

The WORD Jesus Christ

John 1



Daily Devotions in God's Word

December 4, 2017 — March 3, 2017



Saturday, March 3

Galatians 6:14 — *God forbid that I should glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*

A LENTEN CONTRAST: SHAME AND GLORY

As we have been considering Lenten contrasts, each of the contrasts pointed to what we have deserved because of our sin and what our gracious God and Savior has done for us despite these sins.

Do you think that you have merited salvation by your works? Look at the law and look at your life and you will see your sin, what you have done wrong! Martin Luther once wrote, "Indeed, my sins go over my head. That was my plight, not only in the days when I was not converted, but it is still my plight. I do not believe this merely because I read about it in my Bible, but I experience every day what a wicked thing my heart is and how frail my Old Adam." Salvation by works? Not in my life, not in Luther's life, and not in yours either, for "By the deeds of the law, no flesh will be justified in His sight" (Romans 3:20). Instead of bringing salvation, God's Law brings shame to us, for it reveals a life of sin.

Instead of glorying in lives of shame, glory in the cross upon which the curse of sin was removed. In the blood of God's own Son, we were bought back from the curse of the law, as we read in Galatians 3:13, "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree')". The reason for this redemption? We are told in Romans 8:3, "For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin."

This is why we glory in the cross of Christ. We were not able to keep the law. Christ kept it in our place. We were not able to buy ourselves back from punishment. Christ paid the price for sin in our place. By His sacrifice, "the world has been crucified to [us]." In His death, Christ "Wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross" (Colossians 2:14). On account of Christ's sacrifice, our sins, our shameful lives as members of the sinful world, will not be held against us by God. Rather, we have been made alive together with Christ, [He] having forgiven us all of our trespasses (Colossians 2:13).

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>

3:19). The Scriptures show that "The soul who sins shall die" (Ezekiel 18:4). To those guilty of sin, eternal death is the final verdict pronounced on the Last Day, when the Righteous Judge will say to sinners, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41).

With this verdict and punishment justice is served and the bad guy, the sinner, gets what he deserves.

God demands that justice be served for sin, for as the psalmist writes, "For You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness, nor shall evil dwell with You. The boastful shall not stand in Your sight; You hate all workers of iniquity. You shall destroy those who speak falsehood" (Psalm 5:4 ff.) We have sinned, and someone had to pay for our crimes. And sin WAS paid for, the punishment WAS suffered, as we read in our text, "For He made Him who knew no sin, to be sin for us ..."

As a result, God's divine justice was served. In Christ's sacrifice, sin was paid for as though we ourselves had suffered eternal punishment. Christ's entire life on this earth was lived in our place. Being made under the law, Christ fulfilled the law, satisfying God's requirement that the law be kept perfectly. This Jesus did for all of us, so that, in God's eyes, His righteousness is our righteousness. And Christ died in our place as well, suffering the punishment of hell, the result being that we are declared "Not guilty" before the Righteous Judge.

Christ Jesus committed no sin, but he was made sin for us, made to be sin in our place, so that we would be righteous, perfect, without guilt, in the eyes of the holy LORD.

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?

"My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" we see the Man of Sorrows suffering all this for us! Our sins made it necessary for Christ to go to that cross! WE should have been the ones who were nailed up and lowered into the depths of hell! This Savior paid the eternal price necessary for sin, not deserve it. He did it to bring us joy everlasting in heaven!

As we continue further into the season of Lent may God grant us sincere sorrow over sin. But may that sorrow not be the sorrow of the world, which, while sorrowing over the punishment it faces, turns away from God, hiding its face from Jesus Christ and continuing to despise Him. May our sorrow be the sorrow of the believer, who sorrows over the sins that led Jesus Christ to suffer and die-- even as we turn to Him in faith. And may God grant that He never leave us in sorrow, but that the Holy Spirit ever work joy in our hearts, knowing that through the sorrows and griefs that Jesus Christ suffered, we have everlasting joy.

Let us ever praise God for His wonderful contrast. The Man of Sorrows has brought unto sinners everlasting joy!

Friday, March 2

2 Corinthians 5:21 — *For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*

CONTRASTING JUSTICE AND MERCY

Justice is what is fair, especially in regard to punishment.

With our guilt clearly laid out in the law of God, it doesn't take a jury to decide what the verdict should be in order that justice might be served. Again, God's Word is clear: "Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God" (Romans 3:19). Guilty of sin, we deserve God's anger, as Paul writes, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Romans 1:18). The punishment, the result of that wrath, is death, as God said to Adam after the Fall into sin, "for dust you are and to dust you shall return" (Genesis

sin we have betrayed innocent blood, but through that innocent blood our sins have been forgiven by God from His undeserved love. What a contrast! He is God our Savior, and nothing, not even our unfaithfulness can change that. So don't give up hope like Judas. When you sin, cling to the confession of hope in Christ, made fast in God's faithfulness. He who called you is faithful. He keeps His promises.

Thursday, March 1

Isaiah 53:3-4 — *He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.*

A LENTEN CONTRAST: THE MAN OF SORROWS BRINGS US JOY!

If we have no sorrow over our sin, then we have not read God's Law. The law, written in the heart or recorded in the Scriptures, serves as a mirror and shows us our sin, for "By the law is the knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:20). From it we know that we deserve punishment for we have broken God's law. The fact that we deserve punishment should be enough to make anyone sorrow over sin. On account of sin, with no hope, mankind is grief-stricken as he thinks on his impending death.

This is the way the law works. I'm sure that death row is full of people who sorrow over their coming execution, but they have earned it by their crimes. If a crime is committed, it is the function of the law to convict and condemn! So each of us, as sinners are condemned to death. Mankind sorrows over the punishment he has brought upon himself through sin.

On account of our sin, on account of the fact that we could not pay for sin ourselves, God, out of His infinite grace, sent us Someone to take our sorrow away by taking our sorrow upon Himself. As we look at the crucifix with the figure of the anguished body of the Savior stretched out upon it; as we look at paintings depicting Jesus' bleeding, thorn-crowned head; as we listen to Jesus' words of despair as He suffered the torments of hell,

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!

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Wednesday, February 28

Hebrews 10:23 — *Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.*

CONTRASTING BETRAYAL WITH FAITHFULNESS

When you here the word betrayal, whom do you think of? During Lent, we think of Judas. To betray is, basically, to do evil to someone who trusts you. Judas' betrayal was very obvious. He was a trusted member of the twelve closest followers of the Lord Jesus. He betrayed the Lord by turning Jesus over to His enemies for thirty pieces of silver.

Our own betrayal of the Lord Jesus might not be as obvious. Like the disciples, we are the beloved of the Lord Jesus. And yet, with the psalmist we all must confess to God, "Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight" (Psalm 51:4). By sinning we have betrayed the innocent blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, for daily we turn our backs on Him by doing contrary to His will, committing those very acts that made it necessary for Him to suffer and die in our place.

Fortunately for us, and all sinners, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us, so that we have been forgiven. When Christ Jesus suffered and died upon the cross, He died to pay for the sins of ALL people. The Holy Spirit means exactly what He says through the apostle John, "the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from ALL sin" (1 John 1:7).

How's that for a contrast? Christ Jesus died to pay for Judas' betrayal; He died to pay for Peter's denials; Jesus died to pay for your sins, for my sins, for the sins of every single person who ever has lived, and who ever will live. It is as it has been written, "Christ Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the whole world" (1 John 2:2).

Our confession is that we are sinners and that the blood of Jesus Christ has cleansed us from ALL sin! And that is our hope of salvation because God is faithful. He keeps His promises, including the promise that He has forgiven our sins. He is God our Savior. "If we are faithless, He is faithful. He cannot deny Himself" (2 Timothy 2:13).

By our sins we are all guilty of betraying Jesus, for we have all gone contrary to His will. But in this contrast, our sin and Christ's faithfulness, we find the Law and the Gospel, man's sin and God's grace. Through our

Tuesday, February 27

1 John 3:16 — *By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us.*

LENT: CONTRASTING MAN'S HATRED WITH GOD'S LOVE

God says that man is "dead in trespasses and sins," and "by nature children of wrath" (Ephesians 2:1, 4). In Romans 8:7 we read that "the carnal mind is enmity [has hatred] against God." Being fleshly minded, seeking his own gratification, the natural man hates God and works against the Lord. As one who hates God, the unconverted man is on the side of the devil, serving Satan, rather than God.

At times the world may be heard to wonder, "How could a God of love condemn anyone to hell?" Actually, it was man who condemned himself to hell by disobeying God. Man knew the consequences of his actions in the garden, for the LORD had said, "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it, you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:17). In spite of man's rebellion and hatred, God promised and sent mankind a Savior from sin.

During Lent we sorrow over the sins that made it necessary for Christ to go to the cross to suffer our punishment. Jesus Christ DIED on account of our sins. However, we do not focus only on our sins. The main focus of Lent is the love of God shown to sinners in Christ's sacrifice on Calvary. Thank God that He is not as sinful men, loving only those who love Him back. The natural man hated God, and yet God loved man so much that God paid for man's sin with the life of His only Son.

Let this ever be our light, not only in the solemn season of Lent, but as we walk through this sinful world, knowing the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ, confident in the salvation won for us on the cross. Confident that eternal life will be our end for "In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him" (1 John 4:9).

Praise God for His undeserved love, revealed in Jesus Christ!

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.

And so it is that through the gift of the Savior, in whom we believe by the gift of faith in Him, we receive the gift of eternal life. Having been brought to faith in our Savior Jesus Christ we can be confident that God will not judge us according to what we deserve.

Rather, because Christ kept the law perfectly in our place and paid for our sins in His death on the cross we "become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). In Christ we are judged by God, again, not according to what we deserve. Rather, as believers we are judged to be "not guilty" of sin. Through the gift of faith in Christ we believe what our Savior has promised, namely that "Whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

"The wages of sin is death." The law shows us that we are sinners who have fallen eternally short of being righteous.

"But the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Through grace (undeserved love), God sent the Savior into the world to suffer the wage of eternal death that we deserved, and has brought us to faith in that Savior, turning that wage of sin, death, into the entrance into everlasting life, as the Apostle writes, "For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (2 Corinthians 5:1).

This is the contrast that sets the tone for Lent. We deserve death for our sins, and yet in Christ God gives us what we do not deserve, eternal life. We are sad our sins drove our Savior to humble Himself and go to the cross to suffer our punishment. For this same reason we are joyful and eternally grateful, for unless Christ had done this we would get what we deserved.

"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

May we join the centurion in praising the Lord. May we see Jesus as our sin-bearing Substitute, come from heaven to dispel our fear. Clothed in the garment of holiness He obtained for us, which has become ours through faith in Jesus, may we joyfully confess: "O Lord, you are my God; I will exalt You and praise Your name, for in perfect faithfulness You have done MARVELOUS things, things planned long ago" (Isaiah 25:1). "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is MARVELOUS in our eyes" (Mark 12:11). Let us look forward eagerly to the time when the crucified and exalted Savior shall come "to be glorified in His holy people and to be MARVELED at among all those who have believed" (2 Thessalonians 8:10).

Monday, February 26

Romans 6:23 — *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

CONTRASTING SIN AND DEATH WITH GOD'S GRACE

From beginning to end the free gift of the Savior from sin is just that-- a free gift. The promise of the Savior given in Eden was a free gift, given when man fell into sin. That Savior Himself was a free gift, sent into the world as humble Man. He suffered and died on the cross, freely offering up His own holy body as the atoning sacrifice for sin. All of this He did without asking anything in return, for Jesus said, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28).

Having sent us this Savior from sin to keep the law in our place and to offer up His life in payment for our sins, God did not leave it up to sinful man to bring Himself to faith. If this were the case we would still be doomed to eternal death, for the Scriptures tell us that "The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God for they are foolishness to him; neither can he know them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14). Instead, we find that faith in the free gift of the Savior is itself a free gift. We read in Ephesians 2:8f, "By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast."

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

Lamb of God, for sinners wounded, Sacrifice to cancel guilt!
None shall ever be confounded Who on Him their hope have built.

(The Lutheran Hymnal, 153:4)

Saturday, February 24

Matthew 27:54; Luke 23:47 — *So when the centurion and those with him, who were guarding Jesus, saw the earthquake and the things that had happened, they feared greatly, saying, "Truly this was the Son of God!" ... [The centurion] glorified God, saying, "Certainly this was a righteous Man!"*

IT HAPPENED ON GOOD FRIDAY: THE CENTURION MARVELED

As a soldier of Rome he had no doubt supervised many crucifixions. What happened on Golgotha was in itself nothing out of the ordinary. So why did the centurion fear greatly? He had witnessed the remarkable events that had transpired earlier that day: the unusual proceedings in the court of Pilate, the governor's inexplicable action of sentencing an innocent Man to die, the calm demeanor Jesus had shown. His uttering not a single curse word at His foes. When Jesus did speak, it was to utter a prayer of forgiveness for His foes and to promise Paradise to a dying thief. Then there was the extraordinary way He expired. Usually crucifixion victims would hang on the cross for days before dying finally from exhaustion. Jesus had hung on His cross for just six hours. The centurion noticed how Jesus did not die from exhaustion. He commended His soul into the hands of His Father ... voluntarily! Then there were the strange phenomena in nature: the earthquake, darkness, and splitting rocks. All the centurion had seen and heard caused him to recognize: the Person we have just crucified is no ordinary human. And it made him afraid.

But his fearing took a wonderful turn. He also experienced something within his heart that had never been there before: true peace and joy! By the grace of God the centurion came to recognize that the Crucified One was his Savior. This moved him to marvel and glorify God and say: "Certainly this was a righteous Man and the Son of God!"

Friday, February 23

Luke 23:44-45 — *Now it was about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour. Then the sun was darkened.*

IT HAPPENED ON GOOD FRIDAY: THE SUN STOPPED SHINING

Why did God cause this remarkable phenomenon to occur? It was His way of impressing on the citizens of Earth the significance of the events of that day. His Son, the Light of the World, was being "eclipsed" by the darkness of human sin. The One whom Malachi described as "the Sun of Righteousness." The One whose physical appearance dazzled with the high magnitude brightness of the glory of God on the Transfiguration Mount. He was being stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted for their sins.

Our godless culture views sin as a trivial matter. If there's a God in heaven and a thing called "sin," He turns a blind eye to it and ignores it. Christians, too, in weakness are subject to the temptation of viewing the sinful thoughts, actions, and words in their lives in a nonchalant way. Here in the Good Friday darkness we see sin for what it truly is, in all its damnable-ness. Hanging on the cross midst the shadowy gloom hangs the Son of God. The sun goes dark as if it can't bear to watch anymore, like it's rebelling against the injustice being perpetrated upon its holy Creator.

Good Friday is memorable to us because of its tragic events. Our hearts overflow with sadness as we think of the hell Jesus went through to save us. But we also remember Good Friday with fondness. We're glad for the opportunity to meditate each Lenten season on all He suffered for us as He walked the painful road to Golgotha. We believe that He endured the cruel scorn, the agony of body and anguish of soul, the indignity of being crucified between two criminals as the worst of a bad lot ... because of His boundless love for us and His fervent desire to save us.

Yes, mournful, dismal Calvary Mountain preaches a powerful sermon on the blackness of our sin. It also proclaims a comforting sermon on the lengths to which Jesus-- God's patient, quiet, uncomplaining lamb-- was willing to go to rescue us from the dominion of darkness and bring us into His kingdom of light.

Here we have a firm foundation; Here the refuge of the lost; Christ's the Rock of our salvation, His the name of which we boast.

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

IT HAPPENED ON GOOD FRIDAY: MEN MOCKED

After Pilate condemned Jesus, the soldiers led Him out to Golgotha where He was crucified. One aspect of His suffering is described in the reading above: Those who passed by on the road, the Jewish religious leaders, the robbers who were executed with Him, all united in a chorus of jeers: "You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross."

The ungodly world still blasphemes the Savior, joining the group of revilers on Golgotha. This they do when they scorn the teachings of the Bible, especially the central truth of Christ crucified and risen. They also mock the Savior when they make fun of His Christians, regarding those who love God's Word and seek to live according to it, as religious fanatics and kooks. (You may well have been on the receiving end of this mockery.)

Little did the enemies of the Lord know that when they jeered Him on the cross, they were giving testimony to a splendid Bible truth. No, Jesus didn't come down from the cross (He could not if He was to save us), but He did come forth of the grave after being dead, as He said He would do. Now He sits at God's right hand ruling everything for the good of His people. (In love He exercises patience with unbelieving skeptics, giving them opportunity to believe the Good News before the Day of His return.

Let us then bear the ridicule of the world patiently, as the Savior did. May He use it to confirm our faith. May we remember: "This is the victory that has overcome the world--our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" (1 John 5:4-5).

Heartless scoffers did surround Thee, Treating Thee with shameful scorn,
And with piercing thorns they crowned Thee.
All disgrace Thou, Lord, hast borne
That as Thine Thou mightest own me And with heavenly glory crown me.
Thousand, thousand thanks shall be, Dearest Jesus, unto Thee.

(The Lutheran Hymnal, 151:4)

accusations but to present Himself as the King from heaven born into the world to testify to the Truth.

Clearly, Pilate concluded, this Prisoner is innocent of the offenses for which He has been charged. He walked outside and told the rabble crowd: "I've found in Him no grounds for the death penalty. So I will punish Him and release Him."

But Pilate didn't release Him. Instead, when the crowd kept insisting that the Prisoner be crucified, the governor, fearing a riot, ordered the death penalty to be carried out. Then, to absolve himself of his villainous deed, he washed his hands with water in front of them, saying: "It's all on you. I'm in the clear."

Pontius Pilate, how foolish! How can washing your hands with H2O exonerate you of the crime of convicting an innocent defendant? More than that: how can it free you from the guilt of your sins in the sight of God, the righteous Judge of all? Indeed, how foolish it would be for anyone to think they could maneuver themselves free from blame before God by anything they do? Impossible! The Bible's remedy: look in penitent faith to Him who suffered under Pontius Pilate, the Innocent for the guilty: JESUS. In Him your soul will find perfect cleansing.

Not all the blood of beasts On Jewish altars slain
Could give the guilty conscience peace Or wash away the stain.

But Christ, the heavenly Lamb, Takes all our sins away;
A sacrifice of nobler name And richer blood than they.

Believing, we rejoice To see the curse remove;
We bless the Lamb with cheerful voice And sing His bleeding love.

(The Lutheran Hymnal, 156:1-2, 5)

Thursday, February 22

Matthew 27:39-44 — *And those who passed by blasphemed Him ... Likewise the chief priests also, mocking with the scribes and elders, said, "He saved others; Himself He cannot save. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" Even the robbers who were crucified with Him reviled Him with the same thing.*

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.

On Good Friday He lost them too. The soldiers responsible for carrying out the crucifixion helped themselves to Jesus' garments and divided them up between them. One article of clothing, His tunic, they bartered off in a gambling game. They did this in full view of Jesus, below the cross, so He could be a front seat spectator at their fun and games.

Little did they know the truth of what was going on! He, their heavenly King, was laying down His life to atone for the sins of the world (theirs too), the Innocent for the guilty. As they amused themselves with their gambling game, hooting and guffawing, making light of His suffering, He was showing how much He loved them by purchasing a robe of holiness to cover their sin and shame. Did they come to understand later who Jesus was and the love He had for them, and put their trust in Him? It seems that at least one did (the centurion), hopefully more.

How blessed we are to have a Savior willing to make Himself nothing for us, who let His enemies take everything away from Him, even His clothes, so that we might be dressed in a robe of holiness through faith in His blood.

Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress; Helpless, look to Thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly,— Wash me, Savior, or I die!

(The Lutheran Hymnal, 376:2)

Wednesday, February 21

Matthew 27:24 — *When Pilate saw that he could not prevail at all, but rather that a tumult was rising, he took water and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, "I am innocent of the blood of this just Person. You see to it."*

IT HAPPENED ON GOOD FRIDAY: PILATE WASHED

It was a case like none he had ever handled before. In his courtroom stood a Prisoner like none he had seen before. He examined Him thoroughly, asking numerous questions about the charges levied against Him by His foes: treason and sedition. But the Prisoner had kept strangely quiet. When He finally did speak up it wasn't to defend Himself from false

There are several lessons we may learn from this story. First, we like Peter have reason to praise God for His mercy in revealing His Son to us and leading us to confess Him as our only Savior. We couldn't have done it on our own. We also learn of the need we have to look to Jesus for strength to overcome the temptations of the devil, the world, and our flesh. We dare not trust in our own might. If we do, like Peter, we're headed for a disastrous fall. Especially if we expose ourselves to situations and circumstances where we know our faith will be put to the test.

Another lesson, perhaps the most important: as Peter was led by the Savior to repent of his denial-sin with bitter tears, trusting in the Lord's forgiveness, so we may look to Him in repentant faith for the forgiveness of our sins, knowing we have it, and then letting the Savior's forgiving love be our strength and motivation for walking with Him more closely each day.

Let us ever walk with Jesus, Follow His example pure,
Flee the world, which would deceive us And to sin our souls allure.
Ever in His footsteps treading, Body here, yet soul above,
Full of faith and hope and love, Let us do the Father's bidding.
Faithful Lord, abide with me; Savior, lead, I follow Thee.

(The Lutheran Hymnal, 409:1)

Tuesday, February 20

John 19:23-24 — *Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took His garments and made four parts, to each soldier a part, and also the tunic. Now the tunic was without seam, woven from the top in one piece. They said therefore among themselves, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it, whose it shall be."*

IT HAPPENED ON GOOD FRIDAY: SOLDIERS PLAYED

"Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." That's the description Jesus once gave of Himself during His life on earth. He had no home to live in, no place to "hang His hat." He depended on others to supply Him a place of shelter, a roof over His head. All He owned was His clothes.

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)

Jesus, as testified by His own words and promise, is miraculously present both at and in this meal. And as we receive His body and His blood at His Table, He gives believing hearts the forgiveness of sins.

Truly, this Supper of our Savior is a meal to be savored until we see our Redeemer face-to-face and join Him in the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19).

Monday, February 19

Luke 22:59-62 — *Then after about an hour had passed, another confidently affirmed, saying, "Surely this fellow also was with Him, for he is a Galilean." But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are saying!" Immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had said to him, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." So Peter went out and wept bitterly.*

IT HAPPENED ON GOOD FRIDAY: PETER WEPT

What a glorious confession of Jesus Peter had made on two previous occasions. When others had abandoned Jesus and He asked the disciples if they planned to desert Him too, Peter declared: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe You are God's Holy One." Another time, when Jesus asked the disciples "Who do you say that I am?" Peter quickly responded: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus answered: "How blessed you are, Peter! This is a truth you couldn't discover your own. My Father revealed it to you."

So far so good. But now in the courtyard of Caiaphas Peter's spiritual life took a turn for the worse. Jesus had warned him that he was headed for a fall. Peter had begged to differ: "No way!" he said. "I'll not turn my back on You even if all others do!" His two-fold blunder was overestimating his own strength and putting himself in a position where his faith would be tested. Sadly and predictably, he failed the test. Afraid for his life, not wanting others to think ill of him, he caved to the pressure and denied having any connection to Jesus.

For while Pilate was nailing up His sign above Jesus' head, God was nailing up a complete record of all our crimes against Him so that it could later be recorded in God's own record: "He has forgiven you all your sins: Christ has utterly wiped out the damning evidence of broken laws and commandments which always hung over our heads, and has completely annulled it by nailing it over his own head on the cross."

Saturday, February 17

Mark 14:22-23 — *And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." Then He took the cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, and they all drank from it.*

THE LORD'S SUPPER

It took three years to complete. To this day it is the most popular piece of Christian art in the world. It was originally done in oils on the dining hall wall of a monastery by Leonardo da Vinci, but from the time it was completed in 1498 "The Last Supper" began to fall apart, its paint fading and flaking off the wall. The last major restoration effort, a 20 year project, was completed in 1999. Da Vinci's "Last Supper" wasn't so lasting.

But that is not the case with the Lord's Supper. To this day that Supper remains unchanged. To this day our Lord Christ calls us to His Table and comes to us through His Sacrament. You may well have an invitation to join Him tomorrow morning. The same Jesus who eagerly looked forward to celebrating this sacred meal with His first disciples eagerly anticipates your receiving bread and wine from His own hand. This is a miraculous reality beyond all human comprehension.

But there is more. Much more. Because His body was given up for us on the cross, because His blood was shed on that cross, we-- along with those first disciples and all who have followed them-- hear Jesus say: "This is my body" and "This is my blood shed for you for the remission of sins" and receive from the hand of Christ the ultimate proofs that He laid down His life to atone for our sin-guilt. Namely, His very body and blood.

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)

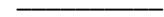
our failure to speak the truth about Jesus, to declare the Gospel of forgiveness when God gives us the chance.

Won't anyone speak the truth in love-- all the time, no matter what the personal cost?

Jesus did. Still does. Jesus spoke the truth about Himself for the sake of those unfaithful Jewish elders. For Peter He spoke words of warning, and then with a look caused them to ring anew in Peter's ears.

Jesus still speaks the truth. For our sakes. He leads us also to look square at our lies and to repent; to put aside all our excuses and to place our faith not in our manipulations but in Him.

Jesus is still the Way, the Truth and the Life. Ever He speaks the truth about the Father's love, the Son's Sacrifice, the Spirit's power, the truth about forgiveness for dishonesty and every other sin, purchased and won for us on the cross.



Friday, February 16

Colossians 2:13-14 — *God made us alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.*

IT IS WRITTEN

Jesus of Nazareth spent years working as a carpenter and only hours nailed to a cross. But those hours on the cross were so important that when nails are noted in connection with Jesus, we are reminded not of Nazareth's workbench but of Calvary's cross. They nailed Jesus to the cross. His enemies had demanded it and Pilate gave in. But he wasn't happy about it. That's why, on the placard of crimes nailed above Jesus' head, the Roman governor had them write a contemptuous: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS.

Unknown to Pilate, Jesus went willingly to His cross. Not because He was guilty of anything, but because we were guilty of everything-- and the Son of God willingly took our punishment from God.

particular shells brought up by divers from the depths of the Mediterranean. True repentance comes from hearts crushed by the reality of guilt before God, hearts which God Himself restores by the substitutionary death of the King who was "crushed for our iniquities" and "by whose wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5-6).

Thursday, February 15

Mark 14:53-54, 66, 76, 77 — *And they led Jesus away to the high priest; and with him were assembled all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes. But Peter followed Him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. ... Now the chief priests and all the council sought testimony against Jesus to put Him to death, but found none. For many bore false witness against Him, but their testimonies did not agree. ... as Peter was below in the courtyard ... those who stood by said to Peter, "Surely you are one of them;" ... Then he began to curse and swear, "I do not know this Man of whom you speak!"*

WHERE IS TRUTH TO BE FOUND?

Jesus is on trial in the palace of the High Priest. Peter warms himself by the fire in the courtyard below. These two scenes have too much in common. Won't anyone speak the truth around here?!

Not those appointed to highest court in Israel-- 72 men whose main work was to get at the truth. But where Jesus is concerned the truth is of little or no concern, since their goal is His death. Couldn't find witnesses against Jesus? Buy some. Can't find words of Christ with which to condemn Him? Twist some. And if the prisoner speaks the truth about Himself, brand it a lie. There's no truth here, is there?

And down below in the courtyard? Peter, the most famous disciple of them all, teacher of God's truth, opens his mouth only to utter lies, each time stronger than the one before.

The Sanhedrin would not seek the truth. Peter would not speak the truth. But it doesn't stop there. We too have failed to seek and to speak the truth always. Sadly, like Peter, too often our worst sin against the truth is

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)

Wednesday February 14 (Ash Wednesday)

Psalm 51:1-4 — *Have mercy upon me, O God, According to Your lovingkindness; According to the multitude of Your tender mercies, Blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, And cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions, And my sin is always before me. Against You, You only, have I sinned, And done this evil in Your sight.*

THE COLOR PURPLE

Lutherans attending church this Ash Wednesday evening will no doubt note a change in color. The pulpit and altar hangings go from green or white to purple. Purple is the color of repentance, and that is also the theme of Ash Wednesday.

It is helpful to remember that the "ash" of Ash Wednesday goes back to the ancient custom of using ashes to denote grief and sorrow and to remember how the expression "ashes to ashes" is a stark reminder of our own mortality. Repentance has a real sense of urgency when we remember we will exit this life through the door of death to stand accountable for our actions before the Almighty.

But true godly repentance is not simply regret and remorse for wrongs committed and good left undone. It is above all sincere sorrow directed toward the One above all. As David sees and confesses, sin strikes out at God Himself, for to Him we are ultimately accountable. But if repentance is only such sorrow over sin, then the result will only be evasive action by the guilty sinner-- or abject despair.

But since true repentance is always the result of the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, such repentance turns to the One to Whom the Spirit ever bears witness: Jesus Christ. Spirit-worked repentance not only turns away from sin, it turns with empty-handed reliance to the sinner's only Hope, the King who went crushed to the cross in our place to secure our forgiveness-- to wash away our guilt before God.

In the ancient world the color purple was reserved for kings. It bespoke the wealth of royalty, since the dye was so expensive few others could afford it. It came a drop at a time from the crushing of thousands of

Tuesday, February 13

Matthew 17:1-2 — *Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light.*

FROM MOUNTAIN UNTO MOUNTAIN THE GLORY OF THE LORD SHINES FORTH

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, Aaron and all the children of Israel saw him, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him (Exodus 34). So Moses covered his face in meeting with the people until the glory faded.

On the Mount of Transfiguration Jesus' face shone like the sun and His clothes became as white as the light. But when Jesus went down that mountain afterward, the glory which had shone from His face and body did so no longer. That was because Jesus' glory, unlike Moses', was not a lingering reflection of being in the presence of God. His "shining glory" came from within. It was His own. And to carry out His mission and pay the price to bring us rebellious sinners back to God, the Son of God set aside the use of the glory, majesty, and power that was His. He humbled Himself to redeem you and me.

After Jesus came down from the mountain He told His disciples how He would be arrested, abused, handed over to the Gentiles and crucified--how He would die and rise again. Jesus, having shown Himself to be very God on the mountain, sets out for Jerusalem to fulfill the purpose of His coming: To destroy the devil's work; to make us safe forever.

It is no accident that many churches turn to the Scripture accounts of Jesus' Transfiguration on the Sunday before Lent begins. On the mountain see we and remember that THE SAME LORD WHO REVEALED HIMSELF ON SINAI-- and again in the presence of Peter, James and John-- then sets out on His way up to Jerusalem. To the cross. And on the cross the glory of the LORD shines forth with indescribable power. Not megawatt power, but the eternal saving power of the redeeming love of God.

Monday, December 25

Luke 2:11 — *For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*

FIRST CHRISTMAS DAY

The angel shows most clearly that nothing is to be preached in Christendom except the Gospel, he takes upon himself the office of a preacher of the Gospel. He does not say, "I preach to you," but "glad tidings I bring to you. I am an Evangelist and my word is an evangel, good news." The meaning of the word Gospel is, a good, joyful message, that is preached in the New Testament. Of what does the Gospel testify? Listen! the angel says: "I bring you glad tidings of great joy, my Gospel speaks of great joy. Where is it? Hear again: 'For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.'"

Behold here what the Gospel is, namely, a joyful sermon concerning Christ, our Savior. Whoever preaches him rightly, preaches the Gospel of pure joy. How is it possible for man to hear of greater joy than that Christ has given to him as his own? He does not only say Christ is born, but he makes his birth our own by saying, to you a Savior.

Therefore the Gospel does not only teach the history concerning Christ; but it enables all who believe it to receive it as their own, which is the way the Gospel operates, as has just been set forth. Of what benefit would it be to me if Christ had been born a thousand times, and it would daily be sung into my ears in a most lovely manner, if I were never to hear that he was born for me and was to be my very own? If the voice gives forth this pleasant sound, even if it be in homely phrase, my heart listens with joy for it is a lovely sound which penetrates the soul. If now there were any thing else to be preached, the evangelical angel and the angelic evangelist would certainly have touched upon it.

—**Martin Luther**

Tuesday, December 26

Luke 2:1-2 — *In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole empire should be registered. This first registration took place while Quirinius was governing Syria.*

REAL HELP FOR OUR REAL WORLD

The birth of the Son of God into our sinful world is not a myth but an historical event. Luke makes that plain with his references to the Roman emperor Augustus and the governor of Syria. Further, what could be more "real world" than the purpose of the emperor's great registration, namely the collection of taxes.

Why is the real, historical nature of the birth of Christ so important? We live in a real world. Our deep and enduring problems are not going to be helped by make-believe-- not even by the most beautiful of sentimental stories.

Truth be told, that expression "the real world" is usually used with reference to sin, to the fact that people often can't be trusted; that too often they are selfish, grasping and cruel; that for too many the so-called "bottom line" is the great decider.

But enough of the "real world" around us, what about the one all too close at hand? Look at your own life just this past week. What you've said. What you've done. Your own thought-world.

Our real world is not a pretty one. But into this world Jesus was born. That's the message of the manger scene in each of our homes during this season.

Real problems need a real solution. Our sin-filled world needed the intervention of One who could really help. And the only possible Savior was the very Creator whose world human sin has left such a blasted hulk. Only God could deal with a reality so ugly, so big, so deep, so beyond human coping. And this could not be done from a distance. Thus the Son of God became the Son of Man as well.

The reality of the incarnation is the first step in the reality of our redemption. And just as there is no birth without blood-shed, even so there could be no new life for humans dead in sin without the shedding of blood, the blood of Him who became one with our blood when He was born of Mary of Nazareth.

Monday, February 12

John 1:17 — *[T]he law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*

GOD REVEALED ON A MOUNTAIN ... AGAIN

Four men, one in the lead, go up the mountainside. Ahead lies an experience they'll never forget, a scene to be inscribed on their minds forever! Shining glory. A bright cloud. And the voice of God. But I'm not talking about Jesus and his three disciples. I'm talking about Moses on Mt Sinai. During those days when Moses went up the mount alone and received the Ten Commandments, there was also a day when God had Moses bring three others up into the mountain with him. That scene is not one we readily recall, but you can be sure Peter, James and John did-- after they had been with Jesus on the mountain where He was transfigured.

The parallels between these two historic events are striking: The mountain-top. The cloud. The voice of God. The shining glory. Even the presence of Moses.

The contrasts between these two events are also striking in the extreme. God SENT Moses with the Law. God Himself CAME to fulfill His Gospel promises in the person of Jesus Christ.

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai his face shone with the reflected glory of God, with borrowed light. When Jesus was transfigured on the mountain His shining glory came from within. It was His own.

Moses represented the new nation of Israel at Sinai. Jesus went up the mountain-- and came down to go to Mt. Calvary on behalf of all people of all time.

On the Mount of Transfiguration the "curtain" was pulled back for a few moments and Jesus' disciples could see the glory of the LORD. The God who made covenant with men has come to deliver them.

God's wondrous plan unfolds in history. His great love in action goes beyond the imagination of us undeserving sinners. That's grace! Jesus completely fulfills the divine promise of our redemption from sin and death. That's God's truth!

Saturday, February 10

Matthew 2:7-8 — *Then Herod summoned the wise men ... And he sent them to Bethlehem....*

LET YOUR WORD SHINE

If you have ever felt "alone," felt as though everyone else finds comfort, meaning and purpose in life through the philosophy of this world without actually kneeling before the King, be assured you are not alone. Such a strange predicament can result from following the logic of our own mind. It was logical for the wise men to think that the new-born King would be found in the palace of Jerusalem, and they wound up in the stronghold of one of Jesus' fiercest enemies.

The thing that set them on the right course again was the Word of God through the prophet Micah:

But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, ... out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel (5:2).

And even though Herod tried to use the Word of God to fight against God Himself, that Word was still trustworthy and turned the wise men in the right direction. Herod did not trust the Word enough to go to Bethlehem himself and never found the Child he so much wanted to kill. But all the time that Word was completely trustworthy. And it will be for us also, even if others try to use it for their own self-serving purposes.

The Word they still shall let remain,
Nor any thanks have for it.
He's by our side upon the plain
With His good gifts and Spirit.

Then let your Word within me Shine as the fairest star;
Keep sin and all false doctrine Forever from me far.
Help me confess you truly And with all Christendom
Here hail you King and Savior And in the world to come.

(The Lutheran Hymnal, 130:6)

Wednesday, December 27

Isaiah 7:14 — *Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.*

OUR SAVIOR COMES!

In the days leading up to Christmas we hear much about the birth of Jesus. Manger scenes and Christmas cards and letters remind us of His special birth. The birth of Jesus of Nazareth was different from any other birth. And our Savior Himself was different from every other person who has ever lived. The difference was that our Savior was both True Man and also True God.

Isaiah speaks of the Human nature of our Savior saying, "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son!" This is most certainly a sign that would be remembered. It was a promise of something extraordinary and miraculous! It would be nothing new for a woman to give birth to a child, but this woman would be a virgin, one who has not had relations with any man. Now that would be a miracle!

But there was also more to Jesus than just His human nature. For we know that He was also true God. Isaiah goes on to tell us more about this virgin's son, saying, "and shall call His name Immanuel." Immanuel, as Matthew tells us, means "God with us." Here the LORD was not referring to the actual name of this child who was to be born, but was referring to what He would be. He would also be true God. In Jesus, God and man were brought together in one person. God Himself would enter human life through this miracle.

When the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph, he was told to name this baby Jesus because He would save His people from their sins. The name Immanuel refers to what that Child would be, namely, God with us! They shall call his name Immanuel, God with us, God in our nature. This was fulfilled in their calling him Jesus, a Savior. For if He had not been Immanuel, God with us, He could not have been Jesus, a Savior. Praise be to God that He did fulfill this promise that a virgin would conceive and bear a Son, who was both true Man and true God in one person. Thanks be to God for the salvation we have received through that Holy Child, our Savior Jesus Christ!

Thursday, December 28

Titus 2:11 — *For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.*

HE IS ALREADY HERE

In Johann Sebastian Bach's "Christmas Oratorio" he sets to music the events of the Scriptures from Christmas Eve to Epiphany. Near the end of the work there is a trio for soprano, alto, and tenor where, in typical Bach fashion, he writes the music to match the text. The soprano and tenor with hurried and anxious flourishes are singing back and forth, "Oh, when will the time be ripe? When will the comfort of His people come?" And then all of a sudden, right between them both, comes an alto voice singing in firm rhythm, "Be still, He is surely already here!"

Oh, blessed Christmas, which assures us once again that Jesus is already here! How often are the moments of our lives when we run about fretting, consumed with anxious worry. "When will Jesus come to me?" we cry. "Isn't he here yet to help me?" The answer of Christmas is, "Yes! He is already here. For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men." Do you thirst for His salvation even today? As you look about your world, do you long for the devil's head to be crushed and the Savior's victory made known? Be still. Be comforted. He is already here.

He is already here to live and die for you. He is already here to be with you in all your need. He is already here to bring light to the darkness and to Shepherd us all out of the valley of the shadow of death. In the midst of chaos and confusion you are invited to hear His infant voice. This is not the voice crying in the wilderness-- not the voice of preparation and anticipation-- but it is the voice crying in the manger announcing that all is fulfilled. Be still, He is surely already here!

Friday, February 9

Mark 10:18 — *And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."*

WEAK AND POOR

When Jesus told the young man to go and sell everything that he had and to follow Him, He said this because He loved the young man and wanted to show him that he had not even kept the first commandment. His riches meant more to him than the Word of God itself.

Does this mean that we should get rid of all our material possessions? If staying with the Word of God requires it, yes! It happens more often than people realize that someone turns down a promotion, perhaps risks the loss of his job, because he wants to be near and to hear the Word of God preached and taught; because he wants to provide a Christian education for his children, and grandchildren.

It can happen that material wealth is lost because one refuses to defraud the public in order to sell some aluminum siding or some cookware. He refuses to defraud others because that is not the way His Savior has treated him. It may cost him something or, from the world's point of view, it may cost him everything, but "take they our life, goods, fame, child, and wife, if these all be gone, they yet have nothing won. The kingdom ours remaineth."

Ah, look on me with pity Though I am weak and poor;
Admit me to your kingdom To dwell there, blest and sure.
I pray you, guide and keep me Safe from my bitter foes,
From sin and death and Satan; Free me from all my woes.

(The Lutheran Hymnal, 130:5)

Thursday, February 8

Mark 9:4 — *And He was transfigured before them.*

GLORIOUS LIGHT

"It's good to be here, Lord." That's what Peter said, and so it is also for us, good to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Next month when we see Jesus suffer many things in our name, this glorious vision of our Lord on the mountain will help us remember that He is also truly God the Son from all eternity.

We notice that both Moses and Elijah were believers in Jesus, but Peter, James, and John were the only other ones there. And even they, after a brief moment of blinding glory, were alone again with Jesus, listening to His voice alone. Now they had nothing further to rely on than the other disciples: Jesus and His Words alone.

But Jesus alone had been enough for Moses and for Elijah--the prophets of old--and Jesus alone is enough for you and me, too. Many times glory is chiefly hidden, but it will all be seen one day. If we can face the tears and disappointments of life, when our hopes are crucified, and see Jesus alone, with His great love for us, we will be truly blessed!

Peter could not stay up on the mountain as he wished, and we cannot remain in those brief moments when we see His glory reflected in our lives, but Jesus went back down the mountain with His disciples, and He goes with us, too. Thanks be to God!

And yet you shine so wondrous, With rays of glorious light;
Your works proclaim your goodness, And all your ways are right.
We pray you, shield your people With your almighty arm
That they may dwell in safety From those who mean them harm.

(The Lutheran Hymnal, 130:4)

Friday, December 29

Luke 2:11— *Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*

KEEPING CHRISTMAS

"He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough, in the good old world ... and it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge."

So concludes Charles Dickens' classic story "A Christmas Carol." But as much as we might enjoy the tale, a question does hang in the air. Did he? Did Dickens' Ebenezer Scrooge truly know how to keep Christmas well? Is the heart and soul of Christmas kindness and generosity, family gatherings and bountiful Christmas dinners?

Certainly these things, along with traditions like decorations and gift-giving, can be part of truly celebrating Christmas, for the joy of Christmas has always overflowed in a wealth of such expressions-- ever since the very angels of heaven could not contain themselves that first Christmas night but had to burst into celestial song. But the heart of Christmas is ever and always in the angels' message, not our responses to it.

Because the message of the angels is the heart of Christmas there are better examples of keeping Christmas well than good old Ebenezer Scrooge, as fond as we may be of the crotchety old fellow.

In truth, you, dear reader, may be an excellent example of keeping Christmas well-- if you center your heart's confidence on the fact that this Savior was born for you, to set you right with God, and if you pass on to others what you have seen and heard from the messengers God has sent to you, then you are truly keeping Christmas well.

Being generous and kind is truly part of keeping Christmas when such actions flow from a heart that holds fast the Word from God regarding the Babe of Bethlehem, the world's Redeemer.

Saturday, December 30

Matthew 11:28-29 — *Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest ... rest for your souls.*

GOD REST YE MERRY, GENTLEMEN

Sometimes the placement of a comma can change the entire meaning of a sentence. The King James Bible's rendering of Romans 9:5 hides the Apostle's clear testimony to the deity of Christ when it puts the comma before the word "God" instead of after it.

In singing the old English carol "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen," many people put a comma between "ye" and "merry" (as in "God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlemen"). In fact, many printings of the carol have done the same. But music historians agree that the line originally read, "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen." To "rest someone merry" meant "to keep someone happy." In other words, this wasn't a wish for happy people to rest, but for people to be and to keep on being happy because Christ is born.

The carol then goes on to find the reason for our continual joy in the purpose for which the Christ came:

Remember Christ our Savior was born on Christmas Day;
To save us all from Satan's power when we were gone astray.

The best response to the birth of Jesus isn't rest, but rejoicing. All the more reason to plan our Christmas celebrations and observances in such away that we do not arrive at the long awaited day completely played out. Also a good reason not to try to cram all of Christmas into December 24-25. There's just too much rejoicing to be done and too many reasons to do it right-- that is, to receive the blessings of Christmas "with the Word of God and prayer." Observing the Twelve Days of Christmas between Dec 25th and Epiphany (Jan 6th) has real merit when we daily set aside time to let God widen and deepen our Christmas joy through the Scriptures.

So in these busy days, I do pray the Lord grant you the physical rest you need. But far more importantly, may God give you the joy of personally knowing His forgiving love in "Christ our Savior, who was born on Christmas day!"

Wednesday, February 7

John 18:36-38 — *Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here." Pilate therefore said to Him, "Are You a king then?" Jesus answered, "You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice."*

A MIGHTY MONARCH

Jesus admitted it. "As you say! I am a king." Here is someone who stands alone. All His followers have run away. He is a member of a downtrodden people, and even among them He has nowhere to lay His head. Yet He admits to having followers in another "world." There His followers would fight any encroachment of His power. And that is really what they are doing right now, in the spiritual realm.

Why did He not stay in His own realm? He was born and He has come into this world for one purpose: to testify to the truth. Why is the truth so important?

Because the truth to which our King testifies is a life-giving: Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven! ... Come unto me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest ... Come, blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

You are a might monarch, As by your Word is told,
And yet you care but little For earthly goods or gold.
You do not come displaying Your power and renown.
You dwell in no high castle; You wear no jeweled crown

(Christian Worship, 94:3)

Tuesday, February 6

Matthew 2:11 — *On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.*

EASTERN MAGI

The wise men responded to the gift of God's own Son by worshiping Him and presenting Him with gifts. John the Baptist suggested that we give to God a life worthy of His grace. If we really want our sins taken away, then we should not cling to them or make excuses to keep them around. We should not be satisfied with them, not if we want them removed, forgiven. "Bring forth fruits in keeping with your repentance" (your desire for forgiveness) was John's message.

And when the people asked how this worked out in their lives, John again pointed them to giving, giving to one another. "He that has two coats, let him give to him that has none." He who has an Almighty Father can afford to share.

The Magi presented Jesus with gifts. Did you do that this past Christmas? In Matthew 25, when God's children ask, "Lord, when did we ... give you something ...?" the Lord answers, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." So yes, you too presented Him with gifts of golden thankfulness in gifts given to one another! But the greatest Gift was the one given to the wise men-- and to us!

The Eastern Magi, coming Their gifts of love to bring,
Bear witness to your glory And worship you, their King.
To you the star is pointing And the prophetic Word;
So joyously we hail you; Our Savior and our Lord.

(Christian Worship, 94)

Monday, January 1

Luke 2:21 — *On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived.*

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

There is a lot of thought that goes into naming a child. Before the baby is due to be born, many couples sit down with books listing all kinds of names and spend a lot of time finding the ones they like. I'm sure you have some favorite names yourself.

Once someone is named, it becomes hard to think of that person apart from that name. Think of your best friends and their names. Wouldn't it seem funny if they were named something else? After a time, each person's name just seems "right." That's because your brain connects a particular name with who that person is, so when you hear a name you see a picture of that individual in your mind. At the sound of someone's name, you immediately think of everything you know about that person. Our names really become shorthand descriptions of who we are.

Sometimes names are even specially chosen at birth to describe something about a child. This custom was popular among the Hebrews. Remember Esau and Jacob in the Old Testament? Esau was so named because he had a lot of hair when he was born. Esau is the word for "hairy." Jacob was so named because he came out of the womb grasping his twin brother's heel. Jacob is the word for "heel grabber."

On the eighth day, Jesus was officially named as Joseph and Mary presented Him to the Lord at the temple in Jerusalem. The name Jesus is very descriptive of Him too. It means "Jehovah saves." Doesn't that name tell us exactly who He is? Doesn't that name tell us that this is the Christ sent from the Father who saves us from the punishment of our sins? At the name of Jesus, the picture that comes to mind is, "My Savior. My Salvation." And that description is just right. The name fits Him perfectly. Blessed are they who trust in His name today and in the new year ahead.

Tuesday, January 2

Luke 2:17 — *Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child.*

THEY MADE KNOWN ABROAD THE SAYING

We have no way of knowing when they did get back to their flocks. Having seen the Child they had to speak of what they had found. We are carefully told what their message was. It was not a matter of reporting the strange story of a child born in a stable because there was no room in the inn, nor any of the other interesting bits of news they had found. They made known the "saying" that was told them concerning this Child. We can hear them taking up the words of the angel and repeating over and over again to those they met, "Unto you is born!" This peace with God was meant for all men. The shepherds understood quickly that this was not something they could keep to themselves and so they set about sharing this gift with everyone they could reach.

Let our Christmas thinking be controlled as was that of the shepherds. The angel was speaking to us when he announced "Unto you is born!" Fixing our hearts upon this truth of God will give meaning to our Christmas joy and will compel us to share the peace we have found in the Child of Bethlehem with all we can reach.

To you this night is born a child
Of Mary, chosen virgin mild;
This little child, of lowly birth,
Shall be the joy of all the earth.

Monday, February 5

Luke 2:9 — *And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. . . . and suddenly . . . "Glory to God in the highest . . ."*

THE KING OF GLORY

When the new-born Jesus lay in the manger, there was nothing in the scene to indicate that He was even a king, much less a glorious one. The Lord's glory was shining around some shepherds out in the field. And there God's messengers announced that the baby born in such lowly circumstances was Christ the Lord! He was the King of Glory, David's heir, whose ruling would have no end!

When Jesus walked the dusty paths of Palestine, to the physical eye He appeared anything but glorious. Yet again the Word of God revealed Him as the One who spoke with authority, the One who was promised from ancient times, the One whose coming would mean the opening of blind eyes, the unstopping of deaf ears, the leaping of lame men, and joyful singing from the tongue of mute sufferers. He would bring the water of life to people in the wilderness, "and streams in the desert" (cp. Isaiah 35:4-6).

And when our life seems dry and we cannot see it going anywhere, when we cannot even hear the background music much less come up with words to sing, then let us remember our King, who prayed on the night of His arrest: "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you."

O Jesus, King of Glory, Both David's Lord and Son!
Thy realm endures forever, In heaven is fixed Thy throne.
Help that in earth's dominions, Throughout from pole to pole,
Thy reign may spread salvation To each benighted soul.

Saturday, February 3

John 8:36 — *If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*

FREE INDEED!

A little boy visiting his grandparents was given his first slingshot. One day he spied Grandma's pet duck. On impulse he took aim and fired. He hit the target, and the duck fell dead. In panic, he quickly hid the dead duck in the woodpile, only to look up and see his sister watching. Sally had seen it all, but she said nothing. After lunch that day, Grandma said, "Sally, let's wash the dishes." But Sally said, "Johnny told me he wanted to help in the kitchen today. Didn't you, Johnny?" Leaning over to him she whispered, "Remember the duck!" So Johnny did the dishes. Later Grandpa asked if the children wanted to go fishing. Grandma said, "I'm sorry, but I need Sally to help make supper." Sally smiled and said, "That's all taken care of. Johnny wants to do it." And she whispered again, "Remember the duck, Johnny." So Johnny stayed and Sally went fishing. After several days of Johnny doing both his chores and Sally's, finally he couldn't stand it. He confessed to Grandma that he'd killed the duck. "I know, Johnny," she said, giving him a hug. "I was standing at the window and saw the whole thing. Because I love you, I forgave you. I wondered how long you would let Sally make you a slave."

Sin leads to slavery, the slavery of guilt. Guilt, in turn, subjects us to a miserable life of trying to hide and cover up our wrong-doings, our lies, our failures. It causes us to live in fear, thinking that someone might discover who we really are and what we've really done.

How can a sinner be free? Only one way! Only the Son of God can set us free. He sets us free, not only from the horrible bondage of guilt, but also from the death and hell we all deserve because of our sins. He set us free by taking on our guilt and suffering our hell on Calvary's cross.

"If the Son sets you free you will be free indeed!"

Wednesday, January 3

Luke 2:17 — *And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.*

THE SAYING OF CHRISTMAS

One year when we were having quite a stormy winter, I set about rummaging the closets for a pair of boots. After a few minutes I triumphantly held up a pair that were my size and in quite good shape too. I turned to my wife and said, "Hey! Where did I get these?" In an instant she shot back, "I gave them to you for Christmas last year." Rather sheepishly I admitted that I hadn't remembered-- and it's not just that way with a pair of boots. If you asked me what I got for Christmas two, three, or four years ago, I don't think I could remember very well.

Do you remember what you've gotten for Christmas over the years aside from a few certain gifts here or there? If you don't, it wouldn't be unusual. The shepherds themselves didn't make much of the Christmas "trimmings." When they went back to their sheep, their families, and their villages, they didn't talk about how the stable looked that night. They didn't speak of how many animals were milling about or how the swaddling clothes were wrapped. When they talked to others about that Christmas Eve, they didn't even dwell on how they had been privileged to see the holy Child face to face. But they did make known abroad the SAYING which was told them concerning this child.

For the shepherds, the message of Christmas was everything. It wasn't all about the angels or the crude manger and the straw. Christmas was about the word from God that unto them had been born a Savior who was Christ the Lord. Here was the Child who would save them from their sins! Here was the Messiah who would pay the price for all their guilt with His own body on the cross! The shepherd's Christmas focused on the things they had been told concerning this dear Baby.

Let it be the same for you. If you forget from one year to the next which strings of your Christmas lights work and which ones don't, that's alright. You don't need to remember the decorations or every moment of family time you shared. Those things will fade. Instead, ponder the sayings about your Savior. In them you will find Christmas treasure for every day.

Thursday, January 4

Luke 2:12 — *And this will be a sign to you, you will find the Babe, wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.*

AWAY IN A MANGER

During this Christmastide I've spent some time considering the gospel nuggets embedded in Christmas carols familiar since childhood. Like "Mild He leaves His throne on high, Born that man no more may die" (from "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing!") or "Come from on high to me, I cannot rise to thee" (from "Good Christian Men, Rejoice"). This is a good idea since the full meaning of songs learned by rote at an early age may not come clear -- even in later years -- without a fresh and/or closer look.

For example, for years I mentally sang a comma after "light" in the third stanza of "Silent Night" making "love's pure light" a name for Jesus and leaving one to wonder what it was that "radiant beams from His holy face."

Now, ask people in your home in what sense the first word of "Away in a Manger" is to be understood. The simple word "away" has multiple meanings.

Is the baby Jesus "not for immediate use" as in "tucked away"? We know that can't be. And we surely are not to take "away" in the sense of "out of existence" ("fade away") or something that is "to be removed" (as in "clear away"). Rather, in this familiar Christmas song isn't the word "away" used of something "put in its proper place" (as in "put the equipment away" or "file the letter away")?

And how could a common feed-trough be the proper place for the Son of God come into human flesh? Answer: When the manger is used by God Himself to direct the first worshipers of the Christ to His make-shift bed. When our loving God uses a feed-trough as an indicator that the event reported is a fact of history -- then that manger is indeed the right and proper place for the Babe of Bethlehem. He who has come to seek and to save the lost must be identified beyond a shadow of a doubt -- for in Him we are to place our complete trust.

Friday, February 2

Matthew 13:54 — *Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. "Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?" they asked.*

HE CURED THEM ALL

Many are the stories recorded in the Bible where we read of Jesus helping people with serious health problems. When word spread of His power to work miracles, friends and relatives brought to Him all who were ill and suffering pain (epileptics, the paralyzed, the blind, the deaf) and He cured them all. Each miracle was another epiphany of Jesus, proclaiming the message loud and clear to all: "I am God's Son, qualified to serve as your Savior from sin, death, and hell."

As amazing as these miracles were, there was an even more wonderful way He revealed Himself as the Messiah: by His authoritative preaching and soul-comforting teaching. Jesus possessed the amazing ability, through the sharing of the simple Gospel, to release souls from slavery to sin and the domination of the devil. He even used physical misfortunes like a man born blind (whom He cured) and a dear friend dying (whom He raised) to work special blessings for many, by attracting countless numbers to Himself, that He might have a chance to share with them His saving Gospel.

Jesus manifests [reveals] His Savior-glory in the same way to you and me. In His love He provides physical healing for our illnesses or needed strength to bear up patiently under them. He speaks to us the simple yet glorious Gospel message for our everlasting comfort: "Be of good cheer. Your sins are forgiven you."

Manifest in making whole Palsied limbs and fainting soul;
Manifest in valiant fight, Quelling all the devil's might;
Manifest in gracious will, Ever bringing good from ill.
Anthems be to Thee addressed, God in man made manifest.

(The Lutheran Hymnal, 134:3)

Thursday, February 1

Luke 4:18-19 — *"The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, To set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD."*

THE GREATER NEED

Let's suppose for a moment that you were in a position to solve any human problem and your neighbors brought to you someone who had cancer and who had no knowledge of Jesus Christ.

What would you say would be more important, to cure the cancer to speak of Christ to secure their eternal salvation?

In many cases Jesus solved both the bodily and the spiritual problem. But He made it clear that His primary purpose was to solve spiritual problems. Look back at our Bible verse above.

What is our purpose as a congregation? Is it to solve the problems and right the wrongs of this world? There are some today that believe the Christian Church on earth has been established merely to improve social conditions, to run soup kitchens, and help the wayward.

There are some that believe we should throw our weight around in an effort to secure legislation that will make this world a better place.

If our ultimate goal is merely to provide earthly needs and make people comfortable here. But wouldn't that be like giving someone a band-aid for a gaping wound?

Don't misunderstand. We ought to make a real effort as Christians to help those who are in need. However, the greatest help we can offer is to bring them to Christ. Truly, the highest goal of the Christian church on earth and of each Christian congregation should be to gather human beings into Christ's Kingdom by proclaiming the Gospel.

God help us to that end! Amen.

Friday, January 5

Psalm 93:1 — *The LORD reigns, He is clothed with majesty; The LORD is clothed, He has girded Himself with strength.*

A TRUE MERRY CHRISTMAS

We try desperately to capture the joy of Christmas. "What kind of Christmas will it be without any toys?" our children ask us. Are gifts under a tree the secret of a merry Christmas? Our children open one gift, but want another, and still another. They are not satisfied but become more greedy. The merry Christmas has a way of ending in disgust.

Could it be we are trying to celebrate Christmas by just celebrating? Who told us that eats and drinks, toys and gifts will give us happiness? The Christmas angels tell us where to find it. Our happiness lies in a manger at Bethlehem. But all we find is a baby. Yet not just another baby. This infant is "robed in majesty, he is girded with strength," (Psalm 93:1). He is the King who rules forever.

We have such need of Him. When the glory of the Lord appeared to the shepherds, they were terrified. The holiness of God exposes us as sinful people. And we are afraid, terrified at God's punishment. This is what robs us of any joy no matter how many the gifts under a Christmas tree.

From the glory of God come the words: "Unto you is born a Savior." The holiness that brings wrath and destruction promises help, forgiveness, peace, joy, life. The Holy, Holy, Holy has so loved us that He gave His Son to be our Child. Our Child is the mighty King who is able to bear our sins, rescue us from our death, put the powers of darkness to rout for us.

Without Him we are helpless. Disease and war, famine and poverty, greed and cruelty, envy and bitterness, injustice and tyranny so harass our lives. Like a flood they roar against us and threaten to overwhelm us in destruction.

With Him cradled in our hearts we have happiness. Do not leave this gift of God unopened this Christmas. Let all the gifts you open remind you of this one Gift. Your Christmas will be merry.

Saturday, January 6

Matthew 2:1-2 — *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."*

CHRIST ANNOUNCED TO THE GENTILES

The way in which the first Gentiles were led to Christ was wonderful. Even more wonderful than the circumstances of this account is the fact that God chose to lead the Wise Men to Bethlehem, not exclusively by the star, but also via a detour. The Jewish king, with his chief priests and scribes, first had to show them from God's Word that Bethlehem was the place where Christ could be found. God wanted to show all future generations that He did not lead the Gentiles to His dear Son by miracles, by stars, by angels, or by some other extraordinary heavenly appearance. Instead He directed them by means of men, His already existing church. We see from this that the mission to the Gentiles is a duty of the Church.

Unfortunately, in our day, far too many people, including those who are undeniably Christians, think that the mission to the Gentiles, while laudable, is something they can do or not do. With so much distress in the world, they believe that the burden of missions should not be imposed on the Church as a potential hindrance to other important work. Such Christians are in error. The Christian Church is a debtor to the whole world that remains outside Christ. They are responsible for the lighting of the heavenly star of the Word for the poor Gentiles and leading them to Bethlehem. The Church is the fruitful mother out of whose womb more children should be born for God.

O Jesus, King of Glory, both David's Lord and Son!
Thy realm endures forever, in heav'n is fixed Thy throne.
Help that in earth's dominions, thro'out from pole to pole,
Thy reign may spread salvation to each benighted soul. Amen.

(The Lutheran Hymnal, 130:1)

—Excerpt taken from "God Grant It : Daily Devotions from C. F. W. Walther."
Concordia Publishing House, 2006.

Wednesday, January 31

John 6:19-20 — *So when they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and drawing near the boat; and they were afraid. But He said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid."*

DON'T BE AFRAID!

If the fear of drowning wasn't enough, the disciples began to see a figure walking on the lake. How did they see Him? Perhaps it was the flashing of lightning that revealed the figure as he drew near the boat.

Whatever the case, they were terrified by this phantom-like figure. But then he spoke. It was Jesus speaking words of tender comfort: "It is I; do not be afraid."

When a child wakes from a nightmare it is often necessary to tell the child that all is well. Many a parent has spoken similar soothing words: "It's OK, I'm here now. Don't be afraid. I won't let anyone hurt you."

All it took to comfort the terrified hearts of the disciples was the word of Jesus. All it takes to calm our frightened hearts and wildly palpitating hearts is the word of our Lord Jesus:

When weak and alone He says: *"I am with you always, even to the end of the world."*

When doubts and questions arise in our hearts and disturb our rest, He says: *"Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden, I will give you rest."*

When death comes knocking, He says: *"I am the Resurrection and the Life, he who believes in me though he may die, he shall live."*

The Lord is near to all who call upon Him, and nothing can stop Him from coming to our aid.

Tuesday, January 30

Romans 8:35-39 — *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

CONQUERORS THROUGH CHRIST

As people who live in a world infected with sin and evil, each of us face difficulties of various types and varying degrees. Some will face many trials in life, while others may face few by comparison. These troubles span the whole range of human existence, and are often incomparable to what others have gone through, since each individual situation is different. At times we may feel that what we are going through is so unique or unusual that no one can understand, and that nothing can help us. We may give up all hope, thinking that all is lost.

Paul offers us words of comfort, reminding us that, as believers in Christ, we have something that cannot be taken away from us no matter what we face in this life. No matter how many troubles afflict us, no matter how great those troubles are, we still have hope and confidence in the future! "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

Despite the trials we face, we become conquerors! "Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us." There is nothing we can face in this life which can take away our hope and our confidence in God's love for us. A love that was so great, He sent His only-begotten Son to be our Savior!

In tribulation, distress, famine, peril, and even death itself, we are more than conquerors through Jesus!

Monday, January 8

Matthew 2:7-11 — *Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also." When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.*

AS WITH GLADNESS

As with gladness men of old Did the guiding star behold;
As with joy they hailed its light, Leading onward, beaming bright,
So, most gracious Lord, may we Evermore be led by Thee!

(The Lutheran Hymnal, 127:1)

No doubt those Magi thought that their journey was at an end. They had come from a far-distant land because they had seen the star announcing the birth of the King of the Jews. Where else would He be but in the capital of the land of the Jews? So they arrived at Jerusalem.

The prospect of doing what King Herod said, of going and "searching diligently" for the young Child in Bethlehem was daunting. It would be like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack!

The Scriptures clearly reveal to us how happy those Magi were when they once again saw that star after Herod sent them on their way: "When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy." How overjoyed they were that the way to the Savior was now as clear as day!

Tuesday, January 9

Matthew 2:9-11 — *When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. 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.*

AS WITH JOYFUL STEPS

As with joyful steps they sped, Savior, to Thy lowly bed,
There to bend the knee before Thee whom heaven and earth adore,
So may we with willing feet Ever seek Thy mercy-seat!

(The Lutheran Hymnal, 127:2)

It was for this reason that they had come. All those many miles, all that preparation, all that effort, time, and expense. It was all so that they could come to worship this new-born King. And so they did! *"And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him" (2:11).*

They wasted no time. It had become apparent to them that the Lord's blessings were upon their journey, as "the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was" (2:9). There was no time for dawdling on the way, no side trips to "see the sights." They had come to worship their Lord, and so they aimed their steps in that direction without delay.

It is to that same Lord that we would come with our worship and our prayers. As we see the dedication shown by these Magi in their quest to worship their King, we can follow their example to re-focus and re-dedicate ourselves to worship and praise the One who has given us His Word as a "lamp for our feet and a light to our path."

Monday, January 29

Matthew 8:8 — *The centurion answered and said, "Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof."*

NOT WORTHY, BUT STILL LOVED!

A pastor tells of an old cab driver who once gave him a ride. As he climbed in the back seat the pastor dropped a remark about the cabby's age, and then added: "Well, I hope that yours will be a happy lot when your years come to an end." "Yes, sir," answered the old man, "I think they will. As far as I know, I've never been drunk in my life, never used a profane word, and I also go to church now and then." He was pretty satisfied with himself and was quite shocked when the pastor expressed serious doubts about his going to heaven if he were to die in such a self-righteous state. The cab driver did not have faith in grace -- in God's undeserved love for sinners, he had faith in himself. His faith was self-centered. His faith was in his own ability to win salvation for himself. That kind of self-trust is found even among those who call themselves Christians. It's always the same idea: they're worthy of heaven because of the good they've done, or the evil they have not done.

The Centurion in our verse, despite all his prestige, looked upon himself as a wretched sinner. Why? Was he haunted by memories of people whom he had hurt in his life? Was he aware of his failures as a follower of Christ? Was he disgusted by wicked thoughts that lurked within his heart? We don't know. One thing is certain: He knew he deserved nothing from Jesus -- nothing, that is, but rejection and punishment.

And yet he knew something else. He knew that Jesus was the Friend of sinners. He knew Jesus was his Friend. God had worked in his heart a faith that looked away from self and depended entirely on Christ for salvation. The Centurion had a faith centered on God's grace! His was the kind of faith expressed in the favorite hymn: "Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to Thy cross I cling."

No. We are not worthy, but, nevertheless, we are loved by God deeply and forever. Just look whom He sent to bleed and die for us: His own Son.

Saturday, January 27

Psalm 67:1-2 — *May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us, that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations.*

MISSION THOUGHTS FROM MARTIN

A Spirit of Holy Restlessness—When a Christian begins to know Christ by faith as his Savior who has redeemed him from death and brought him into His kingdom of grace, his heart is thoroughly permeated by God. Then he would like to help everyone to enjoy this same blessedness. For he has no greater joy than the treasured knowledge of Christ. So he begins to teach and exhort others, confesses, and commends his blessedness before everyone, and sighs and prays that they, too, may come to this grace. He has a restless spirit while enjoying the supreme rest of God's gracious forgiving love. Therefore he cannot be quiet or idle but is forever struggling and striving with all his powers, as one living only to spread God's honor and praise farther among men, to cause others also to receive this spirit of grace and through it also to help them pray.

Mission Work is Christlike -- The Lord wants to say: You have received enough from Me -- peace and joy and everything you ought to have; personally you need no more. Therefore work now, look at what I have done, and imitate it. My Father has sent Me into the world for your sake alone, in order to help you, not to benefit Myself. This I have done: I have died for you and have given you all I am and have. Therefore you should think and act in like manner. Henceforth spend your lives serving and helping everyone; otherwise you would have nothing to do on earth, for through faith you have enough of everything. Therefore I send you into the world as My Father has sent Me, that is, that every Christian may instruct and teach his fellow man also to come to Christ.

Begin at Home -- The noblest and greatest work and the most important service we can do for God on earth is bringing others, especially those entrusted to us, to a saving knowledge of Christ by the holy Gospel.

Luther Looks to Foreign Fields -- I do hope that our Gospel, now shining with a light so great, will, before Judgment Day, make an attack also on that abominable prophet Mohammed. May our Lord Jesus Christ do this soon. To Him be glory forever. Amen.

"What Luther Says," by Ewald Plass., Concordia Publishing, Vol. II, pp. 958-960.

Wednesday, January 10

Matthew 2:10-11 — *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.*

AS THEY OFFERED GIFTS

As they offered gifts most rare At Thy cradle, rude and bare,
So may we with holy joy, Pure and free from sin's alloy,
All our costliest treasures bring, Christ, to Thee, our heavenly King!

(The Lutheran Hymnal, 127:3)

Rare gifts indeed! Gold, a precious metal which still today is a priceless commodity; frankincense and myrrh, products made from tree resin, treasured for their aroma, used in perfumes and for burials.

We wonder if it didn't strike the gift-bringers as odd to be offering such kingly gifts to One who did not look at all like a king. There was no palace, no crown, no regal surroundings, just "a house" (2:11). But nothing kept them from opening their treasures and proceeding: *"they presented gifts to Him"* (2:11).

They were not ashamed. By faith they knew who this young Child was. He was "the King of the Jews," God's own Son. May the Lord also keep us from being ashamed of Jesus, keep us from turning away from Him and the salvation He brings even though He is so lowly, so simple, so plain. Instead, let us join the Wise Men in laying before Him all our best, giving to Him who has given us His all!

Thursday, January 11

Matthew 2:9-11 — *When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. 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.*

KEEP US IN THE NARROW WAY ...

Holy Jesus, every day Keep us in the narrow way;
And, when earthly things are past, Bring our ransomed souls at last
Where they need no star to guide, Where no clouds Thy glory hide.

(The Lutheran Hymnal, 127:4)

We are not told anything in the Scripture record of the challenges faced by those Magi in their efforts to worship the one born King of the Jews. We can but imagine the difficulties they encountered in their preparations and travels, not to mention answering questions like: "You're going where to do what?"

There are challenges that we face too, for like the Magi and the Apostle Paul, "We walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7). We live in a world of people who often go by what their limited reason can understand and what they can observe with their physical eyes. We have those yet today who challenge us with words like Peter records, "Where is the promise of His coming?" (2 Peter 3:4).

So yes, in these days where clouds still hide the glory of the Lord from our eyes, we ask the Lord to bless us "who have not seen and yet have believed" with ever increasing faith and the ability to stay on the narrow way, "for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it" (Matthew 7:13).

Friday, January 26

Isaiah 49:5-6 — *And now the LORD ... says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."*

BIG MESSAGE WITH BIG BLESSINGS

After Jesus completed the mission His Father gave Him to do as His Servant, the apostles broadcast the good news of forgiveness and eternal life in His name to their own people. God's plan, however, was that it be spread to many more. Jesus told the Eleven, before ascending to heaven: "You will be my witnesses ... to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Acts goes on to show how it happened. "The word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power" (Acts 19:20). The Lord, using His disciples as instruments in His hand, worked extraordinary things from the ordinary message of a Man killed on a cross whose body was laid in a grave and who came alive again. It was a message too big and wonderful to be broadcast to a single nation.

He continues to work extraordinary things through the Gospel proclaimed by His disciples today. Then, let us watch for opportunities He gives us for telling others what great things He has done for us. Let us ask Him to bless the mission efforts we're doing in the communities where we live. Let us support with prayers and offerings the kingdom work we are carrying on as a synod in places like Atlanta, Detroit, Mapleton ND, Appleton WI, Tacoma WA, British Columbia, and in our overseas mission fields in Africa, India, Nepal, and Myanmar. The message of Christ crucified and risen for the salvation of sinners is too big and wonderful to be shared with only a few.

Knowing Thee and Thy salvation, Grateful love dare never cease
To proclaim Thy tender mercies, Gracious Lord, Thy heav'nly peace.
Sound we forth the Gospel tidings To the earth's remotest bound
That the sinner has been pardoned And forgiveness can be found.

(The Lutheran Hymnal, 498:4)

It gladdens our hearts too for the same reason. We know that just as the Holy Spirit used the Gospel to accomplish the wonder of bringing us to faith, so He will do for others through the Gospel we share with others. So we will continue to pray:

Fly abroad, eternal Gospel; Win and conquer, never cease.
May Thy lasting, wide dominions Multiply and still increase!
May Thy scepter Sway th' enlightened world around!

(*The Lutheran Hymnal*, 505:3)

Thursday, January 25

Isaiah 49:2-3 — *He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver. He said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor."*

EPIPHANY SPLENDOR

In his prophecy Isaiah foretells what the ultimate purpose would be for the Father sending His Son to our world and using Him like a "sharpened sword" and "polished arrow." Whenever a poor sinner is granted the epiphany: God's Son descended from heaven for me to bring me life to the full (here and hereafter), it has the splendid effect of God's splendor being placed on display for all to see. The prayer Jesus prayed as He readied Himself to enter His passion is beautifully answered: "Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you" (John 17:1).

The application this has for Christians in our daily faith-walk? It gives inspiration for the important work He has given us to do as His disciples. Think of it! Whenever we share His message of life eternal in Christ (with our fellow Christians at church on Sunday, with others outside the church walls through personal evangelism and our church's mission programs), it redounds to the glory of God.

Savior, shine in all Thy glory On the nations near and far;
From the highways and the byways Call them, O Thou Morning Star.
Guide them whom Thy grace hath chosen Out of Satan's dreadful thrall
To the mansions of Thy Father—There is room for sinners all.

(*The Lutheran Hymnal*, 498:6)

Friday, January 12

Matthew 2:1-2,10 — *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."*

ALLELUIAS TO OUR KING ...

In the heavenly country bright Need they no created light;
Thou its Light, its Joy, its Crown,
Thou its Sun which goes not down.
There forever may we sing Alleluias to our King!

(*The Lutheran Hymnal*, 127:5)

It would have been impossible for those Magi to know there was a king born if God had not revealed it to them through that special "*star in the East*" (Matthew 2:2). In a similar way it would be impossible for us to know the way to God if the Lord had not revealed it to us in His Word.

The Bible term for this is "mystery" -- something we would not know if God had not revealed it to us. As Paul writes, "[God has] made known to us the mystery of His will ... that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth -- in Him ..." (Ephesians 1:9-10).

What a wonderful day that will be when all which God has revealed to us about eternal life in heaven will be brought to fulfillment before our very own eyes! It will be a place as John speaks in Revelation: "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God" (21:3).

There forever we will sing Alleluias to our King!

Saturday, January 13

John 6:38-39 — *For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day.*

ABOUT THE FATHER'S BUSINESS

Most family businesses have earthly goals. If your family business is a dairy farm, then good quality milk production is one of your goals. If you are a rancher, then good quality beef is one of your goals. I'm not belittling these goals. In fulfilling these goals as Christians, you are doing a good thing. But as good as these goals are, they are still earthly goals. Jesus tells us that the Father's business involves heavenly and eternal goals.

He came down from heaven to be about the Father's business, to do the Father's will, to do what the Father wanted. What did the Father want of Jesus? Well, simply put: "that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day."

The Father sent Jesus down from Heaven to secure all those (he's not talking about things, but people) that belong to the Father and keep them safe. This does not exclude making people God's Children by faith, but includes the same. Jesus came to see to it that God's people were not lost, not even in death, but that they should even be raised from death on the last day.

Did Jesus accomplish the will of the Father? Oh, yes. He was born subject to God's law in order to be the perfect human being that God demanded each one of us be. He not only lived the perfect life, He offered up the perfect sacrifice to remove our sin and guilt forever. He sent His Spirit to convince and convert hearts so that we should benefit from God's work. He Himself arose from death to confirm that He can keep us safe even through death.

God the Father continues to use His Son in this effective way today through words of Scripture spoken and shared by His Christians who carry out their calling as ambassadors of His Gospel.

Wednesday, January 24

Isaiah 49:4 — *But I said, "I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing. Yet what is due me is in the LORD's hand, and my reward is with my God."*

THE GOSPEL IS (REALLY!) POWERFUL

There are many passages which picture the wonderful ability God's Word possesses to accomplish positive things in human hearts: "The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword" (Hebrews 4:12). "Is not my word like fire," declares the Lord, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" (Jeremiah 28:29). It's "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16).

But is it really so? When we share His Word with others (friends, co-workers, family) but discern no visible results, we may be tempted to wonder if it is really all that powerful and to doubt that it's the effective tool the Bible says it is.

Isn't interesting to note, in the verse above, how Isaiah prophesies that Jesus would be tempted to feel that way too? While He was in His lowly servant-form our Savior was tempted to grow discouraged when the words of love He spoke to people were met with a shrug of the shoulders and even bitter opposition. When He approached the city of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, He saw it and lamented: "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace--but now it is hidden from your eyes" (Luke 19:42).

Yes, Jesus was subject to the temptation of thinking His work as the Savior was "in vain and for nothing." But, as Isaiah goes on to prophesy, He did not succumb. He continued to trust: "What is due me is in the LORD's hand, and my reward is with my God." He knew that His Father would use His sacrificial death on the cross as an effective tool for harvesting souls for heaven, and that made Him rejoice! (See Luke 10:21-22).

"career path" even a little! As the hour drew near for Him to lay down His life for our sins and win heaven for us, He declared: "Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour."

How blessed we are to have such a determined, loving Savior!

Tuesday, January 23

Isaiah 49:2 — *He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver.*

SHARP, USED A LOT, EFFECTIVE

An important aspect of Jesus' God-given mission as His Servant is here pictured by Isaiah. He describes how Jesus' work would involve speaking words He had received from His Father, words that would be "sharp and to the point" (so to speak). Jesus would talk straight. He wouldn't mince words. In love He would tell people not always what their ears wanted to hear, but what their hearts needed to hear: the message about sin and its punishment; death in hell; the message about grace, that God loved the world to such an extent that He gave His only Son so that whoever believes in Him shall not perish in hell's misery but live on forever. This was the golden theme of His ministry.

The other description Isaiah gives of Jesus is beautiful too. He prophesies that the Father would make His Son into a polished arrow concealed in His quiver. The thought here is that Jesus would be a tool that His Father would use to bestow, over and over again, countless blessings to countless souls. Like a tool you have at home (kitchen knife or screw driver) which stays shiny and polished because it's used a lot for its handiness and because it works so well. So by the words which He would give to His Son to speak, the Father would accomplish His gracious purpose. He'd "get the job done" of leading poor sinners to repentance and faith and bringing them into possession of His gift of eternal life.

Monday, January 15

Mark 1:9 — *It came to pass in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan.*

GOD'S SERVANT SERVES US!

Everything that Jesus did from his birth on, every experience recorded in the Gospels, was in some way part of his office and was done on our behalf as our God's appointed Servant. He did these things of his own will to redeem us:

Jesus Himself didn't need to be circumcised. As God, He gave the Law. But as a human being, for our sakes, He kept and fulfilled the whole Law of God in our place to free us from its condemnation.

Jesus Himself didn't need to be baptized for the remission of sins. He was sinless. Yet He was baptized to fulfill all righteousness, to fulfill the Law on our behalf.

The Son of God didn't need to be subject to the Law as God, so He became human to be subject to that Law and to fulfill it completely by keeping it perfectly. Since the fullness of the Godhead dwelt in Him, these sacraments could not add some missing spiritual element to Him. At His baptism, He began his public ministry.

He was baptized, not because He needed it, but in part to show us the importance of Holy Baptism.

And immediately, coming up from the water, He saw the heavens parting and the Spirit descending upon Him like a dove. Then a voice came from heaven, "You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Mark 1:10-11).

When Jesus was baptized, God presented Jesus, His Son, not just to John, but to all men as the Savior whom He had sent, the Servant of all.

He didn't need the Holy Spirit to create faith His heart, but we do.

He didn't need to be told He was the Son of God, but we did.

He didn't need confirmation of these truths, but He was confirmed and shown to be the blessed and holy Son of God for us.

The Servant we see here in the Jordan beginning His service in meekness, is the same SERVANT who became the SUFFERING SERVANT of Isaiah-- not because He had done something wrong, but because of the wrong we have done and still do.

Tuesday, January 16

Mark 10:13-16 — *Then they brought little children to Him, that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked those who brought them. But when Jesus saw it, He was greatly displeased and said to them, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God. 'Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it.' And He took them up in His arms, put His hands on them, and blessed them."*

GOD'S SERVANT BLESSES AND CLEANSSES OUR CHILDREN

If there is one topic that has always been popular among politicians of every party of every era, it is the family. During just about every campaign nearly every politician promises that He or she will protect the family. Some promise to do so by calling for reforms and laws to help protect abused children. They also promise to have compassion on orphans and the adopted.

Just about every election year, they talk about the future our children will inherit from us. They promise to do everything in their power to see to it that our children are not left to fix what we have ruined. Many politicians go to great length to prove that they are caring and compassionate people by mingling with the voters, and by kissing and holding young children.

But, talk as they will, legislate as they might, they cannot do more than you can do for your children by simply bringing them to Jesus. You see, Jesus' compassion is not contrived. It's not for show. His compassion is real and knows no age or bound, for our Savior came not to give us and our children a larger paycheck, not to legislate social change, but to give us spiritual strength and life eternal through the forgiveness of sins.

given opportunity to use them for good, we say nothing! When the Lord flings wide a door and gives us an opportunity to tell of Him, we are silent. When given opportunity to point out sin, to speak up for those whose reputations are being damaged by gossip, we say nothing.

What can we do? Nothing good on our own, that's for sure. So let's not promise to do better next time. Instead, may God move us instead to confess our sins and seek strength from Him who opens ears to hear and mouths to speak for good.

After all, in Christ we are forgiven all these sins!

Monday, January 22

Isaiah 49:1,3 — *Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations: Before I was born the LORD called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name ... He said to me, "You are my servant."*

HE KNEW WHAT HE WOULD BE FROM THE START

What's interesting about this text from Isaiah is that he draws back the curtain, as it were, on the windows of heaven. He takes us back into eternity and provides an opportunity for us to listen in on a conversation which the first and second persons of the Triune God are having. We hear God the Son say: "Listen up everyone! Perk up your ears to what I am about to say! Long before the memorable trip which Joseph and Mary took down to Bethlehem. Long before the angel's birth announcement to the shepherds. Long before the Baby in a manger asleep on the hay My Father chose Me to be His Servant. He told Me: 'It's time to have compassion, Son! Go, bright Jewel of My crown! Bring to man salvation. Set him free from sin and sorrow. Slay bitter death for him so that he may live with You forever.'"

Sometimes as children grow up they wonder what they will do with their lives. Even after they choose a particular career path-- be it teacher, veterinarian, nurse, computer geek-- they may change their minds. Not so, Jesus! He knew from the "get-go," before the world was here, that He was going to be the Servant of His heavenly Father. Our Servant. Our Redeemer from sin, death, and hell. He wouldn't veer from His chosen

Unfortunately, some Christians accuse us of being unloving exclusivists because of our spiritually careful and loving practice. They mistakenly think that our practice says they are not going to heaven because they are not members of our church. Or they imagine we look down on them as "second rate Christians" by not admitting them to the Lord's Supper.

The truth is, it is love that will not allow us to be careless about this Spiritual prescription, lest some receive a medicine that isn't right for them.

Saturday, January 20

Mark 7:32 — *Then they brought to Him one who was deaf and had an impediment in his speech, and they begged Him to put His hand on him.*

GOD'S SERVANT OPENS OUR EARS AND MOUTHS

The Gospel writer tells us that the man had two physical handicaps, one the result of the other. First, he was deaf, unable to hear. As a result of that handicap, he had a speech impediment, literally, "he spoke scarcely and with great difficulty." It wasn't that he couldn't speak; it was that being unable to hear, he was very difficult to understand.

We also know that the man had another problem, a spiritual one. He, like we ourselves, was sinful by nature. The physical handicap didn't stop him from sinning, nor did it make him innocent in the sight of God.

Now we don't all share the man's physical handicap, but in a sense, that makes what we do worse.

Our problem isn't that we can't hear, but that we choose not to listen. I'm not just talking about the selective hearing that happens at school and at home with teachers, parents, and spouse. How often doesn't it happen during the worship service that we are distracted so that we don't listen? Maybe the child in the pew in front of us is waving or we are thinking about the game that's on this afternoon and though we can hear, we don't listen.

Our problem isn't that we can't speak clearly, it's that we choose to remain silent. We don't just use our mouths for evil every day, but when

Moreover, He offers this to us through the means of grace, the Gospel in word and sacrament.

There can be no doubt, Jesus wants us to bring our children to Him that He might bless them. More than that, He calls (and enables) us to come to Him in child-like faith, like little children.

Wednesday, January 17

1 Corinthians 5:7 — *For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us.*

GOD'S SERVANT SACRIFICED FOR US

Why, why did He have to die?

Was it all just a big misunderstanding?

No.

Jesus' death was necessary because mankind's response to God's command ("You shall be Holy for I the Lord your God, am Holy") was one of indifference and rebellion. Ever since Adam's fall into sin, humankind's natural response to God's command to be holy and righteous is to disobey it in thought, word, and action.

God's mercy and compassion determined to save us. It was necessary, however, to satisfy God's justice. Therefore, Jesus' death was necessary to pay for the sins of men. And when I say men, I don't mean everyone else, I mean you and me.

Jesus death wasn't only necessary to pay for the sins we consider to be egregious-- theft, murder, adultery, abortion-- but also for those thoughts of lust or hatred. Jesus death was necessary for the times we have spoken evil of someone to make ourselves look better. Jesus had to die for the times we have been disobedient to our parents or have taken the name of the Lord in vain. His blood was shed on the cross to pay for my sins and yours. It was because of our sins that Jesus suffered and was crucified. On the cross, God vented his hatred of sin and unrighteousness on Him, Jesus died so that we might be saved through faith in Him.

For this reason, the Holy Spirit says in the epistle to the Hebrews, "*He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance*" (Hebrews 9:15).

Thursday, January 18

1 Peter 1:18-19 — *[Y]ou were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.*

GOD'S SERVANT FREES US

Jesus' death appeased God's wrath forever, for only the Body and Blood of the Son of God could truly atone for sins.

So why then aren't all men saved?

Well, because many don't think that they need a Savior. They have swallowed the lie of Satan that if they just try to be good (by their own or society's definition of "good") they will be saved. Our human pride wants to receive some of the credit for eternal life.

We have the same flaw in our human nature, but the Holy Spirit has overcome it and granted us the grace to recognize that we can in no way please or satisfy God apart from Christ. The blessings and benefit of Jesus' death became ours when the Holy Spirit called us to faith. We by grace believe that, in the matter of salvation, Jesus has done it all. We are flawed by nature, corrupt, but Jesus' gruesome death obtains for us true freedom-- freedom from sin, death and hell.

Jesus was (and is) flawless, perfect, and pure. Consequently, only the blood of the Son of God could appease God's wrath once and for all for every human being. Our good works add nothing to His perfect sacrifice. At best they are gifts of thanksgiving for His completed work.

God's Servant has set us free and confirms that fact to us each and every time that we come to His altar. He confirms to us individually that our sins

stand forgiven and he reminds us why that is so (it wasn't something we did). He speaks to each believer's heart when He invites us:

"Take, eat; this is My body and Take, Drink ye all of it, This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many."

Friday, January 19

1 Corinthians 11:27-30 — *Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep.*

GOD'S SERVANT'S PRESCRIPTION FOR SINNERS

When a person gets sick, the doctor doesn't just haphazardly prescribe just any medicine, but when he has seen the symptoms and tested he then carefully prescribes the right medicine for the right person at the right time.

The Great Physician, our Lord Jesus, has also prescribed a spiritual medicine for His earthbound people. It is the Lord's Supper, and its purpose is to strengthen and sustain the faith of His people.

The Sacrament of Holy Communion was given to keep us spiritually healthy, not to reserve us for judgment. For this reason, we want to make sure that those who take of the bread and wine recognize that they receive the body and blood of Jesus who died on the cross for their sins. We want to make sure that they do not partake in a careless or faithless way to their harm.

For this reason, we do not commune those who do not believe or who defend some unbiblical teaching, those who do not understand that Jesus body and blood are present, or those living in open sin and unrepentant. This isn't "good 'ole boy clubhouse Christianity." We are earnestly and honestly concerned about their souls, for God's Word warns us in the above passages.