

Advent Devotional Booklet 2023



"But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.'" Luke 2:10



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Dear Friends,

While the Advent season arrives when winter darkness prevails, it is a time when we, as Christians, reflect on the promise of the light offered by Jesus. It is also a time that brings hope as we celebrate the coming of Christ our Lord and Savior, and how His presence impacts our lives.

As we enter this season, it is important to contemplate Jesus' message and how we live out the gospel. The light of Christ shines brighter as we work together serving the most vulnerable in our communities.

Liberty Lutheran serves individuals and families facing life-changing situations. At the center of our service is our partnership in ministry and our relationships with people who live, work and worship in our communities and congregations.

In the pages of this booklet, you will find the reflections, prayers and stories of people including staff, congregational leaders, residents and partners near and far.

May these reflections be an inspiration and affirmation of the joy and peace we share in faith and service -during this Christmas season.

Advent Blessings,



Luanne B. Fisher
CEO, Liberty Lutheran



Sunday, December 3, 2023

**O sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth.
Sing to the Lord; bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day.
Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among
all the peoples.**

Psalm 96: 1-3

Today as I reflect on this verse, I am struck by the realization that singing is not just the act of creating musical sound with your voice.

To me singing is opening my heart and putting myself out there. Singing is being open to vulnerability. Singing is being on display a bit and that is a place of risk. When we do that, others will observe it. That can be so scary.

When we truly sing to the Lord, I think we are also strengthened and protected. When we sing in such a way that we are there one with the Lord it is no longer about how we sound. It is all about the Lord.

How do you sing to the Lord?

I think that there are many ways to “sing to the Lord” in our actions. Opening our heart and putting ourselves out there. Being open to vulnerability. Being on display a bit and in a place of risk.

If we do something for the Lord in action and deed isn't that Singing to the Lord? Some of us may not enjoy making music with our voice but we can still sing to the Lord.

Sing to the Lord by helping those in need.

Sing to the Lord by giving a listen to someone's struggles.

Sing to the Lord by repairing a fence between neighbors (either kind).

Sing to the Lord by...

How do you sing to the Lord?

**Dear Lord, today I sing to you. I sing with my heart, I sing with my voice,
I sing with my actions. Open my heart to sing loudly. Open my heart to sing
joyfully. Open my heart to sing you praise with all that I do. With this I ask
you to walk with me, walk with me in all I say and do, and I pray that I do it
with song and celebrate you in that way. Amen.**

**Denise F. Shelton is Disaster Recovery Director - Eastern PA Conference
of the United Methodist Church.**

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

**Additional copies are available while supplies last;
contact Julia Frank at JFrank@libertylutheran.org.**

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Monday, December 4, 2023

But I am poor and needy; hasten to me, O God! You are my help and my deliverer; O Lord, do not delay!

Psalm 70:5

The Psalms capture the emotions and thoughts of long-ago poets, but they reflect the heartfelt need of today's people for the presence of God to guide, comfort, strengthen and uphold us. This verse is a breath prayer: a short, simple utterance that expresses a deep longing of the heart.

It can be shouted aloud in a time of great need, whispered in the quiet of a lonely moment, or repeated silently in one's thoughts, echoing the desire for help during an ongoing crisis. The plea for God to hasten to our side may come at a moment of grief, when a loved one departs, or a moment of despair, when a natural disaster strikes.

My call for deliverance came decades back when I was hungry and had no money for food. Beginning my graduate studies in the Midwest, far from friends and family, I used every cent to move and purchase a sleeper sofa for my off-campus efficiency apartment; a folding chair and card table completed the meager furnishings.

There I sat, eating cereal and water for a week as I eagerly awaited the first paycheck from my teaching assistantship. Unfortunately, the university did not process my paperwork in time and informed me it would be another week before I was paid. The cereal box was empty.

Hunger is something many families face on an ongoing basis, but it was a new experience for me. It is hard to think, to sleep, to learn, when you are hungry. My plea to God went out as I humbled myself to borrow \$10 from my advisor to buy more cereal. Then, miraculously, another graduate student showed up with a box full of food for me. I did not know her, but she came as deliverer to me, God's answer to my need.

Ever-present God, you work through others to answer our needs. Help me to recognize your voice in the messengers you send and accept the blessings they bring, mindful that all blessings come from you. Amen.

Rev. Jenny Smith is the visitation pastor at Pleasantville United Church of Christ and a member of the United Church of Christ Disaster Ministries Emotional and Spiritual Care Team.



Tuesday, December 5, 2023

On that day, says the Lord, I will assemble the lame and gather those who have been driven away and those whom I have afflicted. The lame I will make the remnant, and those who were cast off, a strong nation, and the Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion now and forevermore.

Micah 4:6-7

We are all broken and lame in some area of our life. In my life, I have had diminished vision for a year. I also have a bunion that makes my foot turn outward and a problem with my back, both of which challenge my ability to walk well or for longer periods of time. All these challenges in my life make walking and reading sometimes difficult. They have tested my faith and made me (an extrovert) become withdrawn.

At times we all experience brokenness and difficulty on our journey of faith. Our Bible verse tells us that some have been driven away. But God can make even a remnant of what we were into something strong and viable. God can and does transform us from the broken people we are into his beloved children, who were called in our baptism to serve a world in need.

Even when we daily falter and follow our human and sinful frailties and weaknesses, God can and does transform the remnant which we have become into a whole new garment and person. God may transform us into stronger people through other people. People who listen, support and give us strength to see a new way forward.

Despite our sinfulness, God in Jesus is still open to reigning over us, of being our God. Jesus turns toward us and our need of him even when we don't know it. God knows it. Jesus knows our need of him. Now and forevermore, God is here for us, calling us to him.

Let us pray. O God as we wait for the birth of your Son, open our eyes, ears, and minds to the areas of our lives which we need to let go of, so that we may become wholly yours. Help us to be there for others who may need us to listen, support and help them to see a different perspective, your perspective so that we may all become strong in you. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Amen.

Deacon Jane Elliott is retired, though currently serving as Interim Director of Faith Formation at Trinity Lutheran Church, Lansdale, PA. She has served in various Lutheran congregations and on SEPA Synod staff.



Wednesday, December 6, 2023

Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth.

Luke 21:34-35

I would like to share about a former student of mine whom I taught in an elementary school. Very intelligent and friendly, she came to school neatly and cleanly dressed. I encouraged her to join some of the clubs we had after school but she said that she could not because her stepfather picked her up after school and she had to do things according to his schedule.

To make a long story short, the student was being sexually abused by her stepfather in the presence of her mother. Finally, she was removed from the home and placed in the custody of her grandmother. Her parents were placed in jail.

When Mother's Day was drawing near, I had the students make cards to give to their mother or caretaker. The student made a card for her grandmother and when finished, she asked me if she could have materials to make a card for her mother. I was touched deep down that she could forgive her mother and loved her enough to make a special card for her.

She did not let the worries of this life catch her off guard. However, her loving response caught me off guard. To think that a child had to live with the dissipation and drunkenness of her parents which caused her to worry each day she was with them and yet give it all to God (this is what she told me) was nothing short of a miracle. It gave me pause to think of how we need to cast our worries on God because He can handle them for us.

0 God, please help us to make choices that will make us happy in your sight; then we won't be weighed down by the worries of this world. Amen.

Sister Anne Kelly is a resident at Paul's Run Retirement Community.



Thursday, December 7, 2023

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky.

Psalm 85:10-11

The psalmist's poetry personifies the great actions of our loving God. Love, faithfulness, righteousness, and peace move and greet one another as if they have feet, lips, eyes and hands. In so doing, we imagine God's very presence with us in ways that make sense to our human bodies and experience. We visualize God through our own experience and wonder, where are these meeting places and greetings, wellsprings and visions from on high in our lives?

Visualization is a practice used by athletes and others to prepare and train for various situations. Creating a mental image of what we want to see or do shapes our behavior and actions. It is a discipline that sets our minds and bodies in the direction of what we hope for. We can also visualize our life of faith, training our minds and bodies to hope for and expect God's actions in our world and in our lives.

How much more love and faithfulness will we observe if we are looking for it? How much more peace and righteousness will be evident if we set our hope on finding them? As we reflect on God's advent in our lives through Christ, the psalmist opens our mind's eye and imagination to God's presence in our lives by training our minds, eyes, and hearts to experience God's actions anew.

Loving God, you move in and around us with fervor and compassion. Enliven us to dance with your presence and reveal the activity of your love and mercy to all the world. Amen.

The Rev. Jennifer Phelps recently served as pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church, Perkaise. Previously, she served as Executive Director of Lutheran Congregational Services.



Friday, December 8, 2023

News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord.

Acts 11:22-24

In Acts, people were scattered, on the move and scared for their lives. Initially these refugees only spoke with people they trusted, people like them, in the places far from their original homelands. But some took a big risk and proclaimed the Lord Jesus to people of different spiritual practices and cultures.

This risk is the news that “came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem.” People taking a risk end-up bringing hope basking in the grace of God. This witness happens in their host community, not their original home community. As Jesus was born from above and came to dwell among us; the Christian witness is mobile and powerful when shared – even when running for refuge.

I’ve received this biblical gift of witness, as a host, years ago – following Hurricane Maria – from people displaced to Reading, PA from the battered island of Puerto Rico. LCS was there enabling us to host a Camp Noah day camp.

The refugees came through this marathon bringing a witness of joyful gratitude to God for bringing them through the storm, hugging and crying with strangers while proclaiming, ¡Gracia a dios! Witnessing faith, as the heartbeat of daily life, even when that daily life is full of uncertainty.

This summer, the flooding was here at home, rendering school buildings unusable just weeks prior to the new year. LCS was (still) there again. Faith, rooted in service to community, LCS was already in touch with local and state resources mobilizing clean-up bucket hand-outs and local resource ‘fairs’.

People who were flooded, were connected while looking to share their perishable food with others in need – as none of the refrigerators and freezers could work. Volunteers flocked to help others sign-up for assistance while their own material lives were stranded. People outside the community witnessed the unconditional love of Jesus; a catalyst for others to share this radical hospitality in the midst of trial.

In countless moments like these, I am a witness, like Barnabas, deeply moved by remarkable courage, resilience and grace as people share their faith in unfamiliar places and circumstances, through word and service.

LCS and the remarkable staff, like Julia Frank, are like heralds bringing the good news over and over to all people. This is where I see the Word Incarnate, Jesus among us, alive and thriving.

Maranatha, Come Lord Jesus! Continue to pour-out of our hearts, our hands, our mouths, our lives – in times of ease and times of trial. Please help us to be with those who are scattered, scared, and searching. Thank you for the grace and mercy we get to share with all whom we encounter in Your Holy Name. Amen.

Rev. Rebecca W. Knox is Pastor of Zion (Spies) Lutheran Church in Reading.



Saturday/Sunday, December 9 & 10, 2023

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

Isaiah 40:1-2

A thick blanket. Warm fuzzy socks. A steaming bowl of soup on a cold day. A hug. If someone asked me to name things that bring comfort, these are some of the things that would be on my list. They are some of the things that make me feel warm, protected, and peaceful.

Here in the Northern hemisphere, it seems as though the short, cold nights of the Advent season just cry out for things that bring comfort. Comfort defined as "a feeling of contented well-being, a satisfying or enjoyable experience."

But there is another definition of comfort which is maybe more helpful as we contemplate God's word to us through the prophet Isaiah: "Comfort: a strengthening aid; assistance, support; consolation in time of trouble or worry."

God's people are living in captivity. They are full of questions about God's, ability, desire and willingness to deliver them.

God tells Isaiah to speak to God's people in the midst of their discouragement- Comfort them! Encourage them! Be tender toward them and give them courage for the difficulties they are facing. Speak right to their hearts and assure them that my steadfast love endures forever.

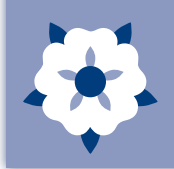
We read God's words through the prophet in this season when we prepare again for the birth of God into our lives in the person of Jesus. This silent, holy night birth will speak the same message as Isaiah spoke.

In this birth, and then in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God again offers comfort: strengthening aid, assistance, support. The assurance of steadfast love visible in Jesus.

Whatever questions, discouragements, challenges, you, your loved ones, are facing in this and every season, may you hear God's Word made flesh and be comforted.

Steadfast God of love, thank you for your desire to wrap us up in the comfort you speak through your prophet, and in the birth of Jesus. Amen.

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



Monday, December 11, 2023

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

Ezekiel 36:26-27

The prophet tells us we will be given a change of heart, that God will work from the inside out so we can feel and enjoy the love of God for all. Our inflexible "heart of stone" will be replaced with "a heart of flesh." The Holy Spirit will dwell in us all and will help us to obey God's law.

At my church, Advent Lutheran in West Lawn, PA, I inherited the task of distributing Bombas Socks on the retirement of our Director of Ministries. She had left detailed instructions, but the enormity of the task seemed overwhelming at first. Five thousand pairs of donated socks to distribute!

E-mails were sent to many organizations, but some contacts had changed. Others were not in the office on a regular basis. Responses were slow in coming. Volunteers from our own church to deliver the socks—all had to be coordinated with each group's own office hours. I was determined that I would NOT be doing this task again.

But in the end, so many were so grateful for socks that by the time the next donation rolled around, I found even more organizations to which we could donate socks. My "heart of stone" was surely replaced with a new spirit and a new heart as I look forward to our next distribution time.

I see myself continuing to help with this project as long as Bombas continues to give us socks to distribute. God has surely guided my way and given me a "heart of flesh."

Dear Lord, we thank you for your loving guidance as we share the good news of your birth and the blessings of your bounty. Amen.

Bonnie Arner, is president of church council, Advent Lutheran Church, West Lawn, PA.



Tuesday, December 12, 2023

For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Him.

Acts 2:39

The promise of the Messiah is for each of us... in God's eyes we are all one. We are His people and we have this time of Advent to truly reflect on what it means to be a follower of Jesus who became like us that we may have eternal life.

In these days where we see and hear about violence all around us it is hard to imagine a world where peace, love and justice are the rule, not the exception. Jesus came to us not as a king but as a baby surrounded by love in a lowly cave, recognized by shepherds and animals.

The United States Bishops remind us that all members of society have a special obligation to the poor and vulnerable. As followers of Christ we are challenged to make a fundamental option for the poor, to speak for the voiceless, to defend the defenseless and to treat all with respect and love. We are called to strengthen the whole community by assisting those who are the most vulnerable.

At times I need to ask myself, "Am I willing to put judgment aside and truly do what I can to help those who are suffering because of a lack of respect and love that is the right of every person?" As Jesus accepts me with unconditional love for the person I am and not the things I do, am I willing to accept those around me with that same unconditional love, even when we do not agree with each other.

Emanuel- God with us, give me the grace to accept others as You accept me with love and dignity. Amen.

Sister Carole Eden is a resident of Paul's Run.



Wednesday, December 13, 2023

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.

Psalm 34:18

As I talk to people who come to me for grief counseling, the first thing I usually hear is that they are spent with sorrow, sadness and overwhelming grief. Their energy has gone and they are feeling that they have no more strength for the things of life. And then I hear, "I am totally brokenhearted."

"What can I do?" they ask. "How will I ever feel whole again without him?" There are many days when they feel that their hearts will never be restored to their former "full of love and hope" heart.

I know they feel empty and lonely... and sometimes desperate. I have the scripture verse in Psalm 34:18 etched into my brain. I always pray that God will lead me to say it to them at the right time. When it is not the "right time", they can feel very angry, depressed or empty. "How will He heal my broken heart?" they cry.

When I was much younger in my counseling career I used to just say that I didn't know HOW He would do that. As a widow who is much older now and have lost many precious people, I've changed my answer.

He meets us in our weakness, I believe. How? By the people He might send in to your life, or the card or letter that says just what you needed to read. Or the sermon you hear when you finally make it back to church. Or the call from someone from your past who says when you answer "Hello, I was just thinking about you."

Merciful God, Thank you for your promise to mend our broken hearts and lift our spirits high. Please refresh us when we feel completely depleted. Amen.

Sylvia Havlish is grief counselor for Lutheran Congregational Services, and a member of St. John's Lutheran Church in Emmaus.



Thursday, December 14, 2023

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.

Philippians 3: 7-8

As a retired pastor and grandfather, I still daily consider what it is that I am called to do.

Paul daily considered what he was called to do as a faithful Jewish male who had changed his life because he had been called by Christ. Now what was important to him was knowing Christ Jesus as his Lord.

The other Jewish required rituals such as circumcision that had been required of him he now regarded as rubbish. Christ accepted Paul's commitment to follow him without trying to prove what a good, religious person he was.

Over the past 43 years of ordination I have attempted to develop Lutheran services to aid both children needing homes and refugees needing life in a new country. I felt that my personal and educational background called me to do this work. In the end the structures I had set up to do this work were torn down and ended. As Grandpa Bill Erat, now I try my best to serve my grandkids and their parents as I am able, but I so often am frustrated that I cannot be everything that I might think a grandpa should be.

So I learn from St Paul that what is of surpassing value is knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. He accepts me and accepts you because we no longer attempt to prove to God how good we are in doing good works for others. I have learned why Paul regards his good Jewish past and what he was called to do as rubbish.

Yes, I feel that I was called in my ministry to serve families and refugees but I know that now in the end I can suffer the loss of all these things and in that process gain Christ. I know that I do not have to prove to him how great a follower of him I am. Rather, he accepts me as a struggling disciple who seeks forgiveness based on his own self-giving in his life, death and resurrection.

Lord Jesus, help me to know and trust in your boundless love for me, a struggling servant who needs your limitless love for sinners like me. Amen.

Rev. William Erat is retired pastor and member at St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Glenside.



Friday, December 15, 2023

Brothers and sisters, I do not consider that I have laid hold of it, but one thing I have laid hold of: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead.

Philippians 3: 13

Are you ready for Christmas? Commonly asked question this time of year, isn't it?

It usually means, have you bought presents, is your house decorated, are groceries purchased, plans made?! Whew! By the time we actually get to Christmas Eve service we may feel not only exhausted but maybe also a bit defeated. "Did I do enough this year," we might ask. "Does what I have done measure up to previous years".

Not for everyone, but for many of us this season is fraught. There are so many demands that the actual Spiritual "reason for the season" is lamentably lost!

Paul's words in Philippians 3 may help to refocus us for a more Spirit-filled Christmas. Paul shares that he does not feel that he has gotten it all "right". He is not spiritually, fully mature. He has not reached the goal. But Paul does not want to get stuck there. He brings himself (and us) back to a realization of the goal: Life in Christ. And, rather than dwelling on what has not yet been accomplished, he looks to where he is in the moment and how he is pressing on toward the goal of life in, with, and for Jesus.

Imagine living Advent this way. Not becoming overwhelmed with what has or has not been accomplished, but eyes and heart and Spirit fully focused on receiving the fullness of God's gift to us in the birth of Jesus-God with us! Could we get to that blessed holy night of Jesus birth in a place of peace and quieted Spirit? Could we let go of what we think must be done, and move instead into what we are to receive- the fullness of God's love. Would it make a difference? How might we experience Advent differently if we refocused our goals?

Loving God, set my heart and mind on what is truly life giving, that in this holy season I might come to know you and serve you more fully and joyfully. Amen.

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



Saturday & Sunday, December 16 & 17, 2023

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners.

Isaiah 61:1

Isaiah brought promises of a Messiah to come. Advent brings us that same time of promise and waiting. A time of reflection, hope, and anticipation.

Waiting does not always come with anticipation of something good. I have worked in disaster response for the last 18 years. My work has focused on long-term recovery, after the news coverage is gone, the funding is gone, the interest has waned, and often hope is gone.

It is hard to tell survivors they have to wait. It does not seem fair or just, and often isn't. Even though we want to, we cannot control outcomes for those who are suffering. But we can walk with them in the waiting. We can be present.

We can be what Jesus would want us to be, what He has called us to be. We can bring the good news, bind up the brokenhearted, open the eyes of those imprisoned in sin and proclaim the freedom that is found in our Lord and Savior. A Messiah that was prophesied in Isaiah, a promise fulfilled in a babe born in Bethlehem.

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people. (Luke 2:10) For all the people – no one excluded, no one rejected, no one omitted. His good news is for ALL to hear.

Go and bring the good news, even in the waiting when answers are unclear, when doubt can creep in, when hope is lost. That could be when it is needed most. Share the hope you have found in the Messiah, the babe, the lamb and redeemer, the Son of God. He can turn mourning to joy and ashes to beauty, even in the waiting.

Most Merciful God, we thank you for the opportunity to be your people of promise bringing the good news to those who are hurting in this world. Amen.

Jessica Vermilyea, Haphak Consulting, LLC, and Chair of the Louisiana VOAD (Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster). Jessica was previously the lead for Lutheran Disaster Response in the Gulf Coast.



Monday, December 18, 2023

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-19

This passage comes at the end of Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonica, his conclusion, where he also encourages them to be at peace among themselves, be patient, not return evil for evil, and always seek to do good to one another and to all. Those were noble and challenging goals for living out faith then, just as they are today!

But a couple of the things Paul urges here almost border on the ridiculous. Rejoice always? Really? That's fine if all is going well, but easier said than done if not.

Advent in particular can be a difficult time for some. We hold a Blue Christmas service for those who are grieving during the holidays, and while they are important and helpful, joyful isn't a word that they bring to mind. We don't always feel happy – emotions are beyond our control.

And give thanks in all circumstances? Come on, Paul – what kind of nonsense is this? There are plenty of times in life when we're praying for help or courage, but aren't ready to give thanks. This is, after all, a devotional sponsored by an agency that in part serves disaster survivors. Wouldn't praying in all circumstances be better advice than giving thanks in all circumstances? Why does Paul think this is possible? He wasn't a fool, and had been through plenty of challenging times himself.

Well, perhaps the answer comes in a couple of phrases that follow these, right at the very end of the letter. One comes in v. 24, "The one who calls you is faithful," and the other in v. 28, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you." Perhaps in pointing to Jesus, and his faithfulness, and his grace, we see the possibility of joy even in sorrow, and thanks even during trials.

Faithful God, you know we are beset by all sorts of worries, hardships, and challenges. Help us to rest in your love, to rejoice in your faithfulness, and give thanks for your grace. Amen.

The Rev. Paul Metzloff is Pastor at Reformation Lutheran Church, Reading, PA.



Tuesday, December 19, 2023

As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people from this time on and forevermore.

Psalms 125: 2

This year has been the most challenging in my walk with God and I hit rock bottom. The last thing I wanted to do was come before God, pray to Him, and seek His face.

I questioned God's faithfulness, goodness, provision, sovereignty, and yet I was questioning my own faith more than anything. I wanted to feel His presence and hear His audible voice just one time so that I may have strength to go and believe God once again. But all I felt was loneliness, confusion, frustration, anger, bitterness, and weariness in mind, body, and spirit.

I wanted to quit everything and just give up and give in. I felt my pain wasn't big enough to get God's attention to speak to me and comfort me. Because we know it's never too small to bring to God, but we just sometimes forget in our despair and loneliness.

I finally sat before God weeping and the only whisper from my heart was, "Please help me, Holy Spirit". And I heard His gentle voice reminding me of that HE IS FOR ME. All my hurt, anger, hate, pain, and confusion were washed away instantly in that sacred moment of brokenness, and I felt the Holy Spirit's healing flowing through my spirit and bringing light to the deep, dark pit I was trapped in for weeks and months.

I whispered, "He is for me!" The whole time when I felt alone and helpless, the Lord has been surrounding me as a Good Father as He always has been from the beginning of eternity and all I have to do was receive it with childlike faith.

Whatever season you and I may find ourselves in, the most beautiful truth we can hold on to our hearts is that as the mountains surround Jerusalem, the Lord surrounds his people from this time on and forevermore in which our healing comes from.

God with us, remember that you are always surrounding us in love. Amen.

Zaya Gilmer is Program Manager, Lutheran Disaster Response - US.



Wednesday, December 20, 2023

Though the fig tree does not blossom and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation.

Habakkuk 3:17-18

This scripture serves as a wonderful reminder that we must recognize the goodness of God in all circumstances. Each day we are presented with both blessings and challenges and it is my belief that challenges are put in our path as a bridge to the blessing.

Our God is a way-maker, a promise keeper, and cannot fail; and so, the circumstances that He allows are a part of His plan for our life's journey. For certain God's timing is not our timing and as the scripture Ecclesiastes 3:1 says "to every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven."

Like the prophet, Habakkuk, we must trust and revere God in all circumstances. Metaphorically, Habakkuk 3:17-18 can describe the following situations:

1. Parents concerned with children who are struggling to find their way;
2. Families facing financial hardships;
3. Persons who have received unfavorable medical reports and are feeling stunned;
4. Individuals overwhelmed by the pandemic, floods, fires, hurricanes and other devastating life events; and
5. Lost and lonely souls without a circle of friends and/or family to infuse hope and healing.

The five situations noted are but a sampling of what could be someone's inner story. Each day so many feel alone, sad, lost and misguided and this scripture reminds us to revere God and rejoice knowing that He never leaves nor forsakes us.

Habakkuk reminds us to remain steadfast and exulting in all circumstances.

Dear God, thank you for being the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow (Hebrews 13:8). I am safe in your care and can exult you in all circumstances because I know that you are my lifeline. Thank you, Father! Amen.

Charmaine R. Maddrey-Smith is Director of Training and Leadership Development for Liberty Lutheran.



Thursday, December 21, 2023

**Hear O Lord and answer me...Guard my life for I am devoted to you.
Have Mercy on me, O Lord for I call to you all day long.**

Psalm 86:1-3

I was in the National Guard and in a deuce and a half (large tactical cargo truck) with eight men in the back and a 105 howitzer. I was in front with the driver. I was a staff sergeant with my squad heading home from my summer training program with the 166 field artillery in the Pennsylvania 28th division. We were on a narrow road with trees on one side and steep cliff on the other. It had just begun to rain.

We hit a bump and the gun on the back started shifting and we lost control of our truck while the driver yelled, "I can't get control!" It looked like we were going off the road and the cliff as the driver yelled, "We're going over!"

I thought about these men sitting in the back with nothing to hold on to as I closed my eyes and said "Dear God here we come!" When I opened my eyes, the gun pushed us 180 degrees and put us on the shoulder facing the opposite way, our gun was gone but we were alive!

It was a miracle.

I think about this story and how in times of duress we yell for God and cling to God for hope in those moments where we need God. But do we call to God when things are easy? Not as much. During this time may we reflect on why we need God and the reason for the season. This season may we seek God even when we don't think we need him urgently, and of course also when we do.

Dear God, Keep us safe during this season and may we lean on you in times of trouble and in times when the going is easy. Bless us always, Amen.

Arnold Escourt is a resident at Paul's Run.



Friday, December 22, 2023

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.

Hebrews 1:1-2

Every Advent, my spouse and I carefully open the battered East German suitcase that belonged to Opa Robert. We listen to Bach's Christmas Oratorio and A Charlie Brown Christmas while we carefully unpack our cherished Advent decorations: the simple 'smoker man' from our first Christmas together, the straw stars, the antique nut and the scroll that my great-grandmother Hulda hung on her son's first and only Christmas tree, home-made ornaments made long ago by our children, and finally, the wooden pyramid that we bought with money given to us by Oma Inge even though we really couldn't afford it at the time.

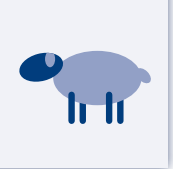
Each item holds a precious story behind it reminding us of tearful times when we struggled and happy times when life felt simpler. When we uncover these decorations, we remember the voices of our relatives and friends, and we are grateful for the joyful love represented in each treasure.

When I worship God with my congregation and I enter the sanctuary, my eyes are drawn to the wooden cross above the altar and pulpit. This is where God's love has truly been embodied for us. God speaks to us through the crucified and risen Jesus who continually stretches his arms out in love for the cosmos and beyond.

Every time the presider carefully uncovers the precious bread and wine for holy communion, remember the ways God has been present with you. And when you hear the ancient, mystical words, "The body of Christ given for you. The blood of Christ shed for you," remember: this is God's beautiful, tangible way of speaking, "I love you."

God of all times and places, during this season that brings many memories, help me to remember that you look at me with eyes full of love. Give me the grace to share that love with each person I encounter. Amen.

Deacon Deborah Graf serves as Deacon at Trinity Lutheran, Reading, and as District Coordinator for West Berks Mission District.



Saturday, December 23

Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness, and the worries of this life and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth.

Luke 21:34-35

A couple years ago, my mom was diagnosed with cancer, right before COVID was in full swing and I couldn't visit. I worried so much about her and her wellness, but I was reminded by my church that in God's hands and in God's way, she would be fine.

The day of her surgery in December 2019, I was on a plane to Puerto Rico for a Mission trip that would ultimately change my life and ministry passions. I had begged her to let me cancel my trip and visit her instead, and the words she used were so similar to the Luke Passage I'll never forget, "What if you let my illness consume your life? What then? God has plans for you, go on your trip, and know I'll be in good hands by the Great Physician."

Today, she is well and recovering, and she was right. What if I wouldn't have listened? I may have been trapped in a box I put myself in.

In this season of advent, and in the last few, it seems that many of us have multiple worries. We worry about weather, illness, accidents, children, schools and more. We worry about having "enough" for our families and friends, making it as special as we can, and remembering all who we care about during this season. So much worrying that we forget about the reason for the season, Jesus. This passage in Luke reminds us in a blatant way, to be on guard, and to be aware of the things that make our hearts and spirits heavy this time of year.

I think all of us struggle with the worries of what will people think, what if my gift or food for the holidays isn't good enough. And God didn't give us this season for that. We are to focus on the coming of this Messiah who takes away our sins and our grief. It doesn't mean we won't have worries, but we have faith to lean on God and his son Jesus, to take that burden off us.

May we have light hearts and high spirits during this season, and if we do worry, let it not consume us.

Holy one, be with us in our worries and sorrows. Remind us you are with us, among us and for us in all things. Remind us to remember the words of Luke as we live out this season and lift up our hearts as we await the coming of your son, our Messiah Jesus. Amen.

Rev. Michelle Wildridge is Chaplain/Director of Spiritual Life at Paul's Run.



Christmas Eve, December 24

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.

Luke 1: 51-52

These verses come from Mary's radical declaration of faith and trust in God known as the Magnificat. After Mary, newly pregnant with the Son of God, visits her cousin Elizabeth, she praises God not only for God's mercy on the lowly, but for God's justice that bends toward those in need.

Even though the Roman Empire cruelly oppresses God's people in Israel, Mary announces God's enduring faithfulness and grace. Didn't Mary know the world is an unfair, harsh, cruel place? Mary will live to see her own son executed at the hands of that same empire, while Jesus' disciples flee and hide in fear.

The world is still cruel and unfair. We can just turn on the television to find examples of suffering, hunger, and fear. Everywhere around us people are struggling to survive. There is war still all across our globe. Floods or fires or other natural disasters inundate the news cycle with horrifying pictures of destroyed homes. The evening news reports are more and more devastating. It is hard to have faith. It is hard to believe that good will win over evil.

As people of God, we see the injustice everywhere, but we also see God's work in redeeming the world. Like Mary, we trust in God's mercy. We have faith in God's promises. We are blessed by God's grace. Mary witnessed Jesus' death, but she was also present for Jesus' resurrection. God does not abandon us to the darkness. Because of Jesus, we know that evil cannot win.

Dear God, thank you for Mary's radical witness and her bold words. Help us to declare your glory to the world, trusting in your mercy and grace. Grant us courage to face injustice and the peace that comes from knowing Jesus. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Heidi Shilanskas is Director of Faith Formation and Discipleship at Star of Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Bethlehem, and a seminarian at United Lutheran Seminary.

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

Luke 2: 10-11

I am fortunate to lead half of LCS' Lay Eucharistic Visitor Trainings offered throughout the year. These opportunities to walk with disciples from across the church who are called to extend their community's witness of care is always a source of joy for me.

Lay Eucharistic Visitors minister to those in their communities who are sick, homebound, lonely, and often unable to gather for corporate worship. During our sessions, we explore healthy practices of visitation with the sick and the elderly, the church's history of celebrating the sacraments as a community of mutual care, and God's proclamation of forgiveness communicated by the Spirit's power in gifts of bread, wine, and community.

Care lies at the heart of all healthy relationships, especially the relationship God envisions for us as Jesus' disciples. From the first angelic declaration of Jesus' birth, God proclaims the depths of care offered in real, tangible, enfleshed ways.

This message of care is God's ongoing gift for us, born in the Christ Child whose resurrection life- and the care it brings- will never end.

Don't be afraid. I'm with you, here and now, with good news. Your sorrow is ending, and joy is on the rise for you and for everyone! The Messiah, God's anointed, who is God's own self, is born for you, for all of you, today!

Experience this new birth from God again and again as this child greets you in water, Word, wheat, and wine. Trust in the angel's message, and share it with a world hurting and in need of the care Jesus brings. Jesus is good news! God brings great joy! The Spirit's gifts are for you- all of you! Taste and see that the Lord is good, caring for us in ways which still the fearful soul and jubilate the sorrow-filled heart.

Thank you, God, for sending us your Son to know, to love, and to worship. Guide us in the comfort of your care, and raise us up to the body of Christ, born and broken for a world hungry for the joy you bring. Amen.

Rev. Brandon M. Heavner serves as pastor of Weisenberg Lutheran, New Tripoli, as a member of the LCS Advisory Board, and an instructor for LCS' Lay Eucharistic Visitor Training.



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