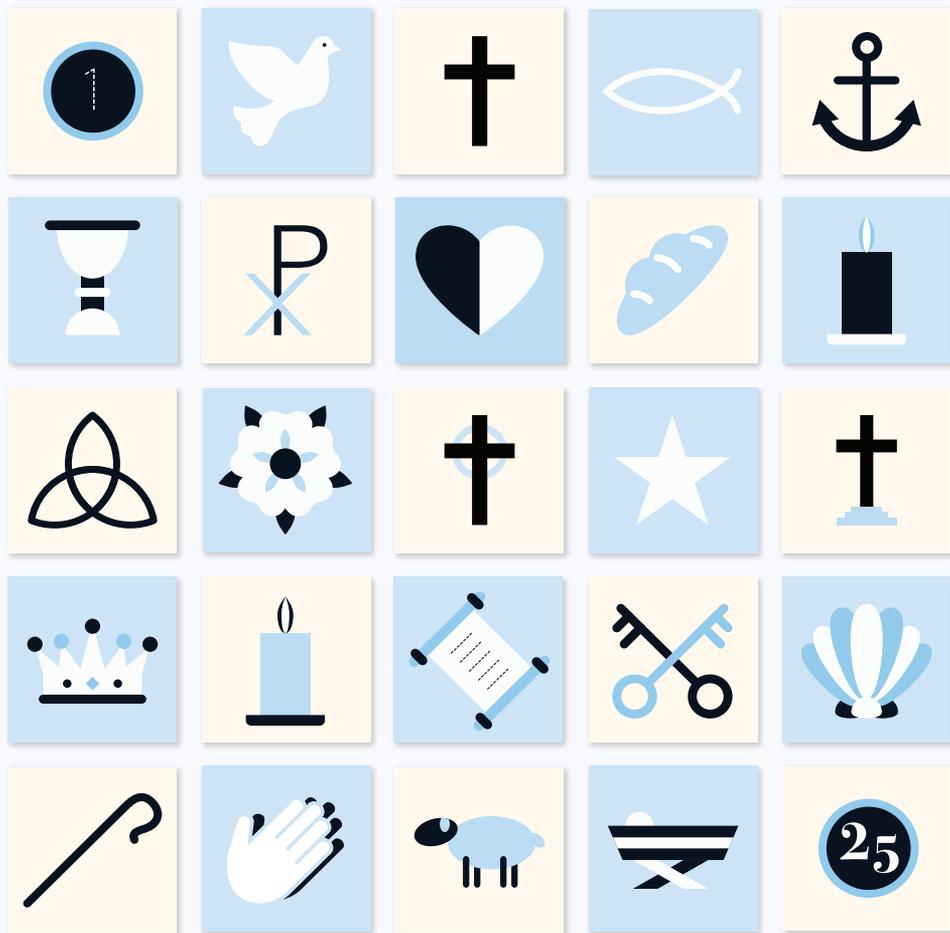


# Advent Devotional Booklet 2021



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

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

**Additional copies are available while supplies last;  
contact Julia Menzo at [JMenzo@libertylutheran.org](mailto:JMenzo@libertylutheran.org).**

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Dear Friends,

Advent is traditionally a time for reflection, and a time of waiting. We began 2021 waiting patiently, filled with hope for light to shine over dark times. As vaccines became available and positivity rates decreased, the rituals we cherish both in church and in community slowly began to come back.

Churches reopened, friends and loved ones reunited, and the little moments we may have taken for granted previously were cherished more than ever. At Liberty, we saw residents enjoying their favorite activities and spending time together in-person at favorite events.

We saw our members return to the West Philadelphia Senior Community Center, celebrating their reopening. We saw congregations walk with Lutheran Congregational Services to help families along their journey to long-term recovery after several natural disasters swept across our region.

We are thankful for your prayers and for the many ways individuals and communities of faith have supported Liberty Lutheran throughout this past year. Your faith lifts us up and serves as a guiding light through uncertain times.

We are remarkably grateful for our family of faith as we continue to walk through this winding journey together. With that, we are pleased to share this Advent Devotional. In it, you will find thoughts, prayers, and reflections that are based on the personal experiences and perspectives of individuals who are in one way or another part of our Liberty family.

We pray that the devotions offered here bring you hope, love, joy, and peace this Advent season. Come, thou long expected Jesus, come.

Advent Blessings,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Luanne B. Fisher". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each name being capitalized and prominent.

Luanne B. Fisher  
CEO, Liberty Lutheran



Thursday, November 25, 2021

**He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.**

**2 Corinthians 9:10**

From a certain lens, Paul's message in the ninth chapter could be considered a message so nice he decided to deliver it twice. That is, Paul had already explained the importance of generous giving in the eighth chapter, and continues the point in this, the following chapter – we should not overlook this purposeful repetition.

In a similar vein, the reciprocity which Paul identifies as a result of the spirit of generous giving enables faithful reflection on how we serve our world, our God and those in our community, however small or large that community may be.

Though the global pandemic and its attendant challenges have even further instilled in me the need to generously give and enunciated the need to continuously realize and appreciate God's blessings, I have also realized that there is always more that I can do. And I believe that this is what Paul had in mind when he selected the words "multiply" and "increase."

These are verbs that theoretically come without bounds. And accordingly, as we are all in some way recipients of God's indescribable gifts, we must share these in profusion, and by doing so multiply and increase the harvest for all.

**Please, God, allow us the courage and selflessness to honor you by sharing with others and with our world the gifts you have given to us.**

**Evan Speece is a member of the Board of Directors at Liberty Lutheran.**

Friday, November 26, 2021



**You gave your good spirit to instruct them, and did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and gave them water for their thirst.**

**Nehemiah 9:20**

As you review your mailing list for Christmas/holiday cards, you probably won't come across the name of your friend from high school who had a bitter falling out with you. You also likely won't be out shopping for the kid who hits your child at recess. And it's a virtual certainty that your miserable neighbor, who always scowls in your direction and parks in your spot, doesn't have a reserved seat at the big dinner you're hosting this season.

Today's verse, Nehemiah 9:20, without any context, seems as though a loving God is providing for his people, as one would expect. However, when you read the rest of the chapter, as it describes the depths of rebellion and blasphemy these ancestors had reached, verse 20 becomes even more striking. By any metric of worthiness, these people deserved to be forgotten and abandoned. Not only did God demonstrate his mercy in not deserting them, but He shows an abundance of grace throughout the verses that follow.

It's easy to read a passage like this and critique the shortcomings and sins of others, much like we may also do with those in our lives. But do we honestly judge ourselves by those same standards? How often do we think about the ways that we fall short of God's glory? Reflections like this may be more likely during Easter season, but easy to lose sight of in the hustle and bustle of Advent.

Take a moment today to reflect on how God has shown you grace and mercy in your life, and also how you can extend those same blessings to others.

**Lord, thank you for the grace and mercy you have demonstrated to all of your people throughout history, and especially to me in my life. Please help me to share that love and forgiveness with others this Advent season. Amen.**

**Brandon Frank is the Manager of Financial Reporting for Liberty Lutheran.**



Saturday/Sunday, November 27 & 28, 2021

**Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.**

**Luke 21:33**

As I write this, Hurricane Ida's devastation is real in my community. The rising flood waters filled apartments and houses, washing away belongings and memories, leaving a wake of wet, moldy debris. Dumpsters around town are filled and overflowing with furniture and trash. Families are struggling to figure out where to live during rebuilding, juggling children, jobs and pets in the midst of the devastation.

The flooding of a home in natural disaster is a part of life that was once known and is now passing away. In the matter of a few hours, what was is now no more. Those who experience flooding have no choice but to view the impermanence of the "stuff" of life. The gospel of Luke takes it further to note that heaven and earth will pass away. In that moment, what remains?

Simply put, God's love remains. God's everlasting care for humanity remains. God's promise of new life can not be touched by any earthly or heavenly destruction. In Christ, we know that life triumphs in the face of any and all death we experience. In the words of promise, grief will slowly lift as the sun rises the next day.

In our community, even amidst the deep grief and struggle following the flooding, the words slowly turn from despair to thanksgiving for life preserved, the help of neighbors and rebuilding together after disaster. God's word lives in the community as we remind one another that hope and love persevere beyond disaster.

**God of promise, strengthen us by your words of promise. When we grieve the losses of our human lives, show us signs of love and hope through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.**

**The Reverend Dr. Jennifer L. Phelps is Pastor of Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church in Perkasio.**

**Monday, November 29, 2021**



**Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,  
so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.**

**Psalm 90:14**

My family knows that if we are packing for a long trip that they need to get all the items we are taking to the vehicle. Once assembled, I look at each item and put them carefully in place so everything fits.

I have learned there are two principals to follow if I want to get the right stuff in the car. The two principals are to determine those items that are most essential and put the big pieces in first. With those principals in place I was even able to move my daughter and all her "essential" goods to college (including the 32 pairs of shoes).

So often at the end of the day when I look back, I wonder why I don't feel like I accomplished anything. Why I don't feel like the day was successful, why the day was so bland. As I look at those days to try to find the cause, I usually discover that I forgot to apply the same principals to my daily schedule that I use to pack the car. I failed to identify those things that were critical, and I did not plan where all the pieces, especially the big pieces, fit in the day.

One of the best ways to start the day well is to carve out time for GOD early in the day and not let all the other issues steal that time from me. Spending quality time with GOD is the missing piece of the puzzle for our souls, our source of joy. Unfortunately we must be disciplined to maintain the priority, or we so easily let other good things take its place.

**Lord, help me to keep you the priority in my life, to take time to talk to you and to get to know you better every day.**

**Laurin Fleming serves as the PEMA Voluntary Agency Liaison to Lutheran Disaster Response – Eastern PA and is a member of Idaville United Brethren in Christ.**



**Tuesday, November 30, 2021**

**I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.**

**Revelation 22: 16**

One of my more evangelical friends once said, “Jesus is the answer.” It’s that plain and simple. Jesus is the root, the descendant of David, the morning star, and before that, this text from Revelation adds “the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”

We might also add that Jesus is the Messiah and our salvation. Jesus is heavenly manna and the Word made flesh. Jesus is radical love embodied. Jesus is much more.

What is so comforting to me in watching this list of Jesus’s attributes unravel is that, despite their large numbers, they all express a sense of permanency. At the time of my writing of this reflection, I had just moved cross-country from my hometown in Sunbury, Pennsylvania to Berkeley, California for seminary.

This move was challenging for so many reasons. I moved far from family, said goodbye (for now) to my home congregation, and set out on an untrodden path. I never thought seminary was for me, but the pandemic created the time and space I needed to discern God’s call and realize the amazing support I had for such a bold move in my life.

The challenges of moving and being away from home haven’t fully subsided. Homesickness still sets in and the tasks pile up. Yet, passages like this one from Revelation are a comforting reminder of the permanency of Jesus. Just as I had known Jesus in my home context, in the love of my family and the grace I saw lived out in my church, so too do I see it here in a wonderful new community of faithful people. People, by the way, who are showing me new ways in which Jesus is rooted in their lives, guiding them like a bright morning star.

**Lord God, open our eyes to your rootedness in our lives, that we may cast our eyes upon your guiding light. Amen.**

**Larry Herrold Jr. is a seminarian from the Upper Susquehanna Synod studying at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley, California. He is pursuing an Mdiv degree and Word and Sacrament ordination in the ELCA.**

Wednesday, December 1, 2021



**Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.**

**Psalm 90:1**

Oh, how I love HIM! The book of Psalms offers us ways to rejoice in prayer, bow in worship, to exalt God for all He does and for all His blessings to us.

When specifically thinking of Psalm 90, verse 1 and how it has affected my life, I immediately look at the relationship between the scripture and my faith. For, it is faith that has brought me this far.

Over the last 18 months it has been evident that my faith has been tested. When your faith is being tested, it is never an easy process. It can destroy you or it can build you. The latter is what happened for me during the pandemic.

Initially, I was untrusting, uneasy and ultimately, weary. I questioned why we were in a crisis with a disease that took the lives of so many. However, it was my faith in the Lord that kept me, just as it has kept those who came before me that were in a perilous state.

Knowing that the Lord is present at all times was comforting to me. Through the lack of information, mis-information, sickness and loss, He was my refuge.

**Dear Lord, please continue to dwell in our hearts and minds forever and ever. Amen.**

**Rose Richardson is Executive Director of LCFS, managing and leading the West Philadelphia Senior Community Center and the In-Home Support Program.**



Thursday, December 2, 2021

**...Dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear.**

**Philippians 1:14**

In this passage, Paul states that his imprisonment has resulted in people speaking more boldly the Word of God. Yes, some proclaim the Word for selfish or ambitious reasons, and others out of good will, but Paul doesn't seem obsessed with motive. He delights in the simple fact that the gospel is being shared.

Like Paul, we find ourselves in turbulent times. We, too, should be emboldened to speak with confidence about Christ, knowing that he is the way to hope.

Christ is love. And that love is the foundation of hope. We proclaim the Word, not just in what we say, but more importantly in what we do, as our actions "speak" louder than our words.

I've often heard from pastors that the opposite of love isn't hate, but selfishness. That implies that to love another requires self-less acts, where we put the needs of others above our needs.

As I reflect on this past year, I can say I've witnessed many self-less acts:

- Neighbor helping neighbor through devastating disasters this summer with record tornadoes and insurmountable flooding;
- Residents and staff at our retirement communities, helping one another through the lingering fear and loneliness caused by the pandemic;
- Congregations rolling out the welcome mat to embrace those arriving in America to escape harassment and possible death in Afghanistan; and
- Healthcare workers who once again put their own anxieties aside to save countless lives as the delta variant surges.

Acts of love that lead to hope. I can't think of any bolder way to "speak" the Word of God.

**God, we give thanks for your son, Jesus, who shows us how to love. Send your Spirit to embolden us to "speak" your Word.**

**Patty Cline, Director of Advancement for Liberty Lutheran, is a member of Grace Presbyterian Church in Jenkintown.**

Friday, December 3, 2021



**Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,  
and has remembered his holy covenant.**

**Luke 1:72**

God is faithful. John was born and Zechariah's voice returned, full of joyful news for the journey ahead. But Zechariah's Prophecy points to more than just the road ahead for God's people.

Zechariah's Prophecy invites the people to join the celebration of God's faithfulness, reminding them that this new child brings the message of salvation and forgiveness into the world. God sends a love note in the birth of John, as part of God's enduring plan to bless God's people.

God is faithful. Advent, the coming of the birth of Christ, brings with it different emotions and memories for everyone. If this time of year brings a heavier heart for you, rest in the truth that God is faithful to gather you in and hold you forever in love.

**Holy God, we can rest in the knowledge that you are faithful. When we forget or our lives make it difficult to remember, remind us that your love never leaves us. In Jesus' name. Amen.**

**Pastor Kathleen A. Kerin is the pastor of St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Philadelphia, PA.**



**Saturday/Sunday, December 4 & 5, 2021**

**See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.**

**Malachi 3:1**

**Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.**

**Malachi 4:5**

Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John –“What did you go out to the wasteland to see –a reed swaying in the wind? Tell me, what did you see –someone luxuriously dressed? Those people are to be found in royal places.

Why then did you go out –to see a prophet? A prophet indeed, and something more! It is about this man that scripture says: ‘I send my messenger ahead of you to prepare your way before you.’ John the Baptist preparing for the coming of Jesus --- just as the prophet Elijah prepared for the coming of Jehovah.”

Today at this moment in history, who are the prophets among us? Who are the messengers, at this time of hatred, of division, of violence, insurrection? When our leaders cannot work together, recall these words of Jesus, “READ THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES.”

Ask yourself, is God calling me to:

Be a Peacemaker?

Write to my Congressperson?

Listen to what the other is saying?

Take global warming seriously?

**O Heavenly Father, we thank you for sending your son, Jesus, and for sending your messenger to prepare the way. Open our hearts and minds to hear the voices of your messengers today, and guide us to do your will. Amen.**

**Sister Jean Olmstead is a resident at Paul’s Run and a member of the SBS leadership team.**

Monday, December 6, 2021



**He will feed his flock like a shepherd;  
he will gather the lambs in his arms,  
and carry them in his bosom,  
and gently lead the mother sheep.**

**Isaiah 40:11**

This year at Vacation Bible School, the congregation I serve focused on the feeding of the 5,000 and food insecurity. To that end, I bought the second edition of “If the World Were a Village,” a book that educates children about the global population by imagining that the world is a village of 100 people.

In the section on food, I learned something interesting: “though nobody knows for sure, there are about 21 times as many chickens as people in the global village.” That’s a lot of chickens! According to the ratios in this book, there are about 31 sheep and goats to 100 people, but in some regions of the world it’s much higher. At “peak sheep” in New Zealand in 1982, there were 22 times as many sheep as humans, but by 2019 it dipped to just under 6 sheep per person due to changing agricultural practices.

I don’t know the sheep to human ratio in the time of Second Isaiah, but I’m sure they were more ubiquitous than twenty-first century eastern Pennsylvania. I imagine most of the population first hearing Isaiah’s words knew what it felt like to gather lambs into your arms. We know that petting a dog or cuddling a cat on your lap releases oxytocin, the so-called feel-good or “love” hormone, and I imagine lamb snuggling was the pleasure of a shepherd at rest.

In this particular passage, God promises comfort. In some sense, God seems to be acknowledging that unleashing the Babylonian army on the people of Israel may have been too great a judgment. This “comfort” represents God’s about-face: “you’ve suffered long enough, and I’m coming to you. My comfort will feel like soft fur cradled in your arms, warm lamb breath on your cheek.”

**Comforting God, in this ongoing time of social isolation, cradle the lonely in your arms. Amen.**

**Inge Williams is Pastor at Friedens Lutheran Church, Shartlesville, Pa.**



Tuesday, December 7, 2021

**May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.**

**Psalm 126:5**

In the season of Advent, as we anticipate the birth of the Messiah, Psalm 126 reminds us that God brought the people of Israel through troubling times on many occasions. That serves to help us find confidence and hope in our prayers for a better future.

In my work as a hospital chaplain, I regularly meet patients and families dealing with unexpected illnesses and traumatic events. It is often hard to know what to say to help them gain a sense of stability and hopefulness in such situations. Memories of how God restored and carried God's people through difficult times help provide words that offer hope.

Poet Silvia Purdie writes of Verse 5:

Remember feeling sad?  
Remember tears running down your face –  
God was with you then.  
Your pain planted seeds and your tears watered them.  
The seeds grew in the tender mercy of God,  
growing fruit of wisdom,  
fruit of kindness.

Sowing itself is an act of hope and expectation. Sowers carry their future in their own hands. But, then the sower's hope is taken out of his/her hands and the future is turned over to God – the one who grants rain and warmth for the seeds to grow.

During sad times, we may feel that the soil around us is barren and unreceptive. But sowing through our tears becomes our act of hope, depending on God's restorative power to provide a harvest rich with kindness and wisdom, especially from people sent our way through God's Spirit. And, God sends us Jesus, the one who came to help us reap God's blessings with shouts of joy.

**Merciful God, in times of sadness and despair, help us find the courage to plant new seeds of hope. Give us strength to turn our hopes over to you so they can be nurtured and grow into restored life. Amen.**

**Paulette Obrecht is a pastor in the Northeast Pennsylvania Synod, who serves as an associate chaplain for St. Luke's Hospital and helps with various projects for Lutheran Congregational Services/Lutheran Disaster Response.**

Wednesday, December 8, 2021



**But by refusing to be baptized by him, the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves.**

**Luke 7:30**

During this advent season, we tend to be so preoccupied with the busyness of the Christmas holiday season that we forget to prepare with reflection, silence and calm repose what is really the reason for the season.

Earlier in this section of scriptures Jesus is asked, "Are you the coming one, or do we look for another?" Many times we look right over ways that tell us He is the one who came to bring salvation to the world. Shouldn't we be looking for ways to turn the world upside down with our love and compassion to others?

Jesus sure turned the world upside down when he let the Pharisees and lawyers know they would not be first in line to receive the grace of God and all it offers. They thought that others were inferior to them. Their ego and feeling of greater self-worth prevented them from turning around and repenting.

The same baptism offered and received by many that day, was also available to them. Those who came and accepted it received forgiveness, acceptance, restoration, reconciliation, mercy and justice. Those who did not were leaving behind that most precious gift offered.

Our own pride and self-reliance lands us in the shoes of the Pharisees on days. But we can daily turn around and seek the forgiveness of our sins. As we turn around, what gifts can we bring for those who need it most? Not by the standards the world tells us is right, but by the way purchased for us on the cross.

**Good and Gracious God, forgive us, accept us, restore us and reconcile us to you. Let us die to sin and receive your grace. Show us how to be the hands, feet and heart of Jesus to a world that is scared, hurting and without your purpose. Bless all your children and give us the calm and peace to wait patiently for you. Through your son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

**Georgia Suranofsky is a Mission Interpreter for Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod of the ELCA.**



Thursday, December 9, 2021

**I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others.**

**2 Corinthians 8:8**

Paul starts off 2 Corinthians, Chapter 8 by praising the churches of Macedonia. He sees their struggle that they have been suffering. Yet in their suffering, they found the ability to be generous, and serve their community, meeting the needs of those who are suffering.

Paul calls to all of us, not in a commandment, but in the genuineness of love, to be reminded of that generosity and emulate it in our community. However, what does it mean to be generous?

What I gain most from this passage is that our generosity should come from love. Just as Christ's love for us led to the generosity of his sacrifice, it is our love and compassion for our community that should influence our generosity in giving and serving. We are not commanded to be generous, instead we are generous as a result of our love.

As we continue through Advent in preparation for the birth of Jesus Christ, we are reminded that this generous gift was given to us through the love God had for God's people. Walking in the same path of love, we must continue to evaluate our ways of being generous.

Generosity isn't expressed solely in the giving of monetary gifts, but in our time and talent as well. Regardless of our ability to be generous, we are reminded by Paul that we are all called to love our neighbors and give generously to them.

**God of love, continue to walk with us. Open our eyes and hearts to the ways in which we can continually serve you in our generosity to others. Amen.**

**Kristen Kelly leads the Interwoven intergenerational program at Allegheny Evangelical Lutheran Church, Mohnton, Pa.**

Friday, December 10, 2021



**Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid.**

Isaiah 12:2

In my life, fear has run the gamut, from the anxiety that builds up as I approach boarding a roller coaster to having two sons serving in Iraq, their deployments overlapping each other. These fears are intense, but have an eventual end.

I sit with people in Al Anon meetings who share their stories of living with a loved one suffering the disease of addiction, and sometimes there is no end in sight. Years upon years of worry and anxiety and fear. That's the stuff that destroys souls! And families!

The people to whom I listen share their stories of experience, strength and hope, and it seems to me that we surround each other like a buoying life preserver, helping each other in the strength of the Spirit who brought us together. We even find ourselves laughing together at times, like a spoonful of the sweetest medicine. The wisdom in that program directs people to their Higher Power, encouraging them to care for themselves and become a stronger person. Turning to and trusting Our Lord!

Take your special gifts of love, listening and laughter, and help someone's fear subside a bit. Be the messenger, and "Bit by bit the river grows, 'til all at once it overflows" \*

I still have fears, but I trust God is sending me the angels I need.

**Lord God, we will trust in you. Send your Spirit to wash away our fears in times of despair. Give us courage and wisdom to buoy others when they are afraid, to extend to them your love, peace and calmness in the midst of chaos. Amen.**

Sue Reier is a retired early childhood educator, a PA Master Naturalist, and member of Saint Paul's Lutheran Church Orwigsburg, and its team leader of Stewardship in Creation.

\*Lyric from "Joy is Like the Rain"



**Saturday/Sunday, December 11 & 12, 2021**

**And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.**

**Philippians 4:7**

Peace. We can have it, we can give it away, and we can make it. That last one has me wondering.

Where does peace come from? Do we have peace because we have everything we need or want? Do we finally have peace when our lives are on track and we are finally organized?

And what about giving it away? Is peace a commodity, something we can acquire and use as we need it? Or is it more about the state of your soul? Is peace more about what we hold in our hands or does it have more to do with what we hold in our hearts?

The Gospel of John reminds us that Jesus gives us peace, but it's different from the kind of peace the world gives. It's the kind of peace not based on our finances or even the security of having a roof over our heads. Jesus gives us the peace of himself in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Jesus provides a peace that dwells within, not based on what we hold but rather, based on what (and who) holds us.

**Dear Holy One, when questions about what is going on in the world weigh heavy on our soul, remind us of your peace that surrounds us and fills us. Amen.**

**Pastor Kathleen A. Kerin is the pastor of St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Philadelphia, PA.**

**Monday, December 13, 2021**



**Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.**

**Hebrews 13:8**

I find both comfort and challenge in this passage. Understanding grows and changes our faith, both to deepen and challenge it, but underlying everything, Christ is our “light and salvation” (Ps. 27). His message is clear, the core unchangeable and calling us to be His servants, His hands, feet and mind on earth.

My faith journey has been convoluted through doubts and fears as well as comforts and joy. As in preceding chapters of Hebrews, I too, look to heroes and martyrs for how to grow in faith and serve.

Closer than Noah or Abel (Hebrews 11), I can find many faith-filled women in my life who have lived out their Christianity quietly: a grandmother who provided food and shelter to immigrants; a wonderful friend who marched for civil rights when she wasn't teaching in mission schools in Africa; and a small Hungarian nun who gave comfort and dignity to those dying in the streets of Calcutta.

With the exception of St. Theresa of Calcutta, the other women are unknown to most people, but they provide encouragement to me as I try to live out my faith. I know they all were deeply human and struggled with all the same things that I find difficult. I also know they are all special gifts to me, offering hope, and so I continue to take comfort in the fact that Jesus is the same, yesterday, today and forever.

**Help us Lord to be as consistent in our faith as you give us to understand it, and to serve through doubts and challenges holding fast to your son Jesus Christ.**

**Barbara Devlin is convener of Trinity Lutheran Church, Lansdale's Racial Justice Ministry.**



Tuesday, December 14, 2021

**Turn away from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing of theirs, or you will be swept away for all their sins.**

**Numbers 16:26**

In this joyous season, we receive this day: a warning. It is taken from a larger story that is terrifying indeed. The earth itself opens and swallows, whole and alive, over 250 people with their families and possessions. Such are the consequences of their actions, simply described as: “these men have despised the LORD” (Numbers 16:30).

I am particularly struck by the words “swept away.” They are chilling, considering the seasons we have just passed through: recurrent pandemic; drought and fires in the west; earthquakes in Haiti; hurricanes and floods; even the “sweeping away” of our military presence in Afghanistan. In a real sense, we can see how interconnected these events are. Even the sweep of time itself: how our past actions (and inactions) sweep across our present lives, and sweep us into a future uncertain and fraught with peril and unimaginable consequences.

And so, yes, we all must be ready to change; and this verse is a call to action. To “turn away” and “touch nothing” of the wicked ways that lead to worsening conditions and dire results. We must fight climate change. We must continue in the science that stills the pandemic, from vaccines to masks and beyond – assuring those same solutions are available to all people, everywhere. And we must share and sacrifice, open our homes and hearts to all who suffer, especially the vulnerable, the stranger, the refugee, the “tempest tost.”

And we must trust in the One who is, and was, and is to come – the “Word [who] became flesh, and lived among us” – in the original language of John’s Gospel, who “pitched his tent” with us – never turning away from our wickedness, but taking it all, to show us the true meaning of love, service, and sacrifice, to gain life and liberty for all.

**Word of God, come and turn us away from evil, and grant us your life, that we may trust and share with all who are swept away by sin, including ourselves. Amen.**

**The Reverend Christopher deForest is the Bishop of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.**

Wednesday, December 15, 2021



**There you shall be rescued,  
there the Lord will redeem you  
from the hands of your enemies.**

**Micah 4:10**

Exile comes in many forms. For the Israelites, exile was a physical removal from their homeland to Babylon, where new cultures and religions competed with their devotion to the God of their ancestors.

Throughout Micah, the prophet reminds the Israelites of their iniquities and how much they deserve this punishment of exile. But Micah is not without hope. God does not abandon His people and He promises to restore Jerusalem and bless Israel with a Messiah who defeats sin and death forever.

For many of us today, exile does not have to look like removal from the place of our births. Separation from loved ones, either emotional separation or physical distance, can feel like exile. Stress and sickness can separate us from the ones we love and make us feel abandoned or without hope. In a world of daily death and destruction, even watching the evening news can make us feel disconnected from God.

But Micah reminds us that we have a God who will never abandon us. Jesus has already rescued us from sin and death, our greatest enemies. We have hope when life is bleak, because we are never truly alone. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Jesus' birth during the darkest days of the year point us to the light and remind us that when we feel exiled, God always holds us closer.

**Dear Lord, thank you for your steadfast love that never lets us go. Help us to remember that love when the world brings us low and help us share that love to lift others to the light that is our Savior, Jesus. Amen.**

**Heidi Shilanskas is a member of St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Bethlehem.**



Thursday, December 16, 2021

**Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.**

**Hebrews 10:18**

God's freely given gift of grace can be difficult for many to accept. So often the question of God's forgiveness comes up in conversations with our aging population.

As our elders process and review life, many come to me with concerns in matters of forgiveness. It appears to be a natural part of reflecting on the brokenness that exists in this life.

In times like this, I rejoice in the truth of the Gospel. I remind those we serve that, although we live in a broken world that teaches us love comes with limitations, God's love for us is absolutely unconditional.

**May the joy and wonder of celebrating the birth of Christ open our eyes and hearts to the love that God has for his beloved! Amen.**

**Pastor Julie Stumpf is Director of Spiritual Care at Paul's Run.**

**Friday, December 17, 2021**



**Restore us, O God;  
let your face shine, that we may be saved.**

**Psalm 80:3**

Like people in many fields of work, those of us who respond to disasters and emergencies have felt especially taxed for several years now. Climate scientists say that not only should we expect hotter, wetter, more volatile weather here in the northeastern US, but that we are already experiencing that.

Hurricane Ida has certainly had an impact on many right here in Pennsylvania, and there have been countless, “low attention” disasters that have wreaked havoc on families locally.

In the weeks right after Ida I was helping to share clean up information at the Chester County Multi-Agency Resource Center (MARC). Most of the people there were still without working water and electric systems at that point, and most of them were tired, but extremely gracious and to me unjustifiably patient. One woman I met there, Desiree, seemed especially strong to me and I asked her about her fortitude.

I was not expecting that the story of her strength would knock the wind out of me. She told me that about ten years ago, her home had been one of many that were targeted by arsonists in Coatesville. She lost her son and two grandchildren in the fire. That experience made her want to go back to school and now she works with children every day in public school.

She sees her work as a legacy of love to those she lost. She noted how blessed she is and how her faith has been strengthened. She told me she strives to work for the good of others in spite of the Coatesville arsons that took her babies and in spite of the flooding of Ida. Wow.

**Restore me, O God of hosts, like you have restored Desiree;  
let thy face shine, that we may be saved. Amen**

**Julia Menzo is Director of Community Outreach for Liberty Lutheran and Lutheran Congregational Services, and serves as the Lutheran Disaster Response Coordinator for eastern PA.**



**Saturday/Sunday, December 18 & 19, 2021**

**Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid, for the LORD Almighty has spoken. All the nations may walk in the name of their gods, but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God forever and ever.**

**Micah 4: 4-5**

I have been involved in ministry for over fifty years, serving as a parish pastor, a Synodical bishop, and an interim in two Episcopal congregations. I have worked tirelessly to strengthen the congregation or institution where I served, helping it to be a channel for bringing people to faith in Jesus Christ.

As I have grown older, I have come to appreciate a variety of religious expressions. I have family members who are Jewish; I have had my life enriched by Jewish friends. My older daughter lived in India and developed a profound appreciation for Hindu spirituality. She has enlarged my vision to see Hindu worship as a way to honor the one God-force that is experience through many rays or expressions.

My journey to greater appreciation for the rich tapestry of faiths that make up America brings me to truly appreciate the words of Micah when he envisions a time when, "Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid, for the LORD Almighty has spoken." The prophet goes on to picture great multitudes of believers, who may not worship or see things in the same way, but will come together in concord, "All the nations may walk in the name of their gods, but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God forever and ever."

Jesus once said, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice ..." [John 10:16]. I am not sure who makes up the other sheep. I sense that God loves everyone sitting under his own vine or fig tree. So, I must never limit the circle of my love and concern.

**Lord sustain us all the day long and bring us to that place where we will dwell in peace under our own vine. Amen.**

**The Reverend Roy Almquist is the retired Bishop of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod, ELCA (1994-2006). He and his wife Shannon live at Shannondell at Valley Forge in Audubon.**

Monday, December 20, 2021



**Two nations are in your womb,  
and two peoples born of you shall be divided;  
the one shall be stronger than the other,  
the elder shall serve the younger.**

**Genesis 25:23**

In today's reading, we meet one of the core characters in the book of Genesis. Jacob's story unfolds throughout 13 chapters. Even before Jacob and his brother, Esau, are born, they are already in conflict.

What must it have been like for Rebeka to have her unborn sons disagreeing to the point that she goes to inquire of God? We know that things didn't get better even after they were born. Rebeka is told she is carrying what will become the Israelites and the Edomites. Wars will be fought, relationships fractured, and power struggles between nations.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have all experienced immense amounts of conflict. Conflicts within churches, families and our communities have ranged from masks vs. unmasked, vaccinated vs. unvaccinated, this politician or that politician, and the list could go on. We are all familiar with division and conflict.

To complicate the situation even more, the writer of Genesis tells us how Isaac and Rebekah took opposing positions and favored one son over the other. But that can easily happen to us too. It might not be picking our favorite family member, but we can easily fall into the trap of aligning ourselves with positions and people that think like us and are like us. When we do this, we can sometimes shut out how God is calling us to serve and love or, in the words of Isaiah 43:19, "Behold, I am doing a new thing" in our lives.

This Advent, how is God calling you and me to work together with those who believe and live differently than we do? How can we overcome our differences with others so that together we can reflect God's love in the world?

**Let us pray. Incarnate God, help me this Advent to be open to how you are at work in mine and in the lives of others. Thank you for the birth of your son who comes to heal divided people and to make us one in you. Amen.**

**The Reverend Fritz Fowler is Lead Pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church in Lansdale.**



Tuesday, December 21, 2021

**Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.**

**Romans 8:26-27**

Webster defines the word “intercede” as: to plead for the needs of someone else. Other definitions include: to act on behalf of another.

I wonder how many of you, by this time in the season of Advent, with the celebration of Jesus birth set for just a few days from now, are both excited and maybe also a bit weary. Maybe you could use someone to intercede on your behalf, to call out the things your heart and spirit are seeking in this holy reflective season of Advent?

As I write this in September, there are so many things weighing on the world. COVID continues to surround us. Every day we hear the numbers, join in the discussions about masks and vaccines. People are digging out after storms and fires and floods. There are divisions in our country and our world.

Will anything have changed by the time you are reading this? For better? For worse? What other things: global, communal and/or personal, will occupy our minds and mute the joy to the world, silent night celebration of Jesus’ entry into the world?

When I worship with residents at The Hearth and at Artman, I ask for whom and for what they are praying. There are so many things...family, friends, those who have died, things in the world that cause concern and worry. It is a sacred litany that rises up like the most perfect hymn or Christmas carol. Names and needs lifted up in sure and certain hope that the spirit will intercede. As we pray for the needs of others, as we pray on behalf of those we love, we count on the Spirit to hear every sigh.

Our Advent faith assures us - those sighs, sometimes spoken, sometimes too deep for words, are held and carried by the Spirit. They are known to God. Perhaps a gift we can give ourselves in this last week of Advent is just to sit in the place of our own weakness, need, weariness... and to sigh deeply, quietly, with blessed assurance that Jesus Christ is born for this.

**Incarnate God, whose birth into the world we will retell in joy in only a few days, may we always know how lovely your Spirit pleads for us. Hold the weight of our weariness so that our hearts are free for the rejoicing! Amen.**

**The Reverend Ghislaine Cotnoir is Director of Pastoral Care at Artman and The Hearth at Drexel.**

Wednesday, December 22, 2021



**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.**

**Luke 1:47-48**

Over the summer, there was a small Vacation Bible School gathering, held outdoors on a hot and muggy evening. The children who gathered learned about baptism, made crafts and played water games as a way of learning and cooling off. Near the end of the evening after a few drops of rain, a full rainbow appeared to the delight of all.

As the closing worship time began, I gathered the children to sit on the grass under a tent to remind them of the story of Noah and his family, the story of God's bow in the clouds given as a visible promise of life. Little did I know how that story would plant itself in the mind of a four year-old named Sophia who became my helper that evening at what she called, "circle time."

Every Sunday since that evening, Sophia has worn rainbows to church: a rainbow facemask, rainbow tops, and rainbow shorts. At every opportunity (especially during the Children's Time in worship), Sophia reminds us about the rainbow at VBS. She reminds us all that she is the pastor's helper in sharing about God's promises.

Indeed, she is not the pastor's helper but God's own servant. A four year-old magnifier of God's grace in the community. God placed this little "wise-one" who reflects the meaning of her name in the midst of our community to show us how to see and rejoice in God's promises. Sophia reminds us that God works through all who point and rejoice at God's presence in our lives.

**God of hope, open our eyes and ears to listen to your unexpected servants.  
Help us to delight in your presence and rejoice in the ways you reveal yourself  
in our lives through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.**

**The Reverend Dr. Jennifer L. Phelps is Pastor of Trinity Evangelical  
Lutheran Church in Perkasio.**



Thursday, December 23, 2021

**He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”**

**2 Peter 1:17**

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, shares the glowing testimony of bearing witness to the majesty of what he experienced as a Christ follower and the voice of God he heard. I once read “ever since the fall, man has experienced a gaping emptiness that only God’s presence can fill.” Oftentimes people will try to fill the void in their lives by seeking fulfillment from the wrong sources. The passage really underscores the importance of relying on scripture and reading God’s word as He yearns to speak intimately to each of us. In doing so, we are able to discern that it is in fact God’s voice we are hearing.

In our world, there are many who will try to convince us that they are delivering God’s message yet ultimately are steering us down a path lined with an agenda that is not of God—false teachers. Reading scripture will give you that closeness and that understanding of what God truly wants and expects from you. The scripture reads “He received...from God.”

Peter’s book in the bible, titled 2 Peter located in the New Testament, contains only three chapters. Those three chapters represent a blueprint designed for Christians. In the first chapter, Peter provides guidance for growing Christians; the second chapter explains the dangers to growing Christians; and, the final chapter gives hope for growing Christians.

In our world of information overload, 1. Who are you listening to? 2. Where are you getting God’s message? 3. Are you getting the word and then following up with a review of the scriptures? Peter urges us to seek God by reading His Word.

**Dear Lord, thank you for making your Word accessible to us. Teach us to seek your guidance daily, Amen!**

**Charmaine R. Maddrey-Smith is Director of Employee Engagement Training at Liberty Lutheran. She attends Calvary Chapel and St. Paul’s Baptist Church, Philadelphia.**

**Christmas Eve, December 24, 2021**



**The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.**

**Isaiah 9:2-7**

As we celebrate the joy of Christmas, we do so in the midst of a continuing pandemic, recovery from hurricanes and wildfires, and remnants of long-lasting wars. There are many valleys of darkness in our world today. Yet, we celebrate joyfully that, “a son is given to us.”

There are many instances in the scriptures where a new dawn is announced with the birth of a child who’s filled with divine favor and promise – a child who will break the gloom of darkness and oppression. But, the more comfortable future that the child represents is far off and our hardships exist right now – in the present. How can our faith rely on something so distant and so fragile?

When my husband and I brought our first-born child home, we had no idea how we were going to be able to deal with him and his many needs. But, we could sense that our lives had been changed forever. As we held our vulnerable, dependent child in our hands, he seemed like this bridge between what we had in the present – and the time that was to come. We felt more responsible to care for what we might leave behind when our time on earth ends – and more confident about possibilities for starting anew.

I once read somewhere that our offspring “are like windows onto a time that offers a new light” – new perspective – new hope. They remind us of our responsibilities to them and to the world and of our own deep-rooted dependency on God as we move into the future.

As we celebrate the birth of the Christ child – a tiny vulnerable infant entering into an uncertain and risky world – we are reminded of the committed parenthood of God – the one who will nurture and protect us into a promised future that transcends the darkness and offers a light that shines – even in the dark places.

**Mighty God, Everlasting Father, thank you for sending your Son to live among us and bring light and hope to the dark place in our world. Amen.**

**Paulette Obrecht is a pastor in the Northeast Pennsylvania Synod, who serves as an associate chaplain for St. Luke’s Hospital and helps with various projects for Lutheran Congregational Services/Lutheran Disaster Response.**

**But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy.**

**Titus 3:4**

We hear it said often: “She’s such a nice person. There’s a special place in heaven for her.” Hmm...is being good all that is needed to spend eternity with God?

Not according to today’s Bible verse. In fact, not according to all of God’s word. None of us are worthy of God’s mercy yet, He blesses us with grace through the Holy Spirit which is all that is needed to lead us to eternal life. Nothing we do—whether it’s good work, kind deeds, or sacrifices can gain us eternal salvation.

Once God has called us to Himself and calls us His own, there is nothing we can do to make ourselves more righteous in His eyes. It is all God’s kindness towards us, His love for us. His tender heartedness towards His people declares us righteous and forgiven of all sin—forever.

No matter how much good work you do, how much kindness you show, you cannot gain more favor with God. And, because God showed us grace and kindness, we in turn must show kindness to everyone we meet.

As Christians, we should be known for our kindness. Make it a goal this Christmas to be zealous for God—make it a point to go out of your way and out of your comfort zone to show kindness to those in need.

**Merciful and loving God, cause me to be your hands and feet to everyone I meet. May those I see this day and every day see your loving kindness in me. Amen.**

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





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