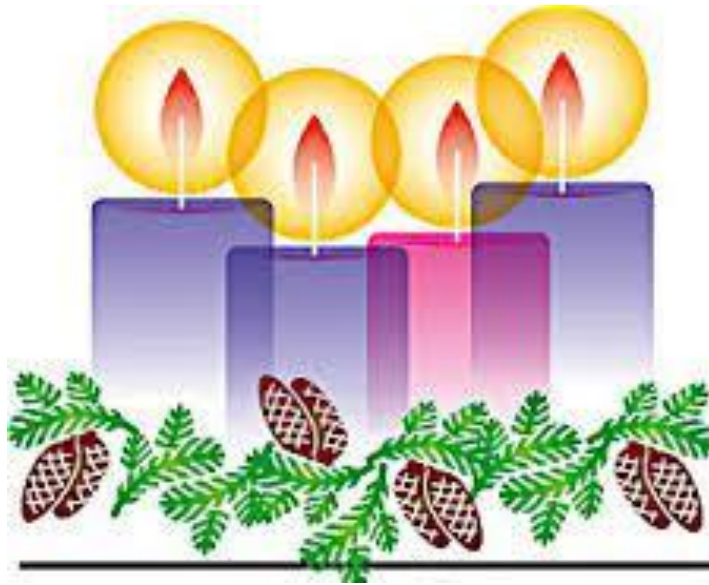


Love Comes Alive!

Advent 2025



A Shared Daily Devotional
with
Grace Lutheran Church of Somers Point
and
St. Matthew Lutheran Church
Moorestown NJ

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Introduction:

As Christians, we do not celebrate an abstract concept of love. We celebrate love that comes alive and walks the earth. God, who is love, came into this world fully in Jesus. In Jesus we see that God's love is concerned with the well-being of others. Love gives of itself for the benefit of the world. In the Holy Spirit, this same love comes to life in our hearts. We are moved and changed by God's love that fills us and moves us to live a life of love and service to others. During the Advent season, we await new signs of this living love. We eagerly anticipate celebrating God's love being born in Jesus so many years ago. We also are reminded of our longing to feel that love now, and our need to watch for signs of that love coming to life in ourselves and in the world around us.

During Advent, churches can fall into using many words to describe God's love coming alive in the world without taking the time to explain what those words mean. As a devotional time this Advent, we invite you to delve a bit into some of those words we so often use. Think of it as a "word a day" Advent calendar. Each day there will be a word and a short description of what that word means in the church or in biblical writings. There will also be a biblical passage. Most of those readings are from the Scripture readings shared in worship. For Sundays, meanwhile, there will be a short overview of how the theme from the week relates to the bible readings for that day.

I invite you to take a few minutes each day to focus on the word for that day. Ideally, set up a small Advent wreath somewhere in your house. Each day light the candles for that week (one candle in the first week, two candles in the second, and so on). Read the devotion for the day and close with a short prayer thanking God for signs of love that you have seen around us.

Advent 1 Love is Near

Sunday, Nov. 30 Themes of the Week

¹¹ Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is already the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; - Romans 13:11

A theme of the readings for this Sunday is the approach of God. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus speaks of the coming of the Son of Man. He urges keeping awake and alert, for nobody knows when the time will come. The need to stay awake is a reminder that it is not just a reminder that God's breaking into the world is not in the far-off distance. Rather, God is near at hand and might show up at any moment. There is a sense of urgency. So too for Paul in his letter to the Roman church, there is a sense of urgency. It is time to wake up because Christ is near.

Isaiah also looks to the nearness of the coming of God into the lives of his hearers. Isaiah makes clear that with the coming of God the result will be peace and trust between people and nations. It will be an overturning of the ways of death of this world. Indeed, throughout these readings for the Sunday we find a sense that we are looking with urgency for God's appearance because it is about to break through into this world. When it does, God's love will bring a new kind of life into this world.

In faith, we today can recognize that in Christ God is present in this world already, bringing people together in love and creating peace, trust, and connection around us each and every day. We are called, then, to be awake to the reality of God around us right now.

Monday, December 1 "Advent"

In days to come

*the mountain of the LORD's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.*

*Many peoples shall come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."*

*For out of Zion shall go forth instruction
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. - Isaiah 2:2-3*

An advent is different from an event. An event is something that we plan, anticipate, and expect. An advent, on the other hand, always catches us by surprise. An advent is something that comes to us, showing up in our lives unexpectedly. It is a neighbor showing up at our door with flowers or needing help jumpstarting their car. An advent may be something that we expect sooner or later, but is never something that we can plan on or know when it will occur. We can hope that it will come to us, but it is always a surprise when it does. The advent of God in the world came unexpectedly to the world. Placed in a manger and attended by shepherds, the coming of God with us in Jesus was not something the world could have expected. So too, while we may long to see God in full and expect Christ to come again, the coming again of the Messiah will always be a surprise. Indeed, God shows up in the least expected places again and again. God's coming to us is always an advent; out of our control and sneaking up

on us. The season of Advent is a reminder of the way that God comes into the world as a surprising advent rather than a planned event.

Tuesday December 2 “Peace”

*[God] shall judge between the nations
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation;
neither shall they learn war any more. - Isaiah 2:4*

It seems like “peace” is something that should be easy to define. Each week in worship we share the peace of the Lord. Yet when you try to put your finger on it, the concept is elusive. Peace is often talked about as the absence of conflict, but an absence does not really tell us what something looks like. How do we know we are experiencing peace? Theologically, peace is the presence of community and mutual care. In the Isaiah reading from this past Sunday the prophet speaks of God turning swords into ploughshares. A sword is a weapon of destruction, while a plough is an instrument to bring forth nourishing life. God’s peace is found in that nourishment. God’s peace is clearing away our destructive impulses and the ways we fall into harming one another so that we are freed to engage in activities that build one another up and bring forth flourishing life. The peace of Christ that we share in worship is remembering that Christ took on human violence on the cross and transformed it into a new life in which we work with God’s peace to build up one another to flourishing life.

Wednesday December 3 “Immanence”

¹² *The night is far gone; the day is near. Let us then throw off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light;* ¹³ *let us walk decently as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in illicit sex and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy.* ¹⁴ *Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. - Romans 13:12-14*

Christians claim that God is not only the vast creator of all who dwells in heaven, but that God is also fully with us and present even in the tiniest microscopic particles. Most people have little problem considering how big God is, but the idea of God as tiny and nearby is overlooked or even a bit uncomfortable. The concept of God’s nearness to us is called “immanence.” Immanence tells us that God is not just present in a heavenly way, but is all around us in this world each and every day. God is like air we breathe; so familiar

and enveloping of us that we do not really notice it. The air is invisible to us, and so we only become aware of it if something draws our attention to it. It may well be that we most notice our need for air when we feel short of breath. So too God is so present to us that we only think of God when something causes us to focus on God. Too often it is feeling separated from God that makes us pay attention to God at all. The concept of immanence reminds us that God is always around us, coming near to us at all times. Our feeling of being separated from God has more to do with our sense of awareness (or lack of it) than it does with where God is to be found.

Thursday, December “Messiah”

Keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.

⁴³ *But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into.* ⁴⁴ *Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.* - Matthew 24:42-44

Biblically, the term “messiah” could be applied to any person who was anointed and sent by God. To be anointed means to be specifically chosen for a particular task of importance for all of God’s people. It was used to refer to kings and priests who had a particularly important role in the continuation of the people of Israel. Messiah is not a title that one could claim for themselves. Rather, the community looks at the life and importance of a person and discerns that the person was indeed anointed or chosen by God. The distinctive Christian claim is that Jesus is the one anointed by God for the task of the salvation of all people and the inauguration of the new creation. The Gospel accounts seem to indicate that it was a title used by others to describe Jesus rather than one he readily used for himself. It is after the resurrection that Christians begin to use “messiah” as a title for Jesus. The task to which Jesus was chosen, the defeat of death and the forgiveness of sin, is so great that one cannot think of the concept of God choosing someone for a specific task for the good of all people without thinking of Jesus. Jesus becomes inseparable from the role of messiah, so that he becomes referred to as the Messiah as a formal role. The Greek translation of “messiah” is “Christ.” These titles function alongside of but differently from the titles of “Lord” and “Son of God,” which we will consider later.

Friday, December 5 “Worship”

I was glad when they said to me,

“Let us go to the house of the LORD!”

² *Our feet are standing*

within your gates, O Jerusalem. - Psalm 122:1-2

Worship is the event in which the church occurs. That is, the church is not an institution, organization, or even fellowship of people. The church is something that *happens*. When people gather in faith to hear the Word of God and to celebrate the sacraments, Christ is truly present in that gathering and transforms it from a group of people into being the church. In worship, the people gathered repent of their sin, hear the promise of forgiveness in Christ, and respond with joyful praise (though it does not have to happen in that order). When those things are done in faith, an amazing thing happens: those gathered people become the body of Christ, present on earth. Because of this, worship is the central act of Christian life in the assembly and then beyond it. It empowers us to face the world each week, called by Christ to do God's work in the world. This description may sound somber, but the reaction to having this encounter with Christ in worship is one of joy. Martin Luther frequently talked about how the encounter with God in Christ makes us joyful because in the midst of the struggles of life we find out how good and loving God is towards us. He speaks of this joy using words that have a connotation of ecstatic joy that includes clapping, dancing, jumping, and so forth. While not all people express their joy in this way, worship should engage our full emotional range and move us from downtrodden to intense joy.

Saturday, December 6 "Almighty"

⁷ *I said, 'Let days speak*

and many years teach wisdom.'

⁸ *But truly it is the spirit in a mortal,*

the breath of the Almighty that makes for understanding.

⁹ *It is not the old who are wise*

nor the aged who understand what is right. - Job 32:7-9

"Almighty" is among the most frequently used attributes of God, but it is also among the most misunderstood. To be almighty does not mean to be all-powerful in the sense of controlling everything. Rather, it is closer to "all-nurturing." Almighty is actually closer to a mothering image of God. It speaks to the way that God is present to all of creation and cares for it in a way that calls to mind a mother caring for a newborn. To say that God is almighty is to say that God is with us, giving us what we need. Food when we are hungry, care when we feel alone, and cleaning us up as we make a mess of things. Oftentimes when we hear God referred to as "almighty" we think of a distant figure that could not possibly have any interest in us. In fact, to call God almighty is to proclaim how

intimate God's connection to us is and how near God stays to us, each and every moment.

Advent 2 Love with One Voice

Sunday December 7 Themes of the Week

⁵May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, ⁶so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.- Romans 15:5-6

The theme of voice is perhaps a surprising one for the readings this Sunday. Yet it shows up in surprising ways. Yet the Gospel of Matthew identifies John the Baptizer as the voice of one crying out in the wilderness. John acts as the voice of one who prepares the way for the coming of Christ. The work of the calling of his voice is the call to repentance and to be moved to act with justice and righteousness in bearing good fruit. The voice from the wilderness takes us back to the reading from Isaiah, in which the one who is to come is identified as one who judges with righteousness and lifts up those who are oppressed. In Romans, then, Paul identifies the sound of the voices who come after Christ. The voices of the followers of Christ join together in harmonious living, speaking as one voice of praise.

This harmonious and singular voice of the church does not mean there are never disagreements. Rather, it is a reminder that in worship and praise there is a connection of unity within the church amongst its diversity of members. As the Psalm indicates, the community of faith finds its harmonious unity in blessing the Lord who blesses us with new life and to repentance that we may live for the sake of others in their need.

Monday December 8 "Righteousness"

*His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see
or decide by what his ears hear,
⁴but with righteousness he shall judge for the poor
and decide with equity for the oppressed of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.- Isaiah 11:3-5*

To be righteous means that our relationships are right. Our lives are defined by their many relationships. We relate to family members, neighbors, co-workers, friends, authority figures, and many other people. Beyond that, we also relate to the physical world around us. We use buildings, walk on jogging tracks, drive over bridges. We use products produced from nature. We rely on agricultural products. These are all types of relationships. Above all of this is our relationship with God. The traditional understanding of justice is that our lives are just when each of these relationships functions the way it is supposed to function, and that functioning is mutually beneficial. To be just is to treat not only the people in our lives in a way that is a mutual blessing, but also objects, products, and the natural world. When one of these relationships does not function the way it should, it has wide ranging consequences for the world and for individual people. When that happens, it is a situation of injustice. To be righteous is to be a person whose actions produce justice rather than injustice. Unfortunately, none of us are able to maintain all of those relationships properly, and as we fall short it makes it even harder for others be just in their relationships. The whole world falls into injustice and sin. This happens because our relationship with God is broken, and that causes us to fall short in all of our relationships. Only Jesus' relationship with God is righteous. God's grace, however, is that Christ gives us his righteousness so that our relationship with God might be repaired. In doing so, Jesus opens the way for us to live righteously with others and work to bring justice into the broken relationships of the world.

Tuesday, December 9 "Hope"

¹³May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. - Romans 15:13

In the Gospels, "hope" only occurs as a verb. It is always an action, not a thing. It refers back to the patient confidence of the people of Israel that God would set things right someday and life would be led in peace and safety. True hope in the Old Testament is placing this expectation on God, while false hope is looking to anything else to bring forth that favorable future. Then in Acts, "hope" is used to describe that hopeful confidence of the people of Israel and to proclaim that it culminates in the resurrection of Christ. It is Paul, though, who most frequently uses the concept of hope. In Paul's use, hope is what moves us forward in Christian life. In God's grace, we are justified or accepted by God. But this is just a first step. We hope that we will come to fully experience God in our lives, filling each moment so that we experience ourselves as totally living in God. Hope is what moves us to trust our lives to God, that in Christ we will come to not only be

accepted by God but to have a face-to-face encounter and living relationship with God.

Wednesday, December 10

“Glory”

The wolf shall live with the lamb;

the leopard shall lie down with the kid;

the calf and the lion will feed together,

and a little child shall lead them.

⁷*The cow and the bear shall graze;*

their young shall lie down together;

and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. - Isaiah 11:6-7

When referring to God, “glory” is the experience of God in the world. That is, it is not the appearance of God directly, but rather the way that God chooses to be seen in the world. God may appear in wind, flame, earthquake, or silence. The key thing about God’s glory, though, is that it brings transformation. When God’s glory appears, nothing remains unchanged. God’s glory changes our impression of the world and moves us to become something new and more god-like. The ultimate experience of this transfiguring power of God is known in Jesus. Particularly in the Gospel of John, Jesus is referred to as the glory of God. Jesus is the appearance of God in the world, and encountering Jesus changes our lives. It creates in us the hope of God coming to fill the world.

Thursday, December 11

“Prophet”

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming,

²*“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”³ This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’ ” - Matthew 3:1-3*

Prophets serve as a channel between the divine realm and the human one. Prophets have a personal encounter with God, but these encounters are hard to express and so prophets rarely speak much about these experiences. Rather, they speak about what the reality of God means for the communal life of a society. Some prophets use symbolic acts while others speak in oracles. The oracles are not predictions of far off events, but rather interpretations of the contemporary social and political events. They address the ways that these cultural trends distort God’s will for society, and the implications that will come from wandering from God’s will. Prophets call us to recognize God’s presence and activity in the world, and to conform our lives to God’s ways.

Friday, December 12

“Blessed”

*¹⁸ Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel,
who alone does wondrous things.*

*¹⁹ Blessed be his glorious name forever;
may his glory fill the whole earth.*

Amen and Amen.- Psalm 72:18-19

What does it mean to be blessed? What counts as a blessing? There is not a clear definition. Biblically, God blesses humanity, creation, individuals, and the Sabbath. At the same time, humans can bless God through worship and adoration. Objects can also be blessed by setting them apart for holy use. The exact nature of being blessed is unclear, but it certainly has to do with being recognized and called by God. To be blessed means to be in some way set apart or designated to be used by God. I would suggest that the various meanings come together in a life in relationship with God. Our lives are a blessing from God, and in opening our lives to God's use our lives are both a blessing to others and a life of praise and adoration towards God. In other words, blessing never goes only one way. We are continually blessed by God, acting as a blessing towards other people, and blessing God with our praise. All work together to be a blessed life, a life where a dynamic and living love defines mutual relationships that promote joy and wellbeing for one another through God's continual creative love.

Saturday, December 13

“Authority”

²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee. - Mark 1:26-28

The religious leaders were amazed that Jesus taught as one who has authority. The basic issue of authority is the question “what makes a claim trustworthy?” After all, anyone can claim to have heard God's voice or to know what God intends. How do we know that something is legitimately from God? To have authority is related to creating and communicating an idea. To have “authority” is to be an “author” or one who creates communication. As Christians, we look to the bible as an expression of who God is and what God wants us to know. Yet we are merely interpreters of these words, not authors. That Jesus taught with authority, then, indicates that he not merely passes down old insights but rather

that he embodies the living presence of God to which the scriptural texts give testimony. In the same way, when we read the bible now, it has authority for us in that through them we receive more than information. The living God we know through Christ is embodied in those words and moves us to shape our lives around God's will. In this way, God's authority rests upon Jesus and comes to us, making the words of the bible authoritative for us in understanding who God is and what God wills for our lives.

Advent 3 Signs of Love

Sunday, December 14 Themes of the Week

Be patient, therefore, brothers and sisters, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸ You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. - James 5:7-8

The readings for this Sunday are full of images and signs of God's presence. John the Baptizer hears of the things that Jesus is doing and wonders if Jesus is the one who is to come. Jesus gives John a list of signs: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those with skin disease are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor hear good news. The signs indicate the presence of God. These signs are more effective in describing God's presence than any theoretical discussion. The signs Jesus enacts fulfill Isaiah's poetic image of what it will be like when God leads the redeemed into the promised land. In Christ these poetic images become what might even be called a sacramental reality of God's love come to life in the lives of those in need who encounter Jesus. Jesus' miracles are never done for their own sake, but rather to be living symbols of what the reign of God looks like. They are promises of the nearness of God's presence even in the most difficult of times.

Thank you to Rev. Wendolyn Trozzo, who wrote the daily devotions for this week.

Monday, December 15 "Symbol"

*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad;
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus ² it shall blossom abundantly
and rejoice with joy and shouting.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the LORD,
the majesty of our God. - Isaiah 35:1-2*

What does a red octagon tell you? Especially if it has a white border? Encoded in this sign is essential information – stop! A sign usually has one meaning, or points to one thing (“Chester Ave,” for example). But a symbol has a surplus of meaning. Think of the manger: a symbol of the Nativity. Embedded in a simple image are truths of God’s love, the identity of our Savior, welcome to the poor, and much more. But as information is coded into a sign, much greater “sign”ificance is encoded into the symbol of the manger – one could even say “embedded.” As worshippers and as believers, we are called to seek to decode symbols as familiar to us as the Nativity, the candles, the sanctuary, and the Christ. Because our symbols have so much meaning, our whole lives can be spent curiously decoding and then joyfully sharing the meaning in our simple signs and complex symbols. Look back at the verses above to see what signs and symbols you encounter there.

Tuesday, December 16

“Eschatology”

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³ and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” ⁴ Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with a skin disease are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. ⁶ And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.” - Matthew 11:2-6

Eschatology is the doctrine (“-ology”) of the last things (“eschaton”). What we as Christians learn from eschatology is that the future is life-affirming. Sometimes when we think of end times, we think of apocalyptic terror, but even the word “apocalypse” means unveiling or revealing (as in the book of Revelation). We see that life is a cycle of creation, brokenness, and new creation. Eschatology tells us that our creation is moving toward heaven, and that brokenness is not the last word (see examples of brokenness in the verses above, and God’s response to them). Knowing that our end is not punishment or emptiness frees us to live these days in hope, doing well what we can and returning to God for forgiveness, knowing that failure also does not have the last word. In fact, the last word on our life may mirror the first words of creation – “Let there be light.”

Wednesday, December 17

“Kingdom/Reign of God”

*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf shall be opened;*

*⁶ then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert... - Isaiah 35:5b-6*

Ask a child what a king does, and they may say “wear a crown and make the rules.” Indeed, majesty and power are part of kingship, but a good king will protect and lead all of their people, giving stability and helping people live well together. In the Bible, the Israelites asked God for human kings, who often failed the people, turning them away from God’s law and God’s love. After multiple exiles, and during the Roman occupation, God enacted a new king through a descendant of the Israelite throne (the symbol of the “branch of Jesse”). This King, Jesus, became a Prince of Peace whose power served not himself but a new reign or kingdom – some call it the “Kin-dom of God.” This kin-dom is not based on land, money, or power, but on relationship – being kin, sisters and brothers, and loving all of the human family. The Kin-dom of God is as humble as a mustard seed, yeast, or laborers in a vineyard (or cranberry bog). God does more for us than wear a crown and make rules – today’s verses from Isaiah remind us of that.

Thursday, December 18

“Lord”

*⁵ Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD their God,
⁶ who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith forever;
⁷ who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.
The LORD sets the prisoners free; - Psalm 146:5-10*

An old camp song repeats the phrases, “King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Glory, Hallelujah!” to the tune of a dancing Hasidic melody. Lord in the Old Testament could describe the One God (LORD), a ruler of a territory (Lord), or a master (lord). In the Gospels, Jesus is called Lord but it is the Greek word “Kyrios,” meaning “Sir” or master. It isn’t until after the resurrection that he is given the title Lord, a part of the Trinity, One God. As we have considered what Jesus’ Kingship means – a kin-dom that brings us closer to God and to one another – we also consider what it means for Jesus to be Lord. The best answer may come from the children’s song. When we recognize that Jesus has power but empties himself for us, whether through the manger or the cross, we respond with a word we have

already visited: Glory, and with a shout of praise. The Creating Lord in Psalm 146 above is the same Lord who Saves and is Present to all creation.

Friday, December 19

“Magnificat”

⁴⁶ *And Mary said,*

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ *and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,*

⁴⁸ *for he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant.*

Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed, - Luke 1:46-48

The “Magnificat” (Latin for Mary’s song of praise in Luke 1:46-55) gives us a startling contrast: Mary in her lowly state now bears the Lord of Lords. To magnify something is to make it great – not just bigger or clearer, but greater in its depth and wonder; Mary’s Magnificat shows us how to see and approach God. If you wanted to put all of Luke and Acts into one passage, this could be it. But before you go and read the rest of it (beyond verses 46-48), first go and read 1 Samuel 2:1-10 – the song of Hannah who was childless but is given a son who will serve God wholeheartedly – a song of praise. Then turn back to Exodus 15 – a chapter with the songs of Moses and his sister Miriam, praising God for the Passover and the freedom and new life given to the Israelites. Put together, these three songs inspire us to praise a God who is with us in our human life (as God is with Samuel), a God who upends the rules and rulers of this world (through the humility of one Lamb), a God who takes on frail human flesh in order that brokenness may be made whole. With these themes in mind, return to the Magnificat in your Bible, and see how Mary’s song sings of God our Savior.

Saturday, December 20

“Sacrament”

³ *Do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?* ⁴ *Therefore we were buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life.* - Romans 6:2-4

If a sign points to a thing (like where one should stop), a sacrament is the thing (hence roadways are not sacraments to us). In the Roman Catholic tradition, a wedding ring is a sign, but the marriage itself is a sacrament. As Lutherans, we do not recognize marriage or ordination as sacraments, because these were not uniquely instituted by Jesus through earthly elements. A sacrament has three characteristics: a physical thing that we can touch (and which can touch us), a promise of God, and a ritual to which Jesus calls us.

Baptism is the water, the Word that claims us, and was something Jesus submitted to. Communion is bread and fruit of the vine, a promise of forgiveness and re-union with the Church across time and place, and was commanded by Jesus (“do this in remembrance of me”). Sacraments are sacred rites, filled with symbols (with that ‘surplus of meaning’) that show us the newness of life we have through God’s grace. Sacraments are not merely signs of God’s presence, but truly bring God’s presence to us through the ritual of the sacrament.

Advent 4 Christ is Living Love

Sunday, December 21 Themes of the Week

²²All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³“Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” - Matthew 1:22-23

As we come to the final Sunday of Advent, our readings turn to the promise of the birth of Christ. We read through Joseph’s dream that in Jesus we encounter God with us. The promise foretold in his birth is confirmed in his resurrection, Paul proclaims in Romans. The fulfillment of the promise of God with us through the resurrection, then, calls us to new life. In God’s living love in Christ, we are joined with Christ’s life in God. This life overflows physical limitations, and calls us to radical love towards others as well. Such love answers the Psalmist’s question to God of how long God’s anger will last. We find that God’s love is greater than any experience of God’s anger that we might feel. In Jesus, God’s eternal love is made concrete and walks the earth, and so demonstrates the persistence of God’s commitment to us.

Monday, December 22 “Emmanuel” (or “Immanuel”)

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.¹⁵ He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted. - Isaiah 7:14b-16

In Hebrew, “Emmanuel” means “God with us.” The prophet Isaiah first uses the term to refer to a child whose birth symbolizes the presence of God giving protection and guidance in a turbulent time. Isaiah was writing at a time that Syria and Israel had together declared war on Judah. The prophet was referring to a child who either had already been born or was about to be born, claiming that

by the time the child was old enough to know right from wrong those two nations will have been destroyed, but a new and more powerful threat, Assyria, will have risen. Isaiah was warning that trusting in military power for safety was foolish; trust for protection should be placed in God's presence. Matthew builds on Isaiah's writings to understand the significance of Jesus. To call Jesus Emmanuel is to claim that in Jesus God really and truly is with us. More than that, Jesus upends human conceptions of power and strength, showing that our trust in power is misguided and will not save us. Rather, our trust should be placed in God coming to us, guiding us and giving us shelter in God's grace.

Tuesday, December 23

"Grace"

[Jesus Christ,] through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the gentiles for the sake of his name,⁶ including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,⁷ To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. - Romans 1:5-7

Words always fall short in trying to describe God's grace. Grace is a fundamental characteristic of God, but one that so challenges our human ways of thinking that our language does not allow us to describe it well. For instance, one of the things I quickly learned in Malaysia is that there is no word for an utterly free gift. The word used for grace is a word that describes an act that a sultan might give to one of his people in return for loyalty. It is a gift with an expectation attached. Even the Greek word used in the bible for grace translates most literally as be "favored" by God. Grace is more than being favored by God or receiving a gift in return for loyalty. Grace is a characteristic of God seen through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Grace is God's nature to reach out to us and enter our lives. We contribute nothing to that action of God. It is entirely God coming to us, and when God comes to us God's love springs to life. God's grace reaches into the ways our lives have become deadened: through our sin, through our physical diminishment and physical death, through sense of shame, through our grief, through our fatigue at never being enough. Whatever ways our lives feel deadened, grace is a description of God's nature to enter into our life and spark a renewed sense of joy and liveliness.

Wednesday, December 24 - The Eve of Christmas

"Word of God"

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God,² which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures,

³ the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh ⁴ and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, - Romans 1:1-4

A word is something that comes out from a person to express what they think or communicate something of who they are. Our words project forth from us to communicate something to other people. This is true whether the words are spoken or written. The idea of the Word of God, then, is that it is in some way an expression of God communicated to us to let us know who God is and what God intends. We can find that communication within the written words of the bible but can also experience God's communication to us in preaching, song, and sacrament. Above all, though, we know who God is and what God is like by looking to Jesus. In Jesus, we see the image of the invisible God; we see God's communication to us about who God is and how God intends for us to live our lives and to live in relationship with one another. In this way, the definitive Word of God is Christ. As the Gospel of John puts it, Christ is the Word made flesh. Jesus is the Word of God come alive for us.

Christmas Day "Son of God"

And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. -1 John 5:20

The term "Son of God" indicates the early church's claim that Jesus was of equal stature with the divine. In other words, the early church used the phrase to express its claim that in Jesus the world met the living face of the invisible God. It is not clear if Jesus spoke of himself in this way, as his preferred term for himself was Son of Man. Jesus referred to God as *Abba* or "Father," which implies a sense of being a son, however. Moreover, it is clear that the apostles used it of him in retrospect to describe what it meant to be around him. In the bible there is some sense that being Son of God was more of a claim to a function or office than to a question of metaphysical identity, as it later came to be used. Functionally, to be the Son of God means to be the living, breathing, and embodied reality of God on earth, bringing direction and restoration to humanity. To be the Son of God is to be God's living Word. To be the living Word is to express God's intentions for how to live life and to understand the reality of God's love. The Son of God makes the abstract concepts of grace, love, reign of God, and so many other terms we use become concretely grounded in the life of Jesus. The love that comes alive in his life is love that continues to animate our lives today and moves us towards eternal connection with God.

The rest of Christmas Season ... the gift for a new year ... With you eternally...
"Love"

*¹⁷But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,
the one whom you made strong for yourself.*

*¹⁸Then we will never turn back from you;
give us life, and we will call on your name. - Psalm 80:17-19*

Love has so many different meanings and nuances of meaning. Some languages, like Greek, have many different words to express aspects of what falls under the English word "love." In particular, the Greek word *agape* refers to God's unmerited love of humanity and the love that we as humans have for one another that is created and motivated by God's love for us. To live the love is to receive God's *agape* love and respond with *agape* love towards others. God's love for all of creation is constant and is what allows the world to continue. Each new moment appears because God so loves the world that God loves that new moment into existence. It is a continual act of grace coming from God's love. God's love gives us life. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, we recognize that God's love fills us, and that recognition transforms our hearts into a love for the world. Such a love is not primarily about emotional care, though that is of course part of it, but above all is about giving of ourselves for the needs of the world around us. In our acts of care for those in need – the hungry, poor, disreputable, the natural world groaning in agony as it is polluted – we are taking the *agape* love that God has given us and being changed by it to direct it towards the places in the world where acts of love are most needed. In this happening, God's love comes to life in concrete action.

Love Comes Alive!

We are grateful for the time you have given to devotion
in this Advent season. It is our prayer that your faith has been
given greater vocabulary and grounding,
and that the gifts of Christmas – *peace, hope, love, and joy* –
will remain with you in the year to come.



The triune God,
glorious Mystery, holy Incarnate One,
abiding Comforter,
bless you with endless grace, peace, and joy.

Advent

Although the historical record is sketchy, it appears that our Advent arose out of a season of fasting to prepare for baptisms at Epiphany in early January. By the sixth century, an eschatological ("end-times") emphasis was present. **Our Advent** comprises the four Sundays before Christmas. Each year, **the first Sunday** contains the theme of readiness for divine judgment, **the second Sunday** the ministry of John the Baptist, **the third Sunday** the Baptist's call to a repentant life, and only on **the fourth Sunday** a narrative concerning the birth of Jesus. Emmanuel ("God is present"), in the past in the history of Israel and the incarnation of Jesus, in the present in the word and sacrament of each Sunday, and in the future at the end of all things.

ACTIVITIES & WORSHIP SCHEDULE AT GRACE

November 30: 1st Sunday in Advent - 8:00 AM & 10:15 AM

December 7: 2nd Sunday in Advent - 8:00 AM & 10:15 AM

December 11: Christmas Tree Lighting and Carols - 4:00 PM-5:30 PM

December 18: Blue Christmas - 6:00 PM dinner & 6:30 PM Worship

December 14: 3rd Sunday in Advent – 1 Worship Service at 10:15 AM

Special Choir-Led Worship

December 21: 4th Sunday in Advent - 8:00 AM & 10:15 AM

December 24: Christmas Eve Candlelight Service with choir - 6:00 PM

December 28: Regular Spoken Worship - 8:00 AM

Worship Service of Readings and Carols - 10:15 AM

The 6:00 PM Christmas Eve Candlelight Service will be livestreamed.