

The
WORD
Jesus Christ

John 1

Daily Devotions in God's Word

December 4, 2017 — March 3, 2017



The following devotions are taken from a collection of brief meditations written by several pastors in the Church of the Lutheran Confession. You can subscribe to daily devotions via email at:

<http://www.redeemerclc.info/ministries>

Monday, December 4

My wife and I decided to try a gift exchange this year between our four children. Each one of the kids drew names of one of their siblings. It was amazing to see the expression on their faces-- not only getting to keep a secret, but also knowing that one day soon they would be able to share that secret and give their gift to each other. How exciting!

ADVENTURES IN ADVENT: GIFT EXCHANGE!

Advent is a countdown of the days until Christmas, the celebration of Christ's birthday. Each one of us and our families may have a variety of traditions that we do as we prepare for that great celebration.

But none of those traditions can compare to what the Apostle Paul wrote about in 2 Corinthians 9:10-11, 15: *"Now He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and throughout your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God ... Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!"*

As we transition from Thanksgiving to Advent and from Advent to Christmas, we are reminded how our Heavenly Father has graciously supplied us with every need. We have been "made rich in every way" resulting in "Thanksgiving to God." But this "harvest of riches" described here is correctly described as the gift of righteousness in Christ Jesus our promised Savior. The greatest gift exchange of all time is that Jesus came to take your countless debt of sins and guilt on Himself, and in their place give you the free gift of His grace and redeeming love. This gift means salvation from death! This gift is your ticket to heaven through Him! This indescribable gift, this inheritance from Christ, is one that can never perish, spoil or fade away (1 Peter 1:4).

During this Advent season, as we prepare our gifts to exchange, let's remember the greatest gift exchange of all time in Christ our Savior. And let's pray to remember that just as our Lord Jesus has made each of us "rich in every way" you and I "can be generous on every occasion." We can be generous not just with earthly gifts, but with the greatest Christmas Gift of all: The good news of our Savior Jesus Christ!

Tuesday, December 5

Whenever I smell a freshly cut Christmas tree it immediately takes me back to my childhood-- picking out a tree and decorating it together at home. We have the same custom with my wife and kids today. We also have a diffuser with fragrant oils that fill our home. One of my favorites is frankincense.

ADVENT ADVENTURES: SMELLS OF THE SEASON

Over two thousand years ago, the Magi loaded their camels with their packs, supplies, and treasures and began their journey west to Jerusalem. Think of the excitement and preparation for that trip! The Gospel of Matthew records this for us saying, *"Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him' ... And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh"* (Matthew 2:1-2, 11).

These wise men had studied and known about the Hebrew Jehovah God and His promised Son, the Messiah and Savior King. That's why they had made those Advent preparations for His coming and traveled that great distance. As they said, *"We have come to worship Him."* They brought gifts of thanks and praise to their Lord and King; gifts of costly gold, gifts of myrrh, an aloe plant that promotes healing, and gifts of frankincense, that wonderfully therapeutic and relaxing incense. Portable and valuable gifts, no doubt, that God in His divine wisdom had arranged to help Joseph and Mary when they fled with baby Jesus to Egypt while Herod tried to slaughter the Child (Matthew 2).

The smells of the season of Advent and Christmas take us back to the history of the birth of our Savior. They take us back to times in our own past when we prepared and traveled to worship Christ our King as we still do today. The smells of the season remind us of the sweet smelling aroma that Jesus would bring in His sacrifice on the cross for the sins of world, including yours and mine. What greater gift could we be given from our Lord God? What gifts could we possibly give that equal our thanksgiving for His love?

As we smell the familiar smells of the season, remember, rejoice, and remind others of the sweet smelling comfort of peace we have in preparing to worship He who came for us, our promised Messiah-- Jesus (the Christ).

Wednesday, December 6

I would have to admit that one of my least favorite things about preparing for Christmas is wrapping gifts. Whether it is finding the right size box, cutting, folding, having enough tape, placing the bow (though we've done that less these years), or writing and placing the short lived name tag on the gift, Christmas wrapping, in my opinion, is way too much work!

ADVENT ADVENTURES: GIFT WRAPPING?

But one of the adventures we can and should have this Advent season is in reality, gift wrapping. It doesn't matter how big or how many gifts you give or wrap. But that time can be wisely spent not just thinking about the love behind the gift or the expression on the faces of the one who opens it, but using that time to meditate on the gift God Himself carefully took to plan, wrap, and give His Gift to you! That oh-so-familiar Christmas account from Luke 2 speaks about God wrapping a very special gift for you. *"And the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger'"* (Luke 2:10-12).

Nothing fancy about this gift wrapping. In fact, most wouldn't expect much of anything from such a humble gift. But our Lord God had planned from eternity this Special Gift for each one of us throughout the whole world. It was our Heavenly Father's careful planning and His delicately detailed work for thousands of years that went into preparing for the birth of THIS Baby, God's own Son--wrapped up and swaddled in bands of cloth.

This baby, our Lord Jesus Christ, is the gift of God and the Savior from your soul's sin, the Defense from the pointed prosecution of the devil, and Deliverer from the stench of the grave and eternal fire of hell. Jesus'

perfect work was completed throughout His life and in suffering God's wrath for our sin in His death on the cross. His free gift to you is to wrap you in the peaceful and comfortable white robe of His holy righteousness! What an amazing, perfectly indescribable gift! So yes, gift wrapping is an adventure of joy and excitement when it focuses on our Advent Gift, Jesus Christ!

Thursday, December 7

I would have to admit that one of my least favorite things about preparing for Christmas is wrapping gifts. Whether it is finding the right size box, cutting, folding, having enough tape, placing the bow (though we've done that less these years), or writing and placing the short lived name tag on the gift, Christmas wrapping, in my opinion, is way too much work!

ADVENT ADVENTURES: GIFT WRAPPING?

But one of the adventures we can and should have this Advent season is in reality, gift wrapping. It doesn't matter how big or how many gifts you give or wrap. But that time can be wisely spent not just thinking about the love behind the gift or the expression on the faces of the one who opens it, but using that time to meditate on the gift God Himself carefully took to plan, wrap, and give His Gift to you! That oh-so-familiar Christmas account from Luke 2 speaks about God wrapping a very special gift for you. "And the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger'" (Luke 2:10-12).

Nothing fancy about this gift wrapping. In fact, most wouldn't expect much of anything from such a humble gift. But our Lord God had planned from eternity this Special Gift for each one of us throughout the whole world. It was our Heavenly Father's careful planning and His delicately detailed work for thousands of years that went into preparing for the birth of THIS Baby, God's own Son--wrapped up and swaddled in bands of cloth.

This baby, our Lord Jesus Christ, is the gift of God and the Savior from your soul's sin, the Defense from the pointed prosecution of the devil, and Deliverer from the stench of the grave and eternal fire of hell. Jesus' perfect work was completed throughout His life and in suffering God's wrath for our sin in His death on the cross. His free gift to you is to wrap you in the peaceful and comfortable white robe of His holy righteousness! What an amazing, perfectly indescribable gift! So yes, gift wrapping is an adventure of joy and excitement when it focuses on our Advent Gift, Jesus Christ!

Friday, December 8

I always look forward to taking my kids caroling for Christmas. We usually go a week or so early to as many nursing homes and our shut in members that we can in a Sunday afternoon. There's something about the singers (whether they can sing or not) taking time out of the crazy schedule, traveling and warming up together in a group after coming in from the cold, that brings joy as we prepare the listeners for celebrating our Savior's birth.

ADVENT ADVENTURES: CHRISTMAS CAROLING

But who were the very first Christmas carolers? The familiar Gospel of Luke 2 tells us, *"And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: 'Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!'"* So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, *"Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us"* (Luke 2:13-15).

What did that first Christmas Carol sound like? Can you imagine the skies filling with brilliant light and hearing the host of angels give glory and praise to the birth of the Savior? Did it echo in the ears of those shepherds for the rest of their lives? We can't answer these questions specifically, but we can see how this first Christmas carol prepared the hearts of those shepherds to race into Bethlehem to find their newborn Lord and Savior, the newborn baby Jesus!

You and I may not have the voice of an angel, but we can have the heart of a shepherd that runs to Jesus and that celebrates His birth! We can run and tell others about what great things God has done for us and that "which the Lord has made known to us!" Let's grab our kids, family, and friends, and go Christmas caroling! Let's prepare others' hearts to celebrate Jesus' birth just like those first angelic messengers filled the heavens with the praise and joy of our Savior's birth! "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" God's goodwill, His astounding grace was found in a lowly manger in our newborn Savior, Christ the Lord.

Saturday, December 9

When I was very young I remember driving from the Twin Cities suburbs to Red Wing, MN to visit my grandparents for Christmas. We would pack our luggage and prepare the car the relatively short trip. And yes, we would sing from time to time "Over the river and through the woods to grandmother's house we go."

ADVENT ADVENTURES: TO GRANDFATHER'S HOUSE WE GO

I highly doubt there was much singing on the trip recorded in the Gospel of Luke, *"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child"* (Luke 2:1-5).

Joseph and a very pregnant Mary traveled what took probably four or five days by foot to Joseph's forefather's town of Bethlehem some 65 miles south of Nazareth. They weren't going to see family (at least they didn't seem to have any that would take them in). They were going because Rome issued a law that said they had to go. One might call it an Advent Adventure, but it was an extremely dangerous trip for the young couple and the expected Child now due to be born any day.

Yet we can imagine a song that went with them in their hearts along the way. Mary prayed a month or so before this trip with her cousin Elizabeth, "My soul magnifies the Lord, And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed. For He who is mighty has done great things for me, And holy is His name. And His mercy is on those who fear Him From generation to generation" (Luke 1:46-50).

As we may prepare to travel to the homes of family and friends this Advent and Christmas, let's think about Jesus' family traveling before His birth. Let's sing in our hearts of the joy we have in Him our Savior, for He has called us blessed who "hear the Word of God and keep it" (Luke 11:28). We treasure that Word in our hearts knowing what great and mighty things Jesus has done for us through His death on the cross for our sins. And He has risen to prepare to take us to our Heavenly Father's house to be with Him, forever, in heaven!

Monday, December 11

Putting up lights on the house or on the Christmas tree at home or church is certainly a process. But in that process we with our families and friends enjoy a bright and shining sight that is worth enjoying ourselves and sharing!

ADVENT ADVENTURES: CHRISTMAS DECORATING

A long time ago there was an old man in a church who held up one light shortly after Christmas. You wouldn't think that he would do this after Christmas, but he had been waiting for the time when he would get to hold this special light that would give light to the entire world. That old man's name was Simeon. Luke 2 records this event saying, "Behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. So he came by the Spirit into the temple. And when the parents brought in the Child Jesus, to do for Him according to the custom of the law, he took Him up in his arms and blessed God and said: 'Lord, now You are letting Your servant

depart in peace, According to Your word; For my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, A light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, And the glory of Your people Israel."

When it comes to Christmas decorating, our hearts are the masterpieces of Christ. Hearts without Christ are dark and gloomy, without hope, without strength, and empty of God's love. But the promises of Jesus' coming and of His Word of redemption bring "life and immortality to light through the Gospel" (2 Timothy 1:10). Like Simeon, Jesus prepares our hearts by displaying His light there to shine with the warmth of His loving and saving gospel, the Advent and coming of Christmas. Like Simeon in the temple, we praise the Lord in the peace this light gives for our soul in this dark and evil world. Like Simeon, the joy of our Savior's birth and His salvation is what prepares our hearts to share that light with all the world.

As you're decorating this Advent and lifting up lights on the house or Christmas tree, think of the old man Simeon in the temple. Think of him getting to hold up baby Jesus, the light of God's love for the world, and praise his Savior for seeing face to face the light of his salvation. Think of Jesus' face, because it is His face you will see when you stand before Him redeemed, restored, and forgiven through His blood, while enjoying all the unimaginable decorations of your new eternal home with Him in heaven!

Tuesday, December 12

Luke 2:13 — *Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."*

THE MUSIC OF CHRISTMAS

Can you imagine a Christmas without music? Why, whole sections of hymnals are devoted to Christmas! And what about all the other music, live and recorded on tape, disc, and cloud? Everywhere we go, we hear the music of Christmas.

Perhaps music is so prevalent because it expresses God's kindly love in Christ to us in a unique way. Perhaps it is because it is the language of

emotion and this is an emotional season, or at least it should be. God's angel spoke Good news of GREAT JOY!

But we have yet another reason for music at this time. Music is the language of praise! On the night of our Lord's birth, an angel came to some shepherds to tell them what had happened. He told them that this was for all people. Then, suddenly-- they did not all solemnly file in with candles-- there was a great company of the heavenly host, PRAISING God....

When the Old Testament Christians praised God, they sang about God's mighty works. And they played music, too. They played trumpets, harps, lyres, tambourines, strings, flutes, and cymbals! They danced for joy, praising God (cf. Psalm 150).

Jesus did not come to save the angels, yet they praised God for His marvelous gift. We have more reason than they to extend ourselves praising Him! Now, like the nobleman whom Jesus sent on his long trip home, saying, "Go your way. Your son lives," we too, can journey through life assured of what we will find when we arrive home! Hallelujah!

Wednesday, December 13

CHRISTMAS CANDLES

Christmas is a time for candles-- in windows, on tables, in pictures. Yet, in all the Gospel accounts of Jesus' birth, there is no mention of a candle. What do our candles have to do with Christmas? Well, for many, the candles of Christmas are reminders of passages like John 1:4: "In him was life, and that life was the light of men."

Why do we bother with candles when we have electricity? We flip a switch and have light, but we still like candles. Could it be because of the warmth they convey? They are fragile and make a small spot in the darkness, so people get closer together around them.

Warmth means life. When Elisha was called to the home of the Shunamite woman, her little boy had died. But when Elisha prayed and stretched himself over the boy, the boy became warm again, and then was brought back to life (2 Kings 4).

As we think again of the birth of Jesus, John shows us where all life comes from. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... By Him were all things made ... In Him was life. He is the one who made the difference between stones and living beings. In Washington D.C., presidents give awards to some of the most famous people in many different fields for their many years of labor and their contributions to our society. But there is no award great enough properly to honor the contribution of that Baby of Bethlehem! In Him was life! And this life was the light which the creator put in the eyes of Adam and Eve and all their offspring. This Child is the creator who gave life to all.

Thursday, December 14

Galatians 3:29 — *And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.*

CHRISTMAS PROMISES

When Abraham was alone in the land of Palestine, far away from the land of his father and brothers, God came to him with a promise. Abraham was among strangers, owned no property, had no children. Yet God promised him continual care and a child through whom all nations of the earth would be blessed.

Abraham believed the promise in spite of his outward situation. In spite of the fact that Abraham was not pure and deserving of all these promises, he believed that God would keep His promises. Even though Abraham's faith was not perfect (in Egypt or in the land of Abimelech), still Abraham knew that the God who promised a Savior for all nations was perfect!

Now, God kept His promise, and that is the first thing that we celebrate at Christmas. Life, peace, and eternal joy are all ours through the forgiveness that the Savior won for us. But the eternal part of it is still a promise for us. We do not yet see the eternal results of Jesus' doing and dying, so we are spiritual children of Abraham, even while part of the "all nations" who are blessed through his offspring.

We, too, do not deserve it by our lives. Our faith too is less than it should be. But we are all children of God by His promise and not by our

performance. And the God who promises every blessing in connection with His Son-- He d o e s perform perfectly! He has kept His promise in Christ and we will see it when He comes again!

Watchman, tell us of the night, what its signs of promise are.
Traveler, o'er yon mountain's height, See that glory-beaming star!

Friday, December 15

Galatians 4:4 — *But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son ...*

CHRISTMAS SHOPPING

Every year, as we prepare to celebrate Christmas, we hear about the same gift: God sent forth His Son ... Can you imagine opening a package every year for twenty or thirty years and finding a pair of socks, always the same kind and color? How easy it would be to yawn and say, "Yep, here are the socks again," wouldn't it? We might quickly lay them aside and look for something that was kept secret, something that is a bit more of a surprise.

"God sent forth His son" -- No surprise there. So how can we enjoy Christmas with the same warmth of faith and love we had at the beginning? Well, think of those socks again. What if they were the only socks we ever had, and what if our feet have been freezing for a month and a half now. Then we might enjoy the socks more, might not be able to get them on fast enough! And knowing that the pair of socks was coming, we would not shop for other socks full of holes.

The fact is, that when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son-- and it was His O n e - a n d - O n l y Son-- to give His life in place of ours. Can we, then, put on Christ too swiftly? When it is cold death that awaits us without Him, can we yawn and lay Him aside like an old garment? Or go out and shop for some good intentions, victorious living, others' faults, or pain and suffering to give us standing before God? The blood of Jesus alone cleanses us from all sin. What a gift! There is nothing we need more. There is nothing more surely given to us. May all of our preparations point to this gift, and so increase our appreciation of Him.

Saturday, December 16

Hebrews 13:1 — *Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.*

CHRISTMAS SHARING

Christmas is a time for sharing, for hospitality, for being a friend of strangers. Of course, the Bible doesn't confine this to Christmas, but perhaps because of the custom of gift-giving, this is the time that organizations take to the streets to receive donations to share with the needy.

Sometimes, however, sharing takes more than a second and a handful of loose change. Sometimes it takes prayer and time and effort to help others. Sometimes it takes judgment as to what is the best way to share with someone.

But let's not give up. Remember how Abraham and Lot both entertained strangers who turned out to be angels. But "brotherly-love" and "stranger-love" speaks of more than just what we do or don't do for brothers and others. This is talking about our heart. Giving someone a solid gold Cadillac would not be loving or hospitable if our heart was not in it, if it was not for the right reason.

What we need for Christmas is a heart that so rejoices in what God has shared with us that we KNOW His blessings could NOT be topped by anyone! Then we will not be giving because of what we hope to gain, whether thanks or return. Then we will be praying that those whom we gift may see not only our affection for them in the gift, not only brotherly-love or stranger-love, but also Christ-child love, and so be twice-blessed by our gift.

May God this Christmastime create in us a clean heart, and may He renew in us a right spirit through the joy of His salvation in the Babe of Bethlehem.

Monday, December 18

The Gospel—Our Oasis on the Road to Heaven

Isaiah 35:1-2 — The wilderness and the wasteland shall be glad for them, and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose; it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice, even with joy and singing.

BLOSSOMS IN THE DESERT

This wonderful prophecy occurs in connection with a foretelling of God's judgment upon a wayward people. For their disobedience Israel's ten northern tribes would be swept away into captivity by the Assyrian army led by Sennacherib (around 700 B.C.). Yet among the captives were a remnant of believers.

Put yourself in the place of these exiled children of God whose lives at times appeared gloomy and desolate, like a spiritual desert. Yet God's prophet foretells a coming age that would change the desert into a blooming oasis. The parched land and the wilderness would be glad and rejoice and shout for joy!

What could bring about such a change for these exiles--and for us who live in the wilderness of this sin-cursed, doomed and dying world? What but the birth of Jesus Christ whom Isaiah had earlier identified as the One who would be called "Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6)!

When the winter "blahs" threaten--with so much going on in this world and even our individual lives that can threaten to depress or discourage--the believers slake their spiritual thirst at the wonderful oasis of the Christmas gospel!

Behold, a Branch is growing Of loveliest form and grace,
As prophets sang, foreknowing; It springs from Jesse's race
And bears on little flow'r In midst of coldest winter,
At deepest midnight hour.

Isaiah had foretold it In words of promise sure,
And Mary's arms enfold it, A virgin meek and pure.
Through God's eternal will This child to her is given
At midnight calm and still. (*Christian Worship, 47:1-2*)

Tuesday, December 19

The Gospel—Our Oasis on the Road to Heaven (2)

Isaiah 35:2ff — *The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the excellence of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the excellency of our God....*

FORESHADOWING LANDMARKS

The prophet speaks in geographical language which God's exiled people would understand. Back in the day, Lebanon, Carmel, and Sharon were natural landmarks. Lofty, sweet smelling cedar trees filled the mountain range of Lebanon. Mount Carmel was famous for its majestic splendor, not unlike the Grand Tetons of Wyoming. The valleys of Sharon were unmatched for their lush vegetation.

The Holy Spirit inspired the prophet to refer to such picturesque locations as a foreshadowing of the "excellency of our God"--that is, the glory of the coming age of the Messiah!

As their forefathers had been freed from bondage in Egypt, so these exiles would be freed from the Assyrian captivity. And more than that--their long-awaited Messiah would come to save them from all ills of body or soul, as the next verses relate: "Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are fearful-hearted, 'Be strong, do not fear! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God; He will come and save you'" (vv. 3-4).

Fellow exiles, be strong, do not fear, your God will come and save you--hang on tightly to the Promise of the coming Deliverer!

He shall come down like showers Upon the fruitful earth;
Love, joy, and hope, like flowers, Spring in His path to birth.
Before Him on the mountains Shall peace, the herald, go;
And righteousness in fountains From hill to valley flow.

(Lutheran Service Book, 398:3)

Wednesday, December 20

The Gospel—Our Oasis on the Road to Heaven (3)

Isaiah 35:5-7 — Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing. For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The parched ground shall become a pool, and the thirsty land springs of water; in the habitation of jackals where each lay, there shall be grass with reeds and rushes.

NO MIRAGE

An Arabic proverb reads: "More deceitful than a mirage." In deserts, appearances can deceive. The thirsty traveler is sure he sees a great sheet of water ahead, only to discover that the closer he gets it's all a deception.

So in the wilderness or desert that is this fallen, sinful world. The philosophies of humanism (science and/or man is god), secularism (no need for God), and hedonism (pleasure is king) offer all sorts of false comforts. Things like drugs, alcohol, unbridled and/or illicit sex appear to be water and nourishment for parched and aching souls. Yet they are only mirages which ultimately enslave.

By stark contrast is the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is no mirage, but a glorious reality bringing welcome rest for sin-burdened souls. "Come to Me," invites the Savior, "all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matthew 11:28ff).

This Advent season and always, how refreshing to drink deeply of God's means of grace--the gospel in Word and Sacrament--which provide true joy, comfort, and peace through the assurance of full forgiveness of all sins through the Savior born to us.

He comes from thickest films of vice To clear the mental ray
And on the eyeballs of the blind To pour celestial day.

He comes the broken heart to bind, The bleeding soul to cure,
And with the treasures of His grace T' enrich the humble poor.

(The Lutheran Hymnal, 66:3-4)

Thursday, December 21

The Gospel—Our Oasis on the Road to Heaven (4)

Isaiah 35:8-10 — *A highway shall be there, and a road. And it shall be called the Highway of Holiness. The unclean shall not pass over it, but it shall be for others... the redeemed shall walk there, and the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing, with everlasting joy on their heads. They shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*

THE HIGHWAY OF HOLINESS

The path to the heavenly fatherland is called a "Highway of Holiness." How can sinners, "unclean" by nature, presume to travel on such a road?

The answer is--only by turning in at the "oasis" or "rest area" called the gospel. For sure, from conception we are sinful and unclean, yes, lost and condemned. Yet to all passers-by the gospel billboards proclaim: "Redeemed!" "Ransomed!" "Forgiven!" "Thank You, Jesus!"

Yes, the arrival of the promised Savior is the basis--the only basis--for such good news. The Son of God and Mary's Son came into this world to live a holy life, then to suffer and die on the cross in the sinner's place. At the same time, through the Sacrament of Baptism the Holy Spirit gave a new birth, washing away all our sins.

Thus sinners are declared "saints"--yes, holy, not because of anything they have done, but because of what Jesus came to do, and did. All who so believe enter Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, "with everlasting joy on their heads. They shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."

Oh, that we were there.

O Zion's daughter rise To meet your lowly King,
Nor let your faithless heart despise The peace He comes to bring.
All glory to the Son, Who comes to set us free,
With Father, Spirit, ever one Through all eternity.

(Lutheran Service Book, 331:3, 6)

Friday, December 22

The Gospel—Our Oasis on the Road to Heaven (5)

Isaiah 35:8-9 — A highway shall be there, and a road. And it shall be called the Highway of Holiness. The unclean shall not pass over it, but it shall be for others. Whoever walks the road, although a fool, shall not go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast go up on it; it shall not be found there....

THE HIGHWAY OF HOLINESS (II)

As here, the prophet Isaiah likes to use the illustration of believers journeying on the road to heaven. He also uses these familiar words: "Prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth; the glory of the LORD shall be revealed..." (Isaiah 40:3ff).

In Advent we hear the Lord's forerunner, John the Baptist, quote those very words, adding: "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). Those who repent of sin and believe in the forgiveness that Jesus gives live and rest in peace, and finally arrive safely at their heavenly destination.

All this brings to mind John Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress," where the reader follows along with Mr. Christian on his journey to heaven. Along the way many temptations (such as Mr. Obstinate, Mr. Pliable, Mr. Worldly Wiseman) and false friends (such as Mr. Hypocrisy, Mr. Mistrust, Mr. Formalist) are encountered to coax the traveler to take the broad, easy, and thus perilous road that leads only to destruction.

Fellow travelers along the pilgrim way-- in the words of the hymnwriter:
Hark! A thrilling voice is sounding! "Christ is near," we hear it say.
"Cast away the works of darkness, All you children of the day!"
See, the Lamb, so long expected, Comes with pardon down from heav'n.
Let us haste, with tears of sorrow, One and all, to be forgiv'n.

(Lutheran Service Book, 345:1, 3)

Saturday, December 23

The Gospel—Our Oasis on the Road to Heaven (6)

Isaiah 35:10 — *And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing, with everlasting joy on their heads. They shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*

EVERLASTING JOY AND GLADNESS

We have here another beautiful description of those who, by faith, drink deeply at the oasis of the gospel. Whatever their earthly condition, believers--the ransomed of the LORD--know that the blood of Jesus, the Lamb for sinners slain, cleanses them from all sin. With Him as their Deliverer, they travel confidently along the road which leads to the everlasting joys of heaven where "they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."

In John Bunyan's book *Pilgrim's Progress* Mr. Christian encountered a number of unsavory characters along the road on his journey to heaven. Yet he also came upon "Mr. Evangelist" who proclaimed the gospel of the Savior to him. As a result, the sin-burdened man received encouragement to walk day by day the way of faith and trust in Christ until he safely reached the Heavenly Zion.

This Advent/Christmas season and always, let us pray to be "Mr. or Mrs. Evangelist," sharing the Christmas gospel with other weary travelers who with us might quench their sin-weary, thirsting souls at the oasis of the gospel.

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
"Behold, I freely give The living water; thirsty one,
Stoop down and drink and live."
I came to Jesus, and I drank Of that life-giving stream;
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived, And now I live in Him.

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
"I am this dark world's light. Look unto Me; thy morn shall rise
And all thy day be bright."
I looked to Jesus, and I found In Him my star, my sun;
And in that light of life I'll walk Till trav'ling days are done.

(Lutheran Service Book, 699:2-3)