

Advent Devotional Booklet 2024



*"Surely God is my salvation; I will trust
and will not be afraid, for the Lord is my
strength and my might; he has become my
salvation."* **Isaiah 12:2**



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Dear Friends,

As we journey through this wonderful season of Advent, we remember and reflect on the true meaning of Christmas- the celebration of God's love through his son Jesus.

Liberty Lutheran is extremely grateful to you - our family of faith. We are blessed by your gifts and your service.

You have walked with us for more than 100 years. Your prayers and support demonstrate God's love and grace to people facing uncertain times.

With thankful hearts, we are pleased to offer you this Advent Devotional created by Liberty's Lutheran Congregational Services. We hope it serves as a resource for calm reflection and inspiration during what often becomes a chaotic, busy season.

Within these pages, you will find the reflections, prayers, ponderings, and insights of a variety of people who make up the fabric of Liberty Lutheran. You'll hear from residents, team members, volunteers and partners from across our communities.

May their words inspire you and bring you peace in this time of busyness, merriment and waiting.

Advent Blessings,



Luanne B. Fisher
CEO, Liberty Lutheran



**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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Sunday, December 1, 2024

Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths

Psalm 25:4

At two and a half years old, Ty loves to take walks. He comes and takes the hand of any available adult inviting them into his adventure with one word, "walk". He is taking the lead, but he knows he cannot go it alone.

He has wisdom beyond his years, recognizing the gentle give and take of loving relationships between kids and adults. His relationship with those who join his daily walks seems to reflect the relationship between us and our God as it is expressed in Psalm 25. And, it calls to mind an advent relationship of calling, waiting and , receiving that fills our spirits with joy and hope.

Psalm 25, thought to be written by David as a plea for Gods mercy and forgiveness following his sin against Bathsheba, reminds us of the relationship God has with us, even, or especially in difficult times.

It is written as an acrostic. Beginning with the first verse each verse begins with the subsequent letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This style aids in memorization, but more importantly, it reminds us that the mercy and steadfast love which are the core of God's relationship with God's people, is for all of us, at all times...a to z.

In Advent, when we call out, "Come Lord Jesus", we do so fully aware of the places and times when we have fallen short of God's will and way in our lives. But also, fully aware that this season prepares us for the great gift of God's birth into our lives to speak grace and mercy and restoration.

We have learned that when Ty is struggling the most with the rules and needs and directions of his day, a hand in hand walk with a trusted and loving adult, resets and calms his spirit. In Advent, in Psalm 25, we are reminded, that when we struggle with the rules and needs and directions of living in relationship with God, a hand to hand walk with our trustworthy, gracious, loving God, will reset and calm and restore us...a to z.

Let us pray: Come Lord Jesus, restore and calm us by your steadfast love and mercy. When we are broken down, when we have followed wrong paths, when we have relied on other strength, forgive us and welcome us back. Let us walk hand in hand with you, the true light on all our paths. Amen

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



Monday, December 2, 2024

Lord, you have been our dwelling place[a] in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God

Psalms 90:1-2

This Psalm was likely written during the wilderness years on the way to Canaan. This is the only song of Moses in the Psalms and some think this is not the same famous Moses, but the evidence is much greater that this is indeed the great leader of Israel.

So what does this text mean to me, within the context of Psalms as poems of joy and celebration that draw attention to what is good in the world? Personally, the key word that summarizes the first verse is “refuge.” In good and celebratory times, but also especially in troubling times the Lord has been my dwelling place, habitation, and home - for me - and for countless ancestors, all the way back to Adam and Eve and Abraham and Sarah.

The second verse highlights the eternal nature of God to me. Before anything, before the Big Bang, God existed. God’s presence has been everlasting and knowing that provides comfort. God’s eternal nature gives hope that not only for past generations, but also successive generations will find that safe refuge in a relationship with God - and constant companion for our families, children, and their children too.

These two verses together are especially joyful and supportive, reflecting the fundamental foundation that is available to all who believe and seek to learn and love God. The verses increase our confidence to take on daily challenges while knowing that there is an everlasting and place of refuge available when needed. I can readily imagine singing these words to the glory of God, following the example of Moses as he led the people of Israel to Canaan.

Oh God!, we are thankful for the refuge and companionship that comes from knowing and trusting you. You have always provided comfort and solace for those of faith. You have been that foundation for all time, and all peoples, eternally. We are are grateful and appreciative of your presence, your listening, and in the advice you provide - when we listen. Amen.

George Freestone is a long-time member of Advent Lutheran Church, West Lawn - he is one of the facilitators of an active Men’s Group there.



Tuesday, December 3, 2024

Since you, Lord God, are truly God and your words are truth and you have made this generous promise to your servant.

2 Samuel 7:28

As we prepare ourselves to welcome the Prince of Peace we remember the words of Scripture that talk of the heir of David coming to have God with us always and in all ways. In scripture we read of the promise made to David that from his tribe would come the Prince of Peace. David would like to build a Temple for God but God reminds him that we are the Temple given the Grace to carry God with us to all peoples.

This promise has come to fruition when Jesus is born to a Virgin and when he is like us in all things except sin.

As we prepare ourselves this Advent, let us be mindful that our God is a God of Peace who is with us always even in these times of living in a world filled with violence, hate and disrespect. These are material things but our Spirit should never be shaken for we look to our Spiritual side, knowing that God is with us, and we have the promise of a world of Peace and justice for all.

I know that in order to bring peace I have to be a person of peace and I need to show respect to all even if we differ. If I treat all with respect, hopefully they will carry that acceptance to those they meet and our world will be a better place.

I am fortunate to live in a Community where all are respected regardless of race, color or beliefs. We know that all can live together in harmony if we believe.

At this time we hold our Brothers and Sisters, especially the children who have lived in the face of danger and hate for far too long. May this be a time where the Lamb and the Lion can walk side by side and may the children experience Peace. This can happen if we truly believe that God can move mountains and God does listen to our prayers. I pray with a peace filled heart because I know my God is watching over all of creation and God is true to His promises. God is at work within us and among us. We need to stay awake to the signs of hope surrounding us, seeing that we are clay in God's hand who sent His Son to be one of us.

Ever present God, within all my encounters, help me to be there for another and to receive the gift of their presence to me.

Sr. Carole Eden, SBS, is a resident at Paul's Run.

Wednesday, December 4, 2024

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David



Luke 1:32

I recall when I was pregnant, all of the predictions. Some relatives and friends were sure they could predict the baby's gender. Others pondered what features would be inherited from which parent. Still others imagined future occupations and talents. In quiet moments, I also wondered. And I worried. What would I be like as a parent? What would I get right? Where would I fail?

I imagine Mary, after the angelic visitation, after the courageous, yes, in the wee hours... I imagine her hearing the words, "he will be great."

What joy, but also what worry must have filled her heart.

In Advent, as we join Mary in the waiting, do we share both the joy and the worry? We know all the words of the birth story. We know the blessed assurance that this birth will bring peace and hope and joy. We sing, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel...". But do we take time to ponder just what this birth will be for us? Do we ask what it will mean now- where ever we currently find ourselves in life?

Mary must have wondered what it would mean that her Son would be great. And maybe we also wonder. What does the greatness of God, born to Mary, taking on flesh to live in our space, mean in 2024?

Jesus would teach that to be great is to be humble, willing to serve others, and to care for those in need. Greatness didn't come from gathering up the tangible rewards of this world, but in clinging to the rewards of peaceful spirit and joyful love.

In 2024, as in all years, we know the babe born to Mary, Jesus, showed the world greatness expressed in loving service and invited us all to know and live that greatness.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, you are great, but not in the way of this world. You are great in love and mercy, and we thank you for that greatness. Teach us your ways. Instill in us a desire to live the great love you have shown to each of us. Come Lord Jesus, let your greatness fill our hearts with love. Amen.

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



Thursday, December 5, 2024

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the most high, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins.

Luke 1:76-77

In this passage from the first chapter of Luke, Zechariah speaks this prophecy at his and his wife Elizabeth's newborn son John's circumcision and naming, declaring John's calling as a prophet. John will prepare the way for Jesus Christ's coming with the good news of "knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins."

During the season of Advent, we contemplate what the special gift that the coming of Christ into this world means for us. "Knowledge of salvation by forgiveness of their sins"—this is a wonderful gift! We do not need to earn it! We need only accept that Jesus brings us salvation by the forgiveness of our sins through his birth and death. Wow! This is the ultimate gift.

This gift is for sharing. In my daily life, I strive to conduct myself in a manner that radiates the joy that the knowledge of salvation through forgiveness of my sins brings, and that I take every opportunity to share this good news just like John the Baptist who prepared the way for the coming of Christ into the hearts and minds of the people of Israel.

Let us pray: Dear God, As I prepare my heart and mind during Advent, may I be a witness, perhaps a prophet, for the wonderful gift of salvation by the forgiveness of our sins, through the coming of Jesus Christ, whose birth we celebrate at Christmas. Amen.

Cathy Keim is a donor and longtime friend of Liberty Lutheran and Artman.

Friday, December 6, 2024

Advent Wreath Reflection



I light the candles, one each week,
Preparation for the the celebration of Christmas—
The event when God, the Creator,
Sent his Son, the Redeemer,
Fully human, fully divine,
Into this quarrelsome world.

Revealed by the Holy Spirit,
Third member of this triune God—
One God, three equal Persons,
Creator, Redeemer and Comforter—
Are these gifts, represented by the Advent Candles:
One for Hope
Two for Peace
Three for Joy
Four for Love—
Gifts to be used against
Despair, Contention, Anguish, and Hate
In our world.

Lighting the candles, my prayer is
Come, Lord Jesus, our Savior. Amen.
And I am longing for a blessed Christmas
Filled with joy, peace, love and hope,
For All the World.

By Cathy Keim



Saturday, December 7, 2024

For Advent reflection from Sister Laura Cavanaugh at Paul's Run.

I recently found a misplaced Advent prayer service from 2011 and would love to share two beautiful quotes from it to reflect on this season.

Advent begins with a stirring vision of God's hopes for humankind and all creation.

Meister Eckhart writes: "You need not seek Him here or there, for He is no further than the door of your heart; there He stands patiently awaiting whoever is ready to open up and let Him in. No need to call Him from afar; He can hardly wait for you to open up. He longs for you a thousand times more than you long for Him."

Jesus is knocking on the door of our hearts this Advent season. May we allow ourselves to slow down and hear Him knocking. (Rev. 3)

First Coming by Madeleine L'Engle

God did not wait till the world was ready,
till... nations were at peace.

God came when the heavens were unsteady
and prisoners cried out for release.

God did not wait for the perfect time.

God came when the need was deep and great.

God dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine. God did not wait

till hearts were pure. In joy God came
to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.

To a world like ours, of anguished shame
God came, and God's Light would not go out.

God came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.

In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the Stars was born.

We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
God came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!

Sunday, December 8, 2024



I am confident of this that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.

Philippians 1:6

When I read this verse, I immediately think of how the Bible reveals that one day our Lord Jesus Christ will return. With this verse Paul expresses both conviction and encouragement that Christians must be faithful to the end.

For each of us Christians, accepting Christ is not a “one and done” event, but instead a process. The process involves becoming more like Christ and the Bible offers practical guidance. It becomes complex because God has also given us free will and does not tell us exactly what we should do. Because He is our constant companion, He has equipped us with both wisdom and perception and prepares us through our experiences. It is up to us to act in accordance with His will because the work He has begun in us is enduring and grounded in the works of Jesus Christ.

It is fact that we all sin and yet our salvation is the gift of God’s grace once we accept and believe in Jesus Christ, our Savior. Each day I live my life purposing to show love, compassion, kindness, fairness, faithfulness, and commitment so that I represent the fruit of the spirit as shared in Galatians 5:22. I am confident like the verse, that with reliance on God during this season of Advent and always, I can fulfill His purpose.

Dear Father, thank you for being the Alpha and Omega who has begun a good work in me and who will bring those good works to fruition for your purpose. It is gratifying to know that I am a child of the Most High. In Jesus name, I pray. Amen!

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



Monday, December 9, 2024

**The grass wither; the flower fades,
But the word of our God will stand forever.**

Isaiah 40:8

Today as I reflect on this verse, it takes me to a vision in my mind of the serenity, peacefulness and beauty of sitting in a field of flowers and grass as the cool wind lightly ruffles the hair. The sun warms the skin and the fresh air leaves us feeling exhilarated. It feels so good and refreshing in the midst of our busy and chaotic lives.

But fast forward six months in the Pennsylvania climate, and the setting in that field will feel very different. The summer breeze will be a cold biting wind. The fresh air might take your breath away with it's coldness, and the flowers and grass will be brown and dead.

We need to remember that we can have that same feeling of serenity, peacefulness and beauty, any time we like, by meditating on the word of God, praying and just having a conversation with Jesus. We can do this in the beautiful field in the summer, in front of a crackling warm fire in the winter, or anywhere we are, when we just need to stop and regroup. The peace and beauty of the Lord will never go away or die, as long as we take the time to stop and experience it.

Dear Heavenly Father,

Please give us the wisdom, desire and understanding to have a relationship with you that provides us with the same peace and serenity we get from sitting in that field of flowers on a beautiful summer day. Please show us, and remind us, your peace is there for us, even when we go through the trials and tribulations that life brings to us. Amen

Dawn Hickernell is a member of Trinity Lutheran Church in Wernersville.

Tuesday, December 10, 2024

Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

Psalm 126:6

Two years ago, I broke my neck diving into a swimming pool. I was instantly paralyzed, became a quadriplegic with nerve damage in all four limbs. For a long time after the accident, I had no idea what my life would be like now that everything in my life changed. I cried out with tears of grief and loss. Who could imagine that the accident that made me disabled could also bring joy and new life.

Before the accident, I imagined that I could do it all and wore myself out trying. Now, I am able to draw boundaries and focus on what gives me joy, sloughing off the things that drained me. Before the accident, I worried about all the bad things that could happen, often robbing myself of the possibility that things could go well. After the accident, I often say, "What's the worst that could happen? I could break my neck?" I am learning to live in possibility rather than fear. Before the accident, I missed all the little things—everyday accomplishments and blessings. Now, I am grateful for the smallest things I once took for granted.

We will never willingly choose a difficult path, but God always willingly and lovingly lays out a path toward life. By the power of God, the journey of tears leads to the possibilities of joy. Indeed, our tears water the seeds of God's love as testimony to the power of God's work in our lives.

Loving God, let the tears of our lives water the seeds of hope as you turn our sorrow into joy. Open our eyes to the possibility of hope in all circumstances so that we live in gratitude for your grace in our lives shown to us in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Jennifer L Phelps is a pastor in the ELCA living in Stroudsburg, PA. She once served as the Executive Director of Lutheran Congregational Services.





Wednesday, December 11, 2024

**Then the lame shall leap like deer, and the tongue of the speechless
sing for joy.**

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness

And streams in the desert;

Isaiah 35:6

This section of Isaiah is part of a longer section that is connected to my favorite Christmas hymn/carol, "Mary did you Know?"

I always wait for the first time I hear it on the radio every season and no matter what traffic I am sitting in, for a couple minutes, even though I am in the middle of the hustle and bustle, somehow my world is still, knowing God is with and among me.

Much of the New Testament always gives hope, but in the Old Testament there's not as much that overtly gives hope and promise, but Isaiah does in many parts. In fact, my passion for ministry is based on these scriptures that give hope to the hopeless and give the most to the least. For in these passages is a renewal of spirit, mind, and body and everyone can always be uplifted.

In this season of Advent we wait, we long, we hope, and we see that babe in Bethlehem that we wait in angst and uneasiness for the whole season. But this passage in Isaiah gives us a glimpse of that hope before the main event and what a blessing that is.

During this Advent in a year of much loss for many people, and the angst of an election year, we need hope. We need promises of goodness, mercy and joy and Isaiah gives that to us. And what a gift it is.

Holy God, Bless us during this season to find reason to jump for joy like deer that awakened from their winter naps. Help us see the hope in your Son, the babe Jesus, under that bright and shining north star. Amen.

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



Thursday, December 12, 2024

Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need.

2 Corinthians 8: 13 - 14

In Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, he interprets verses 13 & 14 in this way. "You are shoulder to shoulder with them all the way, your surplus matching their deficit, their surplus matching your deficit. In the end you come out even. As it is written, nothing left over to the one with most, nothing lacking to the one with the least." Shoulder to shoulder brings back members from what seems like long ago.

In June 2007 my church, Zwingli United Church of Christ in Souderton, burned to the ground. Through the night 15 fire companies worked to save the sanctuary and it was all that remained as morning broke. Shoulder to shoulder with their surplus matching our deficit began on that first day. Several local churches came to be with us and to pray with us. They offered their church buildings for whatever space we needed. There were many other examples of surplus and deficit throughout the long three years when we rebuilt.

Two years later we began rebuilding our church home and the community came to help. Every Saturday other local churches had volunteers team up with our volunteers and shoulder to shoulder they worked to install drywall and to bring hope to a situation that sometimes seemed less than hopeful. There was a carpenter who crafted a beautiful wooden cross for our offsite worship services...his skills met our deficit. The surplus of help and skills of those volunteers matched the deep deficit that we were feeling. They worked next to us, shoulder to shoulder and it was something that many of our church members will never forget.

This example can be applied to so many instances in our lives...feeding the hungry as we have an abundance of food; providing safe, sanitary and secure housing for the homeless and for victims of natural disaster; and, providing hope for those who feel that deep feeling of hopelessness. Where we match a deficit there are those in turn who provide us with their perseverance, a strong and deep faith in God that causes us to be in awe and a huge lesson in humility that they show in allowing others to help them.

In this season of Advent, as we prepare for the birth of Jesus, what surpluses do each of us have that could meet the deficit of many others?

Gracious God, we thank you for all those who recognize their surpluses and give to many with deficits. May we be ever mindful of those around who are in need of our surpluses. Amen

Sue Wack is a Disaster Case Manager for Antietam Valley Long Term Recovery Group.



Friday, December 13, 2024

God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that always having enough of everything, you may share in every good work.

2 Corinthians 9:8

Floods create a swirling cauldron of emotions, debris and damage. As someone who previously worked with flood survivors, I was well acquainted with the unique challenges survivors face of navigating flood waters and resettling their lives on a firm foundation. I listened to one woman's story of being washed down a mountain with logs rushing past, hearing her children's cries, and feeling powerless and helpless to intervene and make a difference. I watched flood victims and their families not only struggle to survive but to thrive. But this year was different. The flood hit my daughter...and then it hit me.

My daughter hit a storm of unrelenting circumstances that shook her whole foundation. Waves of loss after loss and then feeling stripped of any resources needed to "rebuild" her life. This upheaval in her life coincided with me being asked to come out of retirement and once again help flood victims become flood survivors. Little did I know that I was also going to face a flood of circumstances that would deplete my energy and resources. First, a heart attack, and then a hip replacement and the subsequent recovery process. At times I felt I had "almost" nothing left to give.

Almost...that's the point. God doesn't call us to make miracles happen. He just asks us to offer what we have to Him – and He makes the miracles. II Corinthians 9:8 says "God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that always having enough of everything, you may share in every good work." I discovered two meanings of the word abundance. One is having a large quantity of something. Another is simply having more than is needed. Most of my life, I've had a large abundance of energy – and God has blessed that offering. But even in this later period of my life (when I am semi-retired and very tired), I still experience abundance, and have more than is needed, and He blesses that offering as well.

As I stood with several women, looking at their homes that had been repaired by volunteers, and listening to them talk, you would have thought – in their eyes – I had walked on water in giving them aid. But, in reality, I had merely offered the miracle of His presence in the midst of their storm.

Faithful Father, you know our weaknesses and limitations. Yet, you graciously give us abundantly above all that we can ask or imagine, as we seek to extend your hand of blessing to others. May they see you, Jesus, walking toward them with an outstretched arm to rescue them in the midst of their storm.

Barb Daigle is a Case Manager with the Antietam Valley Recovery Group, a Deacon at the Bridge Fellowship Church in Shillington, and a member of the Berks County Mental Health Crisis Team.

Saturday, December 14, 2024

Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and will not be afraid, for the Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.

Isaiah 12:2

In this moment, stop. Just for the time it takes to read this reflection. The world will pick up right where you left it, promise.

Repeat this declaration of faith and promise of hope to yourself silently or aloud three times. Try one line at a time, breathing in for a count of four and out for a count of eight. Or, imagine blowing out the Advent candles on your congregation's wreath in one sustained breath.

I'll wait.

Are your shoulders a little looser—even by a millimeter? Is your anxiety/pressure/time crunch/expectation meter a tick lower? What images flashed before you?

Daily life is busy enough. Add in the frenetic pace of December, and it can drive someone to exhaustion!

In the midst of what lies ahead for you today, you reminded your brain and body that you cannot be superhuman. That God is God and you are not, despite our efforts to curate the perfect experience. That God is your salvation. That God remains your hope. That God perseveres through your fears.

Even if your shoulders are still as tight and your meter still as full, that doesn't change this verse of grace.

Because God is our strength, might, and salvation.

We Pray: Gracious God, our strength and might, remind me daily to trust in your saving love for all the world, including me! Today, I pray especially for... . Prepare us for your coming. Amen.

Rev. Rachael Dietz is the Executive Associate of the Bishop for Leadership in the NEPA Synod.





Sunday, December 15, 2024

Even tax collectors came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?” “Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them.

Luke 3: 12-13

Being a parent can add so much joy to someone’s life, though it also brings its challenges. As a mom of a three-year-old, I find both joy and entertainment in the conversations I have with my son. We’ve discussed questions like “How can I reach the clouds?”, “What does God do?”, “Where do the trains sleep at night?”, and “What is a guinea pig?”

These are all very legitimate questions that often spark deeper conversations. I usually give him an answer that makes sense in the moment, and I can tell when he’s truly absorbing the information. He becomes still and quiet, listening intently and often uses what he learned at a later time. It’s at those moments where I feel the pressure of being a parent. Am I saying the right thing? Will this affect him later in life? Do I actually know what a guinea pig is?

This makes me wonder if John the Baptist in Luke had similar doubts when responding to the people coming to him with questions. He faced various groups, including those from less respected professions, asking how they should demonstrate their repentance. John’s focus on honesty and integrity in what people do shows how he understands and embraces his role as a prophet, listening to God for guidance.

My son has learned a lot over three short years and I have learned a lot from him too. One is to be still and quiet as I listen for God’s guidance on difficult questions. We are all called to be prophets in our own way, listening and seeking understanding of the unknown. While we may not always have the right answers, when we take time to be still and quiet with God, our responses will be filled with love and grace. During this Advent season, let’s take time to be still and quiet with God as we prepare the way for the Lord.

Let us pray: God of grace, thank you for guiding us through our challenges and questions. Be with us in this cold season, reminding us of your presence in the stillness and silence. Fill us with childlike joy and curiosity as we await the arrival of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Stacey Burke is Communications and Growing Young Coordinator, Northeastern Penn Synod of the ELCA.

Monday, December 16, 2024



Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Hebrews 13: 7-8

I love this verse because imitating the faith of others is what has carried me through some challenging times. Don't we all strive to imitate the faith of Jesus? Isn't that what he taught us to do? When we lose faith or begin to question it, the best thing we can do if we are to not give up hope is to imitate the faith of others. And I am thankful for all the examples of faith I've had that are worth imitating.

I would not be where I am today without the leaders I have been blessed with along the way. Not long after college I started my career at Thrivent where I've encountered many people whose guidance, wisdom, and faith have shaped me, made me a better person and strengthened my faith in God.

As I think back and visualize some of these people, I recognize that every single one of them had their own challenges along the way. Two of them survived the death of a child from awful circumstances. One went through a divorce. One helped their elderly parents move closer to them so they could be a caregiver. Another was raising a neurodivergent child like mine. And several went through layoffs and job changes.

These are just the things I know about. But every single one of these leaders, even in the midst of what was difficult, exhibited faithfulness and love for the Lord.

In my job, I often have to comfort and console clients who are going through challenging times. Death and disability are major life events that I often have to help people navigate and that I've experienced myself. I've been put in a position to help people during those times, and my prayer is that I can be that person of faith to help guide them when their own faith might be shaken.

In this Advent season, it is a good time to reflect on and live out the qualities we admire in our leaders – faithfulness, dedication and a heart for others – as we prepare for the birth of our eternal Leader. Who are the leaders who have influenced you? How can you lead others, even in small ways, to experience the hope, peace, joy, and love that Advent brings?

Lord, You are unchanging and eternal. Thank you for the leaders You have placed in my life. Continue showing me examples of the faithfulness I should have so that my faith will continue to grow stronger. Help me to provide a light to others so that I can be the leader You call me to be.

Vicki Lilley, CDFI®, BFA™, FIC is a Financial Advisor, Redtail Financial Group - Thrivent.



Tuesday, December 17, 2024

Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall, but those who hope in the Lord will renew their wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

Isaiah 40:28-31

As I age, I begin to feel overwhelmed when the many ads, stories and songs of the coming season fill the air. And as I hear my grief-stricken clients each year at this time, I hear many laments that this time of year brings.

Even the most positive, faithful men and women grow weary...and feel a deep sadness at this time. "Where will I find the strength," they ask.

One of my clients said to me, "I wish I could wake up tomorrow and it would be January!"

When we are in the depth of grief, we wish we could "fly away from" the reality. But then the words "...those that hope in the Lord will renew their wings like eagles." A fitting promise for all of us who are walking the path of grief.

PRAYER: Heavenly Father, I believe that you are giving me a special grace to help me through the hardest times. I will stand on your promises even when I cannot see the end of the path. Amen

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

Wednesday, December 18, 2024

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.



Isaiah 11:9

As I write this reflection, war is raging in Ukraine and in the Middle East. In addition, there was another school shooting last week. And last, but not least, we are mercifully coming to the end of yet another tumultuous political campaign –one in which fear, hate, division and anger seems to consume the media coverage.

How long, O Lord? How long until you come down and fulfill the promise Isaiah proclaimed so many centuries ago in the passage that provides the focus for this reflection and in the verses leading up to it? Indeed, there is more to Isaiah's vision than this one verse. In fact, it is the last verse of what is known as Isaiah's vision of the Peaceful Kingdom (Isaiah 11:1-9).

The passage begins with the prophet's prediction that a shoot will come out of the stump of Jesse (King David's Father) and will be endowed with the spirit of God – a spirit of wisdom and understanding, a spirit of counsel and might, a spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord (vv. 1-2).

It goes on to promise that it will be a time when mortal enemies will cease being so (vv. 6-8). It is an inspiring vision of promise and hope that feels in our experiences of life as unfulfilled.

Perhaps? Or perhaps, as we hear those words in verse 2 about the spirit of God, it would be well for you and me to remember that they are the words spoken over many, if not all of us, when we were baptized and stood to affirm our baptism usually as young teens.

Perhaps God has been giving us a hint all this time, namely that you and I have been given the authority, the spirit to be the peace we desire, and the world so desperately needs.

To be sure you and I won't bring an end to any of the items mentioned at the opening of this reflection, but maybe, just maybe, we might strengthen a movement for peace and hope that God initiated in the birth of that tiny baby born in a lowly stable, the King of Peace, Jesus the Christ, by whose name we are called to be peace and hope in an often-troubled world.

Prayer: Gracious and loving God, strengthen me to be the peace and hope you have called me to be through my baptism. Amen

Dennis Ritter is a retired pastor and former executive director of Lutheran Congregational Services.



Thursday, December 19, 2024

This new plan I'm making with Israel isn't going to be written on paper, isn't going to be chiseled in stone; this time "I'm writing out the plan in them, carving it on the lining of their hearts."

Hebrews 10:16 The Message

This verse from Hebrews is striking to me, because it reminds us that we all have a very deep relationship with God. God's plan isn't about the sacrifices that we make or the words that we speak, but the plan is in us. (In this case, we are Israel).

In the Old Testament, there were always sacrifices being lifted to God, but then Jesus came and made the ultimate sacrifice, and everything changed from that point on. We no longer have to offer sacrifices to please God.

God's plan is deep-seeded in us, carved in the very lining of our hearts, so deep that we can't even fathom it, and we can't discard it. This word in our hearts then reminds us all the time to do what God would have us do, to feed the hungry, care for the sick, help those in need, etc.

The ELCA calls one Sunday in September God's Work Our Hands Day, but the plan carved into our hearts makes us understand that our hands should be doing God's work every single day, because THAT is the plan.

I am forever grateful for all of our Lutheran social service agencies who every day live out this plan that is carved into their hearts and ours.

Prayer: Wonderful God, help us to daily live out the plan you have carved into the very lining of our hearts. Amen.

Pastor Sandra Brown is Interim Pastor, Good Shepherd Southampton, trainer for LCS Lay Eucharistic Visitor training, and serves on LCS' Advisory Committee and Liberty's Advancement Committee.



Friday, December 20, 2024

For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting. Do not, therefore, abandon that boldness of yours; it brings a great reward.

Hebrews 10: 34-35.

When I was in high school, sitting around with the girls on my basketball team, someone showed us an old picture of her grandmother who had recently died. As we all offered our sympathies, one of my teammates shared that she never had a picture like that of her grandmother, for all of their old photos had been destroyed in the big flood that had gone through our community when we had been in early elementary school.

She remembered how, as the water quickly came flowing down their street, her family had to flee from their home with only the clothes they were wearing and, so, they lost all of those possessions and photos that might serve as memories now. Many of us remembered that flooding, but few of us had ever met anyone who had suffered through it.

Someone asked how she had managed to deal with such a loss and she told us. As they returned home to begin the cleanup, her aunt stopped by to help. But, she also brought her camera and a photo album to take pictures of the devastation and the progress they made in their recovery.

She took pictures of neighbors and family who came to help. Those were their pictures of promise and hope. Those were their new memories. Memories that showed how they had stood firm in their suffering and how those survivors had found strength to offer compassion and sustenance to others around them who also endured hardship.

In these final days of Advent, may we remember that God does not abandon us in our times of trial. God sends others to accompany us through our suffering, reminding us that this is what our God has promised. And, it came to us, as a tiny child laid in a manger.

O God of promise and hope, you hear the prayers of the whole world – prayers for help, for love, for mercy, for safety and relief. Help us to respond with confidence and compassion. Make us an answer to someone’s prayer. Amen.

Rev. Paulette Obrecht is a retired pastor in NEPA Synod and a member of the Advisory Board of Lutheran Congregational Services.



Saturday, December 21, 2024

...and he will stand to lead his flock with the Lord's strength, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. Then his people will live there undisturbed for he will be highly honored around the world.

Micah 5:4

When I think of Micah, it reminds me of how much God loves us. Although the people were in exile because of things they were doing wrong, God made a way to redeem them by setting them on their own land so they could be free to serve him and no other god. Micah's mission was to instruct them to get rid of the pagan worship and to worship the one and only true God.

We put things before God and sometimes don't notice it (i.e. social media) that's a big thing that will take you down the rabbit hole and before you know anything, several hours have passed you by and you would not have accomplished anything.

God desires to have a relationship with us. God told Micah to warn the Israelites to let go of the Asherah poles, (social media) and all other idols they may be holding onto. He gave simple instructions on what it would take to follow him and do what is good:

1. Do justice, be fair to everyone, not just to those we love.
2. Love mercy, have passion and forgiveness to those you have the power to punish.
3. Walk humbly with God, seek God daily and he will speak to you, he will give you instructions on what to say and do in every situation.

The same rules of instruction stand for us today. He redeemed us with the blood of his son, Jesus. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son and whosoever believeth on him should not perish but have everlasting life". (John 3:16) It is up to us to make the decision to believe.

Most gracious and loving god, we come to you today asking that as we seek to do your will daily that you will draw near to us and help us to be all that you want us to be. We want to be pleasing to you in all that we do and say. Thank you for your love, grace and mercy you show us even when we do not deserve it. We want to live a life that is pleasing to you so we ask for your help. Thank you that you hear our prayers when we call to you. In Jesus name, Amen

Areatha Dorsey is Center Counselor at LCFS' West Philadelphia Senior Community Center.

Sunday, December 22, 2024

And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.



Hebrews 10:10

The Gospel of John tells us that the last words of Jesus were “It is finished”. God’s judgment and punishment of sin was finished upon Jesus’ death on the cross—once for all!

Prior to the death and resurrection of Jesus, atonement for sin was made by offering animal sacrifices. But, once Jesus died and rose to life again, no longer was sacrifice required to gain forgiveness from our merciful Father.

What greater gift is there than the son of God’s death on the cross? How can we possibly repay God for such a gift? We cannot.

No sacrifice, no works, no donations, no deeds--nothing can repay the precious gift we have been given in Jesus’ death and resurrection. But, in response to such a gift and showing of love and mercy from God, we can offer ourselves to the works of God.

The giving of our time to others in love, leading others to the truth of God’s Holy Word, giving to those in need, spending time with the lonely, helping others in their earthly walk---these things reflect the gratefulness we have to God for His mercy and love. What greater gift can we offer to someone than eternal life?

This Christmas season, let’s make a point of sharing the news of the gospel with others so that they too can look forward to eternal life with Christ, knowing He gained forgiveness of sin once for all!

PRAYER: Merciful God: There is no way to thank you for the sacrifice of your Son, Jesus, and the forgiveness of our sin. We humbly offer our daily prayers and works in thanksgiving to you for mercy and love. Help us to be your hands and feet to the people around us and beyond, so that they can know the truth of your word and live out eternity giving glory to you in heaven. Amen.

Christine Naessens is Staff Recruiter, Liberty Lutheran.



Monday, December 23, 2024

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

Colossians 1:15

In the early 90s, my life felt like it was spiraling out of control. I was struggling to manage everything, from my personal life to bills, and it felt like I was constantly being overwhelmed.

As someone with a choleric temperament, I thrive on being in control and having everything in order. The chaos and lack of control during that time were incredibly challenging for me. However, that period of turmoil taught me valuable lessons that have had a profound impact on my life.

First and foremost, I learned to place my trust in God and not to rely on my own abilities. This newfound reliance on God became a cornerstone of my Christian journey, and I found strength in looking to Jesus Christ as the embodiment of the invisible God. This experience fundamentally shaped my perspective and approach to life.

In the book of Colossians, the Apostle Paul articulates a profound revelation about God that has deeply impacted my perception and strengthened my reliance on Him. He eloquently portrays Jesus Christ as the visible representation of the invisible God.

Through my faith in Christ, I have gained a clearer understanding of God's divine nature and His boundless capabilities. This revelation has brought me immense comfort and reassurance, especially during times of personal struggle and moments of feeling overwhelmed.

I have come to recognize that God, once invisible to me, is now perceptible through His son, Jesus Christ. As a result, my faith has been fortified, and I am continually reminded that what was previously unknown about God has been graciously unveiled to us through His word.

Prayer: Dear Father, I thank you for revealing yourself to me through Jesus Christ, my Lord and Savior. This understanding is the foundation of my faith and gives me strength, despite the challenges I may face. Please bless my day today and help me to take each day as it comes. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Vernon Nyangulu is Disaster Recovery Case Manager, Eastern PA Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2024

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.



Romans 8:19

Paul's epistle to the Romans reminds us how much of our lives we spend waiting. It seems these days we are all waiting for something, or for someone. It could be something as seemingly small as being put on hold on the phone or standing in long lines at the grocery store. It could be that we're waiting to improve a skill, for a friend to visit, or even to become a better person.

At times, we may strive for perfection, getting caught in a web of self-doubt and feeling that we are lacking in some way. Yet, this passage in Romans reminds us that we are already God's own, created in God's image. And though we may fall short, disappointing ourselves and others, we are still God's children. We are the beloved whom God loves so much that God gave God's only son for the forgiveness of our sins.

Advent is itself a time of waiting. We light the candles each week, and we wait in community to hear the gospel proclamation of Jesus' birth. When we gather, we do so in hope of what is to come. Indeed, the entire creation waits in eager anticipation of the glory of God.

This verse calls us to focus on the bright future that awaits us in God's loving embrace. What we wait for, long for, along with all of creation, is nothing compared to what God has already prepared for us to share in, the gift of eternal life.

Along with all of creation, we eagerly await the birth of Jesus. The hope this brings fills us with God's grace and inspires us to be better stewards of God's creation as beloved children of God. And just as we wait, God waits with us, in times of sorrow and in joy, in eager anticipation of what is to come.

Let us pray. Lord, be with us as we prepare our hearts and minds for Jesus' arrival. Help us to nourish the earth as good stewards of your creation, just as you feed us daily. Fill us with your grace, so that we might share your love with our neighbors. Your love is ever-present; always doing something new for us, within us, and with us. Amen.

Rachel Zimmermann is Disaster Case Manager for Hurricane Ida. Her home church is St. John's Lutheran in Phoenixville.

Christmas Day, December 25, 2024

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb".

Luke 1: 41-42

As a woman, it is not lost on me how frightened Mary may have been given her dire situation. An unwed, pregnant woman in her time would not only face hate and scorn but would also risk being stoned to death under the law.

I imagine that Mary sought out her older, wiser cousin, Elizabeth, because she too had experienced a miraculous blessing from God. Elizabeth, who had been childless and was beyond childbearing years, was now six months pregnant—seemingly defying nature. Surely, Elizabeth could relate to Mary's extraordinary circumstances.

When Mary arrives, the Spirit of God moves Elizabeth to extend the love and grace Mary desperately needs in that moment. Her warm welcome and kind words reassure Mary that she and her unborn child are indeed blessed by God.

On this day, we celebrate the birth of Mary's baby—Jesus—who dramatically changed and continues to change the world. His ministry revealed to us that God desires to bless everyone with love, grace, and mercy.

The pastor at my church recently emphasized that God will work through whoever God chooses to accomplish God's will. In that moment, it dawned on me that in Luke 1:41-42, we witness how God worked through Elizabeth to give Mary the reassurance she needed.

On this Christmas Day, may God's Word remind us that the Holy Spirit is ever-present with us, waiting to work through us. May we, too, be vessels to bless others in whatever way God desires.

Loving God, as we celebrate the birth of your son today, may we feel your presence and hear your call. Grant us the wisdom and courage of Christ to humbly bless others with your abundant love, grace and mercy. We give you thanks, Immanuel, for showing us the way. Amen.

Patty Cline is Director of Advancement at Liberty Lutheran.