the love of God. Nothing can.

Heavenly Father, let us be like the people of Judah and raise our voices in songs of praise and glory to our God, in good and bad times. Amen.

Linda Graeff serves on the Artman Golf Outing Committee and is a member of Trinity Lutheran Church, Lansdale, PA.



Tuesday, December 10, 2019

In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to boast of my work for God. For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished.

Romans 15: 17-18a

If there's anyone who deserves an award for sharing the gospel, it's the author of Romans, Paul. Responsible for thirteen books of the New Testament, imprisoned unjustly, shipwrecked twice—the man was on an unstoppable mission! But more important than his fervor, Paul understood that the fruits of his labor came through the humility of Christ working through him.

Throughout the Bible, God calls on those that the world would deem unfit to carry on a Kingdom. Moses was slow to speak. Peter stumbled numerous times as a disciple of Jesus. Joseph was the youngest son in an era of important birthrights. And yet it is from the most humble of roots that God brings forth the most glorious of branches.

God does not leave us to worry whether we will be good enough to carry on His Kingdom either! He has a plan for everyone He calls, as Paul describes in Ephesians 2:10, "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." You have been made with intentional love and care. All he calls us to do is love Him, trust Him, and follow where He may lead.

Lord, I pray that we do not take your Kingdom into our own hands, but that we open our hearts to humbly follow Your will through the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Carter Bowman works at the Whitemarsh Office of Liberty Lutheran as the Digital Media Specialist, assisting Liberty's many communities; he attends Covenant Church of Doylestown, PA.



Wednesday, December 11, 2019

As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age.

Genesis 15:15

Going to our ancestors in today's world can seem daunting. Visiting our elders requires that we make time during our crazy schedules to spend quality time with older people we think we have little in common with. It is just as important today to make time for our elderly family members as it was thousands of years ago. It is a time when they can share their stories about family history. These elders are the lucky ones, the ones who have family who visit. So many of the elderly do not have anyone that takes the time to show that they care.

We all have a responsibility to be active members in God's family. When we are baptized, we receive a call from God to be his. When we affirm this and accept Christ, we respond to God's command to extend his love to the people all around us. We all know the verse from Matthew, "love your neighbor as yourself." That one verse, can lead to positive changes in the lives of many!

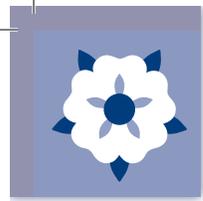
Lay people are called to be channels of love for our neighbors. It is mainly through us that ordinary people in society hear the gospel, the good news that Jesus Christ died for our sins and promised us everlasting life.

So, as you go through your everyday lives, try to raise your antennae, to find someone you can connect to and make a difference in their lives by taking the time to do regular visits with them. God needs each of us and the most beautiful thing is, that as we live our everyday ordinary lives in a God-centered way, our lives become an integral part of furthering God's Kingdom.

Caring Provider, help us love ourselves and our neighbors. Amen.

Terry Fry has been visiting people who are home bound for years, and recently completed the Lay Eucharistic Visitor Training Program through Lutheran Congregational Services. She is a member at Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church, Oley, PA.





Thursday, December 12, 2019

The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.

2 Peter: 3: 9

I recently took a short vacation and had an unpleasant experience with my flight out of Philadelphia. After five hours of delays, including two while on the airplane, the flight was ultimately canceled around midnight. It was another two hours until the airline secured hotel rooms for all of the passengers. "What in the world is taking so long?!?", an exasperated fellow passenger uttered to me around 1:00am.

Our society places an ever-increasing emphasis on speed, whether it's "blazing fast" internet, one-day shipping, or a car that can go 0-60 in under five seconds. We've come to expect everything in an instant, and we don't have time for slowness. However, today's Bible passage reminds us that God is not bound by our expectations, whether they relate to perceived timeliness or otherwise.

2 Peter 3:8, the verse preceding today's passage, reminds us that, "With the Lord, a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day." God's timing often may not align with our earthly desires for immediate gratification, including the unfolding of the last days, as we are reminded elsewhere in 2 Peter. This Advent season, let us take comfort in God's promises to us and his grace in our lives. May we reciprocate the patience he demonstrates with us and express our gratitude for his perfect timing in all things.

Lord, remind us that you are infinitely more perfect than our expectations, and that everything occurs according to your timing. Refresh us in your goodness and faithfulness. Help us to grow with you and repent to you in our waiting. Amen.

Brandon Frank is the Manager of Financial Reporting for Liberty Lutheran, and is a member and Treasurer of the First Presbyterian Church of Olney.



Friday, December 13, 2019

But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

2 Peter 3:11-13

Do you worry about the end times? Or do you live your life as if each day could be your last? If you knew what your last day would be, how would you spend your time? In verse 11, Peter says that the earth will fall away so these earthly things should not matter.

In his essay, "On the day I die," John Pavlovitz writes:

On the day I die, ...

All the material things I so chased and guarded and treasured will be left in the hands of others to care for or to discard...

The words of my critics which so burdened me will cease to sting or capture anymore. They will be unable to touch me.

All the small and large anxieties that stole sleep from me each night will be rendered powerless.

The deep and towering mysteries about life and death that so consumed my mind will finally be clarified in a way that they could never be before while I lived.

These things will certainly all be true on the day that I die...

It's easy to waste so much daylight in the days before you die.

Don't let your life be stolen every day, by all that you've been led to believe matters, because on the day you die—the fact is that much of it simply won't.

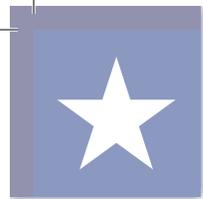
Yes, you and I will die one day.

But before that day comes: let us live.

Loving God, help us remember that you came to give life to all! Amen.

Fran Ferrari is a member at Zion United Lutheran, Brodheadsville PA. She is an advocate for climate justice on behalf of the Church.





Saturday and Sunday, December 14 and 15, 2019

Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.”

Matthew 11:4-5

John the Baptist, while in prison for denouncing Herod’s immorality, sends his disciples to ask Jesus if he is the Messiah or is another coming after him. Why?

If we compare this question of the Baptist to his preaching at the beginning of his ministry, it is not consistent. The Baptist who vehemently said, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This is the one of whom I said...” John 1: 29-32

How is it possible that a prophet of the quality of John, after this earlier revelation that boldly announces the arrival of the Messiah, is now questioning whether Jesus is the one to come? The reality was that John has been imprisoned. John knows that his imprisonment is not fair and that the possibility of getting out of there alive is virtually nil. Jail changes one’s perspective of life. It is a lonely, inhospitable, unpleasant and cruel place. Faced with this loneliness and martyrdom, John asks, not doubts, but asks. Jesus responds not with promises, but with testimony.

How many times have we been in a situation similar to that of the Baptist: alone, beaten, insecure, helpless in the circumstances of life? We tend to pity ourselves and focus our eyes on our misery. Jesus suggests to John to look at the facts of his ministry, because by the facts, it is known who Jesus is. Likewise, we must look at the facts of Jesus in our times of anguish. That is the time to remember his acts of mercy and justice toward the weak and helpless. It’s about transforming our vision and hope.

Lord Jesus, help us to remember that you came to bring us your mercy and justice. Let your testimony transform our lives and bring us hope in all circumstances. Amen!

C. Nydia Lugo is co-pastor at Beit-El Kingdom of God Community Church, a non-denominational Latino congregation in Philadelphia.



Monday, December 16, 2019

**Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?**

**Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.**

Psalms 42:11

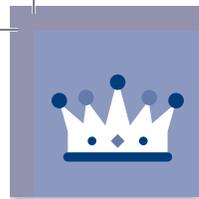
Christians commonly think of Advent as an exciting time. It is weeks of planning, preparing and anticipating, leading up to the celebratory event of Christmas itself. For many people it is a favorite season of each year. I know that it is a time I love. But that excitement is not the reality for everyone.

For those who have experienced loss or are experiencing physical, emotional, or spiritual challenges, Advent can be a very disquieting time. Who has not felt this pang of sadness, even fleetingly, in the midst of Advent activities? Sometimes we are aware of the exact cause of this discontent, and sometimes we just feel melancholic or despondent for reasons we don’t fully understand. While around us the setting may seem festive and our friends enthusiastic, we may, in sharp contrast, feel separated and alone. In fact, it may well be that the lights, the music, the smiles that surround us in the holiday season trigger and intensify our dark mood.

This is when we Christians can find solace in our faith. We can remember that God “passes all understanding.” Therefore, when situations that confront us personally are discomfiting and inexplicable, we can lift up our souls by faith. We can accept that while loss and anxiety are part of our shared human experience, faith is part of our shared Christian experience. We can remind ourselves and others that we have a compassionate God who will comfort us today and offer hope for our eternal tomorrow.

Dear God, In this Advent season when we find ourselves disquieted by personal issues, help us turn our thoughts to you, remembering that you will restore our saddened souls and overcome human darkness with Christmas light. Amen.

Barbara Speece is a life-long Lutheran and granddaughter of a Lutheran minister. She has been a member of two local churches: Grace Lutheran in Norristown followed by St. John Lutheran in Blue Bell. She has supported Liberty Lutheran by conducting public speaking training for its leaders as well as financial support for its programs.



Tuesday, December 17, 2019

Keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.

Jude 1: 21

As loved ones near the end of their time in the earthly world, nothing can be more comforting than to know they are cared for with Christ-like compassion and love.

Executive Director at Artman, Janet Lorenzon, recently received a beautiful note from Susan Brown, daughter of Rita Stuhltrager, who recently passed. Here is an excerpt from her note:

"I am writing to express my sincere gratitude to you and the entire staff of the Artman Home for the care that my mother, received while she was a resident there. I honestly could not believe that there was a more caring neighborhood than Stonebridge* - where my father lived last year, however, the care that mom received while in the Pennlyn* neighborhood was just as amazing.

I am not going to start listing names because I am so afraid that I would forget someone, but everyone that I came in contact with during my visits (almost every day for the first few weeks) was friendly and welcoming to us. I met many staff members in the hallways while mom was there and I honestly can't think of a time when someone did not smile and say hello to us.

The dining services staff encouraged her to sit at the table and have her meals, even as it became more difficult for her to feed herself. I had a difficult time personally sitting with her when I had to feed her, so it was comforting to know that there would always be someone there to help her.

...What I really hope you get from this is that the staff at Artman gets it. They treat the residents like people that are in their home. As a family member of two of those 'people,' it means the world to me to know when I couldn't be there, my parents were both treated with kindness and excellent care."

Merciful Jesus, thank you for caregivers of all kinds in our lives. Help us to see you in those who care for us. Amen.

*Stonebridge and Pennlyn are "neighborhoods" within the Artman Community.



Wednesday, December 18, 2019

Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace, do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath; for all these are things that I hate, says the Lord.

Zechariah 8:16

We will soon be celebrating the birth of Jesus with angel choirs singing Gloria in excelsis Deo. What is their message? It is that we should rejoice in the Lord and hear the truth through the voice of the Savior.

Unfortunately, in today's world it is hard to determine what truth actually is.

We believe in the prophets, strive to follow the Ten Commandments, and unscramble our lives as best we can while being fed distorted news reports, wild exhortations to buy some product, skewed figures in research, and on and on it goes. It is baffling to know what to believe. It is only natural that some interpret what we read and hear one way while others apply contrary meanings; but that can be distressing.

If the words in Zechariah were followed precisely, we would have an ideal society. But such prospects are unlikely and it will doubtless be so for eons. So what can we do? Accept with a sigh and a shrug? Expound from the orator's platform? Flood the streets with shouts and signs? Of course, there's social media at our fingertips.

We will find an answer to our worries by being honest with ourselves, and through prayer and introspection, trusting the Lord to show us a path to inner peace and a world in harmony. Whether we are bold enough to share our thoughts with others, God wants to hear from us. His guidance, even as we wait, will bring us peace.

Almighty God, hear our pleas and help us recognize the truth as we grapple day by day with uncertain times. May we be messengers of your peace, your love, your light, and your joy. Amen.

Mary McCaw, a nonagenarian, is a resident of Liberty Lutheran's Manor at York Town. Throughout her many years she has been a devoted volunteer working in leadership roles toward enhancing life in Bucks County and beyond, related to adolescent girls, women, health care, prison inmate recidivism, the arts, and the Church.





Thursday, December 19, 2019

But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.

Galatians 3: 25-26

Faith comes to us as a gift from God. Through faith we respond by living out Jesus' command to love our neighbors as ourselves.

This response comes in many ways. A retired man donates pasta to the food pantry. Church members stay overnight at the church to help a family who is looking for work and needs a safe place to sleep. The summer adult Bible school makes fleece blankets to send overseas. The confirmation class builds a Little Free Library to share books with the neighborhood. The Mealtimes Ministries Team cooks for people who need a hot meal and a kind word.

In gratitude for faith and God's grace, may we each use the gifts we have been given to share God's love with others and to live lives of service.

Lord God, during Advent and throughout the coming year, help us to love others as we love ourselves. Amen.

Katherine Raphael is the Director of Ministries at Advent Lutheran Church in West Lawn, PA. She leads volunteers and manages outreach projects for local, regional and international needs.



Friday, December 20, 2019

So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

Galatians 4: 7

Growing up I was one of five children. We lived modestly in a small house in rural North Carolina. Mom and Dad made sure we had everything we needed, but there was never extra for vacations or extravagant purchases.

I would sometimes daydream back then about some rich relative, unknown to us, who would leave us their fortune. While the rich relative never materialized, what I inherited is more valuable than any treasure I could have dreamed up back then--my faith and trust in God.

In God Has a Dream, Desmond Tutu begins his book with "Dear Child of God," a phrase he uses throughout as a reminder of our identity. With that identity, he reminds us of how deeply God loves us and believes in us.

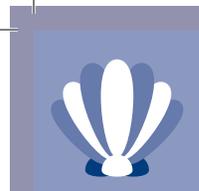
The son of God lived on earth in stark contrast to how we would expect a king and their heirs to live. So what might our inheritance look like? I think that being a child of God means inheriting the character of Jesus - his peace, wholeness, justice, compassion, kindness, joy, hope and above all, love.

There is immense freedom in the knowledge that God loves us and believes in us. No one can take that away from you and me, though at times the bondage of hate and evil and despair may try.

Dear Child of God, you are no longer a slave. Live freely in God's love.

Loving God, it is with much humility and gratitude that we come before you as your children, heirs to your kingdom. Remind us daily of the freedom you provide to be fully who you created us to be. Help us embrace our inheritance by adopting the character of Jesus, the Son of God.

Patty Cline serves as Director of Advancement at Liberty Lutheran.



Saturday and Sunday, December 21 and 22, 2019

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

Isaiah 7:14

This promise is made to King Ahaz after he refuses God's command to ask for a sign – "I will not put the Lord to the test." Ahaz does not refuse out of piety or belief but rather out of fear, fear of the war raging around him and fear of the rulers of the other nations wanting him to join their cause. Ahaz was offered the opportunity to be given any sign he wanted from God (think of Moses and the plagues on Egypt). But he refused, too afraid. God was rejected by those in power. So God did what God always does – God shows up, this time in the midst of the lowest. A pregnant girl of no name. Immanuel – God with Us.

As we wait for Immanuel in this season of Advent, how have we denied God? And how has God shown up anyway? God is in places big and small, miracles surround us daily. We simply need to open our eyes to see and our ears to hear.

Living God, open our eyes and ears to your unwavering presence.

The Rev. Karyn Jean Dickhoff is Chaplain at Liberty Hospice, a Liberty life service.



Monday, December 23, 2019

"And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed.'"

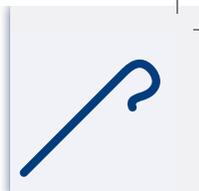
Luke 1: 46-48

It was in the spirit of Mary's prayer that the volunteers at Camp Noah this summer served. Camp Noah took place in North Philadelphia at New Creation Lutheran Church. The camp was designed to serve children who moved to Philadelphia following Hurricane Maria. Nearly 6,000 families have come to Pennsylvania since 2017 as a result of the storm. Many of the children had moved more than four times in the last year, as their parents sought safe places to live as they made decisions about their families' future. Other local families were impacted by the storm as they took in family members, or gathered supplies and funds for loved ones in Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands whose homes were destroyed.

The site coordinator at Camp Noah, Margarita Santiago, wrote this following camp, "I am looking forward to working with you all again; it doesn't matter where because when the Lord has a plan he will make it work anywhere just like he did last week, and from some of the stories we've heard we were a big impact on some of those kids just like they were an impact on us. 'Only fear the LORD, and serve him faithfully with all your heart; for consider what great things he has done for you (1 Samuel 12:24).'"

Loving God, you give us strength to carry on. Help us bring love to all of creation. Amen.

Margarita Santiago served as Site Coordinator for Camp Noah, and is the mother of three Camp Noah campers! Margarita attends Bridge of Hope Ministries, located in North Philadelphia.





Christmas Eve, December 24, 2019

But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

Luke 2:19

Christmas can be an especially difficult time for many people for different reasons. Those participating in Journeys through Grief understand the complex mix of emotions people experiencing loss feel during the Advent and Christmas seasons. Luke's account of the birth of Jesus is a message of hope for us all.

As the shepherds did their work under the cover of darkness, they were startled by a burst of angelic light. I can't imagine how afraid and disoriented they must have been. In the midst of darkness, fear and confusion, an angel gave them a message of unimaginable joy and peace, "Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

We are told they "made haste to see this thing that had taken place," proclaiming to Mary and Joseph what would be the beginning of the greatest love story ever told—God's love for all people poured out in this savior Jesus. God with and for us forever...this is good news, indeed!

Like Mary, may we ponder these sacred words of comfort, joy and peace in our hearts. Arise, shine, for the light has come!

Gracious God, may the light of your love shine in our hearts and lives today and always. In the precious name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

The Rev. Jennifer Heavner is the pastor of Star of Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Bethlehem , PA, and serves on the Advisory Committee of Lutheran Congregational Services.



Christmas Day, December 25, 2019

Who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

Titus 2:14

On this day when Christians celebrate the birth of Christ, reading this verse from Paul's letter to Titus gave me pause. "He who gave himself for us..." stopped me in my tracks! As we awaken on Christmas morning today, are we really thinking about the way Christ's death is the true promise of his birth? Of course, the season of Christmas seems to bring out in people the "eagerness to do what is good." But to me, the most powerful part of that verse is, "to purify for himself a people that are his very own." Now we belong to him! Christ prizes us more than anyone prizes a valuable treasure because he paid for us with his blood.

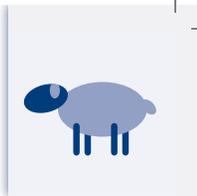
As a bereavement counselor, I am always aware of how very sad Christmas can be for those who have lost their loved ones. It is a time when even the most devout believers begin to feel alone and helpless. It is during such times when I see people eager to do what is good who come to the side of their grieving family members and friends. They don't need to preach to these grieving souls that God has not forgotten them. For their presence and loving, active listening is the real sermon!

I love all the sacred and beautiful music of Christmas. But I feel that the hymn, "Lift High the Cross," expresses the essence of the message in Titus:

Lift high the cross
the love of Christ proclaim
till all the world adore his sacred name.
O Lord once lifted on the glorious tree
as thou hast promised, draw us all to thee!

Living God, On this beautiful Christmas day, compel us to reach out to those who are grieving and give the a gift of your presence. Amen.

Sylvia S. Havlish is Coordinator of Bereavement Ministries for Lutheran Congregational Services, a Liberty life service.





"Oh, Come, Oh, Come, Emmanuel"

LBW: 34

1. Oh, come, oh, come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.

Refrain

Rejoice!

Rejoice!

Emmanuel shall come to you,

O Israel.

2. Oh, come, oh, come, great Lord of might, who to your tribes
on Sinai's height in ancient times once gave the law in
cloud, and majesty, and awe.

Refrain

3. Oh, come, strong Branch of Jesse, free your own from
Satan's tyranny;
from depths of hell your people save and give them vict'ry
o'er the grave.

Refrain

4. Oh, come, blest Dayspring, come and cheer our spirits by
your advent here; disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and
death's dark shadows put to flight.

Refrain

5. Oh, come, O Key of David, come, and open wide our
heav'nly home; make safe the way that leads on high, and
close the path to misery.

Refrain

*Thesaurus Hymnologicus. Hermann Adalbert Daniel. Translated by
John Mason Neale. 1861.*



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