

A vertical poster featuring a sunset over a body of water. The sky is filled with dark, heavy clouds at the top, which transition into vibrant orange and red hues as the sun sets. The water in the foreground is calm, reflecting the colors of the sky. In the distance, a dark silhouette of a forest line is visible, and a single, small figure of a person stands in the water. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

ADVENT DEVOTIONAL 2024
ALASKA SYNOD, ELCA

LET YOUR
LIGHT
SHINE!

Let your light shine!

The 2024 Advent Devotional of the Alaska Synod (ELCA)

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Scripture references, unless indicated, are from
the New Revised Standard Version.

Cover photo credit: Robin Roberts

Let your light shine!

The theme of this devotional booklet is “Let your light shine!” and that may or may not be where you are this season. We take the theme for this publication from the most recent synod assembly – our annual April gathering of ELCA Lutherans from across the state. Now it is likely December when you are reading this, and we are in a different season of the earth’s rotation and a different season in US politics. What does it mean to let your light shine now? Do you want to hide it under a bushel? Let someone blow it out? Share it with others? Burn something down? Light is powerful in that it both illuminates and reveals

In the season of Advent, we wait for Christ to bring light into the shadows of our hearts and lives. Many of us, especially many who are part of historically marginalized communities, are feeling more shadow than light right now, worried about this next chapter in our country. Others feel their lights diminished by grief, isolation, illness, poverty, apathy or conflict. How then, do we hear Jesus’ invitation to let our lights shine?

Jesus spoke these words about light in Matthew 5, right after the section known as the Beatitudes. Jesus names as blessed the ones who were not considered so in that culture, nor in ours: the meek, the grieving, the persecuted, the merciful, the poor in spirit. Jesus names the marginalized ones as blessed and then invites the crowd to let their lights shine. The point is so that light may come to “all in the house” (Matthew 5:15), which invites us to consider how light is for all people. The point is also about the Light giver – when we shine our lights, small though they may be, it gives others a glimpse of the creator of all light. We do not shine the light for our own benefit. Sometimes others shine a light for us, sometimes we shine a light for others.

The authors of the following devotions have let their lights shine in these devotions, and we thank them. We trust that our Guiding Light still shines, even when the world feels dark.

Rev. Lisa Smith Fiegel, editor

Rev. Liz Lowry, content editor

The Alaska Synod is one of 65 synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). The synod is comprised of 30 congregations and 2 new ministries.

Growth

I do not have a particularly green thumb. I've tried in the past to have house plants and I'm just not good at it. I think I've just loved them too hard. Meaning: I am a classic over-waterer. Watering my plants used to be a "One for me, one for you" every time I filled up my water bottle. I would come by and dotingly pour the refreshing elixir of life into their little dirt pots, doing my plant mama duty, only to rot yet another plant that was super saturated in its own soil.

Recently though, I have finally gotten the hang of it. I have a collection of plants that are thriving both in my home and at my office. I have more spider plants than I know what to do with, as well as Angel Wing Begonia, a Prayer Plant, several aloe plants, an orchid, and even a beautiful Christmas cactus. Well, maybe a Halloween cactus, since it bloomed beautiful magenta flowers around October 31st.

My plants are finally thriving, because I've allowed myself to neglect them. Actually, I've allowed plants to do what plants do – to draw in the water they need, store it accordingly, grow when they need to grow, and just be. They don't need me to water them every day or even every week, depending on the plant.

When the Prophet Jeremiah quotes God saying, "I will make a righteous branch sprout from David's line," it reminds me that God doesn't need us to *do* for God, but to *be* with God. The imagery of plants suggests to us that God is new life over and over again. And while we get to experience the fresh oxygen, beautiful flowers, comforting green on a dark winter day, and the joy of seeing new life, God is perennially in the business of creating and recreating.

God of new life, thank you for loving us. Help us to experience the ways in which you are growing life in our lives, to reflect your love through Christ. Keep us safe, keep us strong. In Jesus name, Amen.

Rev. Meredith Harber – Christ Lutheran Church, Soldotna

Monday, December 2

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Joy overflowing

When visiting our two-and-a-half-year-old granddaughter Babaamaadizi recently, we participated in an Indigenous Day celebration and children's powwow. It was not Baabi's first powwow, but it was the first time she danced by herself.

Our hearts swelled with pride as she entered the circle with other young ones. She bounced to the rhythm of the drum, her little ribbon skirt swaying back and forth with each step. She would complete a circuit and stop at our blanket, eyes shining, to make sure we had seen her dancing. We hadn't taken our eyes off her, and we smiled encouragingly as she re-entered the ring of small dancers. The friends and families around us shared our joy as we watched our children.

Our hope for Baabi and all children is that they continue to grow in the presence of community reflecting Creator's love, people joyfully celebrating the lives of the young children dancing, families nurturing the spirit of each child in the circle. Our shared joy with the community was palpable, like the drum beats we felt reverberating in our chests. Our shared love was sure, like the love of a grandmother watching her wee one step confidently into the dance. Creator God's joy overflows with each circle, each milestone, each step.

Thank you, Creator, for your love for and celebration of all children in the joyful circle of life.

Deb Nyquist – Christ Lutheran Church, Soldotna

Tuesday, December 3

2 Samuel 7:18-29

God's time

Matthew Henry, a renowned biblical commentator, described this passage from 2 Samuel as “full of breathings of devout devotion toward God.” Indeed, every breath is full of praise, an outpouring of celebrations of God, God’s mighty works, and God’s promises.

The remarkable thing about the breathings of faith and joy is that they come in response to God saying *no*. David expected God to delight in his desire to build a temple, a worthy abiding place for God. And God said no, while assuring David of continued love for and commitment to him and his descendants. The temple would be built, according to God’s time and purpose, not David’s.

Surprised into humility, David doesn’t push back or complain or ask for an explanation or lose faith. Rather, David bursts forth with praise, full of breathings of devout affection toward God.

Advent is a time of expectation. We anticipate the kingdom come, we sing “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” we await the glory of Christ coming again to make all things new. Yet for generations, we have been putting the proposition before God that *now* would be a good time. And God has said no, while assuring us of continued love for and commitment to us and our descendants. We are called to trust that God will accomplish God’s purpose and fulfill God’s promises in God’s time. And, like David, to praise God, remembering all good things with breathings of devout affection toward God.

Then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee – how great thou art! How great thou art! Amen.

Rev. Sue Bahleda – Island of Faith Lutheran Church, Wrangell

Wednesday, December 4

Psalm 90

Dwelling place

Recently my grandson Gabriel moved to Las Vegas. He had planned this move for about two years, and when the opportunity arose, he jumped. He drove 1,125 miles from Seattle to Las Vegas, through mountains he'd never seen before, a desert and barren land foreign to him. It took him two days, and during those two days, we prayed fervently for God's mercy for safe travel.

In Psalm 90:1 we read: "Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations." What does this psalm mean? To me, it means that through everything, and every place, God is with us. In Gabriel's case, even through the Blue Mountains of Oregon (which can be hazardous due to steep inclines), through the desert of Northern Nevada, through the flat land in Idaho, God was with him. God was his dwelling place.

Often we rely most on God during trials and tribulations. We pray fervently for God's mercy. Yet we can also thank and praise God through song when things are going right. When we dwell in our Lord's presence even when life's turmoil surrounds us, we find peace. For that I am ever grateful.

Lord, I am forever thankful for your abiding presence and your love for all people. In you I find my dwelling place. Amen.

Sue Delgado – Alaska Native Lutheran Church, Anchorage

Thursday, December 5

Luke 1:68-79

Prepare the way

The priest Zachariah has been unable to speak since he was told by the angel Gabriel that he and Elizabeth were going to have a son. The reading for today is a prophecy spoken by Zachariah after he regained his speech with the birth of his son who will become John the Baptist.

We can see how verses 76 and 77 are a reference to John's future ministry. How can we "go before the Lord to prepare his way"? We do not have to go into the wilderness and eat locusts and wear camels' hair like John to do this. When we show kindness and love in our words and actions to those we encounter, we are preparing the way for the Lord. We help bring about God's promised dream for the world – preparing the way – when we care for our neighbors.

It is not only extraordinary people like John who can do this, but all of us ordinary people too. And it doesn't have to be something big and extravagant, but any act of kindness moves the world in the right direction. You are called and able to "go before the Lord to prepare his way." Now go forth and be a beacon of God's love in the world, preparing the way.

Loving God, you call us to prepare the way for you. Encourage us to love and care for those around us. We give praise for the day that your dream for the world becomes fully here. Amen.

Rev. Aaron Silco – Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Anchorage

Friday, December 6

Philippians 1:18b-26

Continue to rejoice

“Yes, I will continue to rejoice” (Philippians 1:18b). What does it mean to rejoice? To shout in excitement? To feel a burst of energy? For me, it is all that and to get a warm and fuzzy feeling. I have been using the First Nations Version, an Indigenous translation of the New Testament. This same verse in the First Nations Version reads: “And my heart will keep dancing.”

I am a person who is in long-time recovery. For me, that means I am abstinent from alcohol and other drugs. As a child, I grew up Inupiaq dancing with my siblings and have done so since I was in sixth grade. While I was in active addiction, I started to become off tune; I was not in balance. I could feel the energy overflowing and I did not like the feeling. So, I quit dancing.

When I went into recovery, I missed and yearned for my culture and traditions. Slowly I started to pick up dancing. Now I am more in tune, in balance, and the energy is manageable. We dance for celebrations such as openings at events, after potlucks and after funerals. Growing up in Teller we would Inupiaq dance after the Christmas fest. We would have Eskimo games regularly until the new year, and then we would dance again on New Year’s Eve.

During this Advent season, let us take the time to rejoice, whether it is through dancing or song, or any other way that we can praise God.

Creator, we thank you for the wisdom of ancestors and elders who taught us to rejoice in you. Help us praise you in all we do. Amen.

Shannon Klescewski – Our Savior’s Lutheran Church, Nome

Saturday, December 7

Luke 9:1-6

Let your light shine

In Luke 9:1-6, Jesus sent out his disciples to bring light by sharing the good news of God's kingdom. He gave them power to drive out demons and heal the sick. He paired his message of hope with action.

A senior I know from church recently made cards for one hundred other seniors. The occasion was another holiday celebrated in the dark, Halloween. She drew a glowing Jack-o-lantern on each card accompanied by the words "Let your light shine" (Matthew 5:16). Like Jesus, my friend paired her message with action. Her cards were delivered to her Meals on Wheels clients along with their meals.

When Jesus calls us, we are often fearful and think we have nothing to offer, but when Jesus sent out the disciples, he didn't ask them what skills and talents they had. He called them as they were and gave them the abilities they needed to fulfill his purpose.

He doesn't call only the bold or the able. He calls all of us to let our lights shine and asks us to trust that he will give us the abilities we need. Jesus calls us to act in faith. Jesus exhorted the disciples to rely on the hospitality of others rather than on themselves. He instructed them not to take extra gear for the journey but to trust in others to provide. Just as the disciples let their lights shine, those who received them were given the opportunity to let their lights shine.

I admit, I don't travel light. I like to be prepared for every eventuality. On my last flight to Alaska, I traveled with two suitcases, a carry-on, and a personal item. I am humbled by the memory of a village elder who traveled with us on a plane to Anchorage many years ago. To my amazement, he traveled with only half a daypack! He had learned to rely on the hospitality of those waiting to receive him.

Lord, open our hearts to respond to your call to be lights in a dark world. Help us step out in faith, trusting that you will provide us with what we need. Amen.

Synje Oslovich – Shishmaref Lutheran Church, 1997- 2003

Preparation

Each summer my husband and I travel to his family's camp for subsistence fishing. We pack up the boat with all the supplies we will need for the week. His mom comes along, and whatever nieces, nephews, or siblings decide to follow. We make the hour-long boat ride on the Kobuk River to the fish camp where my husband's family has spent their summers for several generations, catching fish to store away for the long winter.

When we arrive at camp, we begin the task of repairing the fish racks that have fallen and been damaged from the previous winter. We then rebuild the canopy over the fish cutting table in anticipation of rain and make sure our ulus are sharpened. It is finally time to roll out the fish nets and cast them out into the slough, ready to catch the many pike and whitefish that make their way along the Kobuk. Without ready tables and tools to cut fish and racks to dry the fish, our nets would overflow, and the fish would be wasted.

What does the reading from Luke 3 have to do with fish camp? Remember that the season of Advent is a time of watchfulness and preparation, anticipating the coming of Jesus in both the Christmas season and in the final coming of Christ. In the same way that my husband and I must prepare the camp each season in anticipation of receiving fish, Christians must also prepare themselves each Advent season in anticipation of Christ's coming. May we all be reminded today to "Prepare the way of the LORD."

Watchful God, you have prepared a world for us to tend and enjoy. Prepare us to receive you this Advent season, and to await your final coming. Amen.

Rev. Amanda Snyder – Our Savior's Lutheran Church, Nome

Monday, December 9

Romans 8:22-25

A deeper hope

I didn't fully believe and fully trust in God until I had proof that He really loved me. Until I was in my mid-twenties, I had many reasons to doubt God's love. Even though I knew that God was real, I felt abandoned. Due to uncertainty and misdirection, I felt unworthy. I truly suffered – from anger, doubt, fear, guilt, shame, and loneliness.

I dragged myself to a Lutheran pastor and told him I felt like I needed a spiritual cleansing. I hoped he could help me. Since I had never been baptized, he said I needed to start with that. I felt anguish and rejection. Why couldn't he just help me then? Because of that experience, I didn't want to go back to church. I waited until a new pastor came, and my two children and I were baptized. After 24 years of drowning in despair, I felt washed and new, part of a very old family – with many siblings in Christ.

My baptism (and that of my children) led to the discovery and understanding of the “fruits of the Spirit” and helped me to recognize those fruits in the people around me. From 1 Corinthians 13: 4-13, I learned “the gifts of love.” Through these lessons, I learned that God does love me, and that love is easier to recognize, when I love myself. Those lessons helped me to internalize Jesus's message in Mark 12:30-31, “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart...mind...strength...[and] love your neighbor as yourself.”

Through my doubt, a deeper hope sprouted and took root. My eyes, heart and mind were opened; I felt and gave love. I hungered for more scripture that I could finally understand. One of the most profound Bible verses I learned was from Mark: “Your faith has made you well” (5:34).

Now, I have, and truly understand, the proof I was looking for: though life is sometimes miserable, God is always with us, and so are Godly brothers and sisters. Together, we wait patiently for Christ's return.

*Hope of the ages, help us to trust you when we are in pain and doubt.
Reveal yourself to us in those who share the fruits of your Spirit. Amen.*

Roben Itchoak – Shishmaref Lutheran Church, Shishmaref

Hope beyond imagination

This Psalm first brings to mind times when I or my loved ones have had an experience that brought sadness or grief and there has been weeping. In those times, there was severe disappointment, discouragement and overall lack of hope. Yet the Psalm then challenged me to recall times when there was a subsequent positive experience, a situation of reprieve or redemption even, which was made sweeter or richer when contrasted with the preceding distress.

My son cried frantic tears upon missing a ride at a school carnival in second grade. We rode bikes back to see if it was still open, then searched to see if another school carnival would have it, but to no avail. As a third grader, he arrived early with a plan to go straight to that ride. He literally jumped for joy!

One autumn, I endured a deep sadness when it wasn't going to work out for my parents to join our family of three on a tropical vacation. Almost eight years later, we successfully planned and accomplished a trip together on an island paradise, this time as a family of four. Cousins joined, too. Those memories are priceless!

I experienced a weighty internal struggle after a dear friend confided her third pregnancy. I had unknowingly anchored myself in the vision that we were both going to be mothers of two. It strained our friendship, yet we shared a common faith. By supporting each other's children at church and sports, heartfelt sharing and forgiving, we worked through that time. Last month, almost four years later, I stood with my toddler godchild at the front of the sanctuary for a baptismal birthday blessing. Seeds were sown, sheaves were carried home. The Lord did great things for us.

These recollections remind me that even in the midst of great difficulties, there may still be reason to hope beyond what we can logically imagine in our current comprehension. Sowing tears may yet reap joy.

Lord, let us be like those who dream of healing, of reconciliation, of rejoicing. Help us be instruments of your healing and peace. Amen.

Angela Kuest – Amazing Grace Lutheran Church, Anchorage

Strengthened for service

As this “older lady” read the text and wondered why I had so boldly volunteered to write a devotion, I knew that God was smiling when I read verse 3: “Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.” My two artificial knees are very much a part of me after over 10 years and as long as I keep my activity level up a bit I am still moving in a forward direction! Verse 4 adds: “Be strong, do not fear!” I keep using the phrase “getting older is not fun but the alternative is even less!”

I notice the second part of verse 4: “He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.” The word “recompense” stopped me and held my attention, even after the good news of “He will come and save you.” I kept coming back to recompense. Recompense is defined as “a compensation or reward given for loss or harm suffered or effort made,” according to the reference I used... but a *terrible* recompense, YUCK. But wait, I’m not in charge. Thank God!

Verses 5-7 paint great pictures of peace and justice in this world I love, but these seem like scenes I will probably not see literally. Yet these are the scenes I will take pleasure in. I will continue to take great pleasure in watching little Joseph grow up in our congregation, surrounded by love and support! I will take great pleasure in seeing the twinkle in the eye of a friend that sees a youngster taking his “Jesus snack” slowly and deliberately during communion! I will take great pleasure in watching a parent patiently correcting a child as he or she wonders if the job of parenting will ever come to an end. It is my experience that parenting never ends but the way you do the work changes! I find myself using the theme from Kairos Prison Ministry International, “Love, Love, Listen, Listen,” a lot during these elder parenting years and with others in my life. Through Christ, we are strengthened to serve.

God, strengthen me for service, and help me see You in action in our world. Amen.

Twyla Mundy – Christ Lutheran Church, Soldotna

Thursday, December 12

Amos 6:1-8

Choosing connectedness

We often feel bombarded with choices: who to be, what to do, what to eat, what to wear, what to buy and more. During the holidays, we face a blizzard of choices, with advertisements and media encouraging us to buy more and more. Don't miss this sale! Get the newest, fanciest, most improved gadget!

The prophet Amos has harsh words for those whose focus is on a life of consumption and ease rather than those who suffer. He challenges the Israelites, those who are at ease, “who lie on beds of ivory and lounge on their couches,” eat fancy foods, sing idle songs, “drink wine from bowls and anoint themselves with the finest oils but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph.” God and the prophets have always had harsh words for those who attend to their personal comfort and wealth but neglect those most in need – the stranger, the outcast, the hungry, the homeless. We are connected, all part of God's creation.

In “Living Resistance: An Indigenous Vision for Seeking Wholeness Every Day,” author Kaitlin B. Curtice reminds us that “resistance cannot only be about what we are against. When we choose to resist something or someone, we are also choosing something else on the other side. Perhaps we are choosing ourselves; perhaps we are choosing an inclusive love or a more just society.”

As we get ready for Christmas, how will we honor the ways we are all connected? Can we make choices that favor simplicity and the wellbeing of our communities and world? The suffering around us can feel overwhelming, but even small things we do can make a difference.

God, open our eyes and our hearts to the ways we are all connected. Help us center our lives on your love and live in a way that supports the well-being of your creation. We pray and act for a world without suffering, without violence. Let us be people of your peace, through the one who comes bringing peace for all. Amen.

Rev. Susan Halvor – Manager of Spiritual Care, Providence Alaska Medical Center

Friday, December 13

2 Corinthians 9:1-15

Joy and generosity

In exasperation over the long list of Christmas presents her young children were asking for, the overworked, struggling-to-make-ends-meet single mother wondered: “Jesus only got 3 Christmas presents, isn’t that enough?” This time of year, we are inundated with ads urging us to buy, buy, buy. Children have long lists of what they want from Santa. We read in 2 Corinthians that God loves a cheerful giver. Is this truly the main theme of the season? Where is the song of the angels, the humble worship of the shepherds and the lowly manger that surrounds the birth of Jesus?

The ministry of Jesus was to the poor and marginalized. Through grace we are called to care for our neighbors with joy and generosity. In sharing what we have with others we are giving God praise and thanksgiving for all that God has given us. Paul doesn’t condemn those who have wealth – he looks at it as an opportunity for generosity. Jesus reminded the disciples of giving in the humble offering of the widow, who gave her last penny to the poor. Giving doesn’t always mean monetary gifts. Often it is the giving of your time and talents that shows the love of Jesus to others.

The angels gave the gift of song to announce the Savior’s birth. The shepherds gave the gift of believing and worshiping the baby. The manger gave the gift of a warm safe place for the baby to sleep. Giving is a part of this season of love. For on that blessed night, God gave us the greatest gift of all, Jesus. Through Christ Jesus we are saved by grace and are never separated from the love of God. So, give with joy and thanksgiving what God has first given us, our time, our talents and our treasure. “Thanks be to God for God’s indescribable gift” (2 Corinthians 9:15).

*Giving and loving God, may we share with others the gifts that we have been blessed with so that they may see your love of all through Jesus.
Amen.*

Deacon Linda Bender – Project Director, Golden Connections, Lutheran Social Services of Alaska

What is in your heart?

Merry Christmas. Season's Greetings. Happy New Year. Joyeux Noel. Feliz Navidad. Happy Holidays. Hope. Peace. Love. Joy. We hear such words as these often during Advent with varying degrees of sincerity. Strangers, friends, family all toss them about, but at times they can seem trite or meaningless. Do you *feel* them?

Isaiah prophesied over 54 years, during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. He spoke to a people and rulers who tossed about such words along with similar actions many years ago. Did they *feel* them? He warned the leaders and people that they weren't living up to the truth of these words and actions. They must change. However, their wicked ways worsened.

He listed their sins as disobeying God's commandments, idolatry, oppression, murder, robbery, bribery, and exploiting the helpless. They replaced God's law with their own oppressive laws. The rulers put on a religious facade to cover up their crimes and the people let them get away with it. It was hypocrisy. There would be consequences.

However, in the midst of their sinning, shining hope was offered to them. "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation" (verse 3). Even as the people were continuing in their wickedness, Isaiah told them there was hope. Perhaps they weren't ready to listen, but God was still there. He still loved them.

As we await the celebration of the gift of salvation sent to us, a baby, Emmanuel, how amazing is it that we, too, are loved so unconditionally! Let us live with the joy that is inspired by turning to God with true, heartfelt kingdom living. Let us "sing to the Lord, for he has done glorious things; let this be known to all the world" (verse 5). Shine your light with sincere joy!

God, help me to live sincerely with joy and peace this holy season. Help me to hear, listen and proclaim your greatness and love! Amen.

Ginger Brown – Delta Presbyterian/Faith Lutheran Church, Delta Junction

Gentleness

Is anyone in your life known for their gentleness? Are you? The apostle Paul encouraged the church at Philippi to let their gentleness be known to everyone. Is this what folks think of when they see followers of Christ?!

Gentleness has often been attributed to meekness, or even weakness. The Oxford online dictionary adds these synonyms: mild-mannered, softness of action, lightness. Gentleness can feel scarce in a culture that prizes power, strength, domination, speed and acquisition. Or perhaps gentleness isn't always scarce, but rather is hidden, subtle, found only by those who look. After all, who brags about their gentleness?

I'm writing this reflection shortly after the US presidential election and while my three boys are literally wrestling (and yelling) in the living room. I am ready for some more gentleness, but I am not sure how to manifest that characteristic in myself or in my world.

After Paul encourages gentleness, he adds: "The Lord is near" (verse 5). On my own, I can't force myself into a life of gentleness, but because the Lord is near, because of God's constant presence with me, I can generate some gentleness as a witness to our servant Lord.

The Greek word used in Philippians that is translated as gentleness can also be translated as "reasonable," "moderate" and "fair." I can't always come up with those on my own, either, but when the Lord is near, I can get a glimpse. I can listen to those who have different opinions without interrupting. I can consider both sides of a story. I can make consumer choices that value sustainability so that all may have enough. We can't do any of this alone. But God promises to be with us, giving us the gentleness that we need to share with others, and enough gentleness to share with ourselves, too.

Have a gentle Advent. The Lord is near.

Gentle Christ, you light our way. Give us the gift of gentleness toward all we meet, and shine that light into our own hearts, too. Amen.

Rev. Lisa Smith Fiegel – Alaska Synod Director for Evangelical Mission

Monday, December 16

Isaiah 11:1-9

The wolf and the lamb

I recently felt completely vulnerable as I waited for an explanation on where I stood in what I thought was a good friend's life. They had pulled away from our friendship after I had found out about the "lie." That explanation never came. For days, I wrung my proverbial hands and wondered why. The betrayal was excruciating, and I had no peace. I found myself asking God, "Where are you in all of this? Why do I feel alone? Will I get justice?"

As I sat in silence one night with my head hanging, tears streamed down my face and finally a wave of peace poured over me. It was as if God sent a hug for my heart to give me comfort. I felt better. Not because my friend reached out and apologized, but because the Spirit of peace touched my heart.

I may never get an answer on this side of heaven, but I finally understood that my tears (the prayers that my heart cried out) were heard by the one who is righteousness. Isaiah 11 speaks of the Spirit that the Lord sends to the shoot of Jesse – a spirit of wisdom, understanding, counsel and might. That same Spirit has been sent to us all, and while we may never hear that apology, see justice or find a solution, we are promised that peace will come. The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the kid, and little child will lead them all. In the end, the full knowledge of the Lord will cover the earth and we can lean on the fact that we will have peace.

Lord, when we feel defeated and the world seems to close in on us in the most unexpected ways, help us to remember that your Spirit of counsel and peace will be victorious.

Connie Reyes – Amazing Grace Lutheran Church, Anchorage

Tuesday, December 17

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Who am I?

The prominent theme of Zephaniah is God's judgment on the people of Israel and Israel's enemies. The language is very stark until the ending where God promises good for his people. The Casting Crowns song "Who am I?" reminds me of God's perfect and ever-present love for even a sinner like me.

We all stumble in our daily lives. We wait for Christ's return, when he will judge the living and the dead (Apostles Creed). At times, we are guilty of judgment. I am sure that each one of us can think of a time when we have judged others, whether it was a friend, family member, acquaintance, person in the news, public service worker, or even just a passerby.

Other times, we may feel we are being judged. Receiving judgment seems to get into the inner core of our being, especially when the judgment is based upon a lie or misunderstanding. Or it may be a judgment based upon someone else's opinions, rather than firsthand experience.

In today's scripture reading, God tells the people to rejoice because God will protect and heal them. God is in their midst and gives them victory. Their judgements are taken away from them.

Advent is an opportunity to examine ourselves. We can find time to think and meditate on our lives, consider what needs work and find the goodness that does work. Are we strong in our opinions, or are we humble in heart? After we discover who we are, we can move forward with our walk with Christ and work on the things we need to improve on. We can ask for God's help and protection and God will do it. We can ask for guidance and God will give it. God loves us, even a person like me.

Heavenly Father, you already know us, but we need help to examine our own lives. Help us to fix those things that need fixing and strengthen those things that are good in our lives. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

Archie Kiyutelluk – Shishmaref Lutheran Church, Shishmaref

Children of wisdom

Often in Advent, we speak of preparing ourselves for the Lord. In one sense, this is a laudable practice; in another sense, it is impossible to do. Only Christ can prepare the way – that is why he sent John the Baptist.

Without Christ preparing us, we are like the children in the marketplace: we cannot respond appropriately. One may play the flute, but we don't dance; one may wail, but we don't weep with them. Likewise, when the people heard John the Baptist and Jesus preaching, they didn't respond appropriately. John was an ascetic, someone who gives up worldly pleasures, and instead of applauding his devotion to God, they said he had a demon. Jesus was the opposite: cheery, eating, drinking, and they called him a drunk.

The problem, simply put, is we do not have divine wisdom. God's wisdom "founded the earth" (Proverbs 3:19). We humans can only imitate God's wisdom with our own; in other words, we could never invent a river, but we could paint one. Luckily, God so earnestly desires us to participate in the divine life (cf. 2 Pet 1:4) that God gives us faith and baptism to recreate us and make us children of Wisdom.

Children of Wisdom, to use a phrase from Luther, call a thing what it is. Those without wisdom have too much going on to listen to what God is doing. We're too preoccupied by the weight of the world to dance when the flute plays. Children of wisdom, on the other hand, have Christ. When the cosmic flute plays, the children of wisdom dance in their souls, not because they're better, but because they can hear what God is fluting.

Saved by Christ to be children of wisdom, we have ears to hear what wisdom is saying, and we can thus respond to the needs of the world. No wonder Wisdom is vindicated by all her children! Christ has done the vindicating. He prepares the way, he gives us faith, he gives us wisdom to react accordingly. In fact, he is Wisdom made flesh.

Jesus Christ, wisdom of God, prepare me to hear your Word, make me listen, and help me to live your Word in my life every day. Amen.

Rev. Ollie Bergh – Fairbanks Lutheran Church, Fairbanks

Thursday, December 19

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Remember their sins no more

When I opened my Bible from seminary days to reflect on these verses from Jeremiah, I found verse 34 underlined in black ink, obviously emphasizing something I wanted to remember. And at the same time, it reminded me of a sermon I heard preached by former Alaska Bishop Don Parsons.

He recounted the story of a woman who came to her pastor, eager to tell him about a prayer experience she had. “I heard God’s voice,” she said excitedly. “God understood my problem and gave me my answer to prayer.” The pastor was a bit dubious about this woman’s experience and cautioned her that it might have been her imagination. “Let’s try this,” he said. “Ask God to tell you what my most recent sin has been.” A few days later the woman returned, her face shining. “God talked with me again,” she said. “When I asked him what your sin was, God said, ‘I don’t remember.’”

These verses from Jeremiah are like the words of a love letter to us from God. No longer will God’s law be written on tablets of stone, but on *our hearts*. No longer will there be a sense of any separation from God, for God will be ours and we shall be God’s. Teaching who God is will no longer be necessary, for like someone we love, we already know them. We don’t need to be told. This love is so great that any mistakes are simply *not remembered*. No keeping score or retribution. For we are the beloved of God, just as we are.

Our spiritual practice is thus one that is forever a challenge for us who want to be in control of our relationship with God. We must simply surrender to the grace we are given. There is nothing to do. Nothing to be earned. No need to make excuses or to make ourselves small.

Holy One, keep me open to the tremendous gift of your grace, remembering me only as the one you love, not the one who stumbles. Your heart is in my heart, and I walk humbly in this covenant. In Christ’s name, Amen.

Rev. Marcia Wakeland (retired) – Joy Lutheran, Eagle River

Friday, December 20

Hebrews 10:32-39

Be bold, be strong

“Be bold! (Be bold) Be strong! (Be strong) For the Lord your God is with you!” This camp song (with fun echoes) came to mind while reading this scripture from Hebrews. In this excerpt of the letter to the Hebrews, the author recalls how the people have persevered, with boldness, how they endured hardship, and encourages them to continue to endure, to be bold, not “shrink back...but have faith and so preserve our souls” (verse 39).

It is a good message for us to hear, too. In the depths of winter and dark days, we can recall how we have persevered, and lean on God who gives us that boldness of faith to endure.

It is a bold message to say that God takes on our human likeness and enters into this weary world, and yet this bold message gives us hope in our weary days – that God is with us and among us. May we not shrink back, but boldly proclaim this message, together – be bold! (be bold!) be strong! (be strong!) for the Lord your God is *with you*. God is with us. Thanks be to God.

Emmanuel, help us trust that you are with us and empower us toward bold love and courageous service. Amen.

Rev. Anna Silco – Christ our Savior Lutheran Church, Anchorage

Saturday, December 21

Isaiah 66:7-11

Searching for light

On this winter solstice day, I think of the healing journey the students and families at AK Child & Family are traveling. I think that for many, the path can hold great darkness as they search for Light.

For some, the darkness and torment of personal, familial, generational and societal traumas can hide the light of hope, healing and health. For some, the pain is so great, and this light is so hidden, that they exit this earthly path.

For some, light is restored through second chances, reconciliation, and a renewed sense of worth, identity, grace and mercy. Captives are set free through the power of forgiveness that allows for a re-union with the Holy.

On solstice, some sense the darkness is over, while some rest in the quiet stillness of the day. Shall human desire to shrink away from darkness outweigh God's supernatural ways? No! Let us rejoice in an obedient YES to God!

Let us take comfort and be satisfied, like a child being nursed and nourished by their mother. Let us drink deeply of God's overflowing goodness, love and abundance, knowing that darkness is only and ever another form of Light, refuge and rest.

Yes, we can experience darkness and pain along our paths of healing, but a greater YES is available to co-operate and co-create with and in God's plan. What an amazing opportunity, privilege, blessing and joy!

Holy Light, on this day where darkness rests and moves toward light, let us trust You. Let us yield to You and rest in the stillness that comes while You move imperceptible to us. Let what seems to be mourning be ultimately transformed into holy joy. Amen.

Kelli Williams – Director of Spiritual Life, AK Child & Family

Little

“Little” is not a word that is often associated with Alaska. We are a big state – the BIGGEST– and we are proud of that. One of the first Alaska jokes I heard after first moving here in 1997 was, “Texans need to be quiet about how big their state is, or we’ll have to split Alaska in half and make Texas the *third* largest state.”

Most people do not consider “little” to be a compliment. In the modern world as well as in the ancient world, “bigger is better” is a cliché because it is so often accepted as a fact. Yet, the Bible does not describe reality in that way. The big empires of the Bible, like Egypt and Babylon, do not bless the world or ultimately prosper. God is often in the small. God delivered the Israelites, a tiny nation of slaves, from Egypt. Hundreds of years later, God delivered another small “remnant” of Israelites from captivity in Babylon. The “little” is redeemed by, and bears witness to God.

“But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule” (Micah 5:2). The reality that God acts through the “little” is most clearly seen in God coming into the world as an infant lying in a manger in a tiny village. God does not save us with the overwhelming power of a mighty hero but by coming into the world as a baby.

Even today, God continues to act in and through the “little.” That is good news for Lutherans in Alaska. We may be the largest synod geographically, but numerically, we are the second smallest. We know there aren’t many of us! But God’s light and love shine through us in a multitude of ways, such as In Our Backyard Alaska, the singing of Seward Peninsula Lutherans, the many gardens Alaskan congregations use to feed the hungry, and many other ministries. God continues to bless the world through Jesus, who came into the world as “little,” and through Jesus’ “little” followers as well.

Faithful God, we are grateful to be part of your mission, even in little ways. Help us to show others your grace and love. Amen.

Rev. Timothy Oslovich – Bishop of the Alaska Synod

Monday, December 23

Luke 1:46b-55

The gift that keeps on giving

For me, the Christmas season is a time of self-evaluation and there's no better person to put life into perspective than our dear mother Mary. Whenever I think of celebrating Jesus' birth, I can't go without thinking of the incredible grace and humility of the young woman upon whom God bestowed an incredibly huge task: a virgin, young mother to give birth to Christ our Lord and Savior of all humanity. Talk about a stressful job. Had he asked me, I'd have questions, the first being "WHY ME?!" Yet, in Luke, we see Mary's response to her finding out she would be the mother of God's son: she rejoiced in her God, and she did so in the most beautiful way.

Verses 49 and 50 speak to me personally, and I wish I could exclaim my praise to my God so beautifully. Instead, my humanness gets the best of me. Whenever life isn't going *my* way, I am sometimes like a whining child who doesn't get what she wants. Yet, as I often forget, my life is under God's plan. Thank you, Lord, for providing for me.

Our loving Father is mighty and his love and mercy for his people is still going strong, and it will never end. How beautiful is it that we are loved and cared for so well! In a chaotic world, our Father is at our sides. He will never leave us, nor will he leave our children, or our children's children – ALL generations will be blessed.

This Christmas season I invite you to look inwardly and acknowledge all the mighty and wondrous things God has done in your life. On the hardest days, when I am struggling, I think about the greatest gift God has ever given me – he sent his only son to die for me. He loves us all *that* much – and that love is unconditional, constant and will never end.

Eternal God, we thank you for your unconditional gift of love. Remind us of your care and provision this season and always. Amen.

Kristina Abbott – Trinity Lutheran Church, Palmer

Tuesday, December 24 (Christmas Eve)

Isaiah 9:2-7

God with us

These words from Isaiah are so familiar. Well-worn. We may hear them read aloud in our sanctuaries every Christmas Eve. We may listen to them in the songs of Handel's Messiah. We may be able to recite from memory the titles we ascribe to Jesus. As many times as I have read or heard these words, I still get chills. There is something about these words, and perhaps their location in our Christmas celebrations, that always brings me into *feeling* – through tears, or butterflies in the stomach, or a smile on my face. As I come to write our closing devotional, I find myself not wanting to give any reflection. I would rather sit with the “chills,” and invite you to join me.

Read this passage again. Say it aloud. Let the words wash over you. Sit with the verses a little longer and *feel*.

What do your shoulders say? What yoke is burdening them?
What do your feet say? How long have they been “tramping?”
Where is your body speaking peace?
Where is your body speaking joy?
Where is your body speaking justice?

See, a child is born for us, the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. The one we know to be Immanuel, God with us. May the Word be incarnate, made flesh, embodied, made real in us today.

Creator, thank you for the gift of your Son, the Word made flesh. Amen.

Rev. Liz Lowry – Lutheran Church of Hope, Anchorage

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