

THE ADVENT OF OUR GOD

© 2004 Pastor Tim Pauls

Hymn quotations from *The Lutheran Hymnal* are all in the public domain
Comments and doctrinal concerns may be directed to tpauls@gsboise.org
Additional copies available for download at www.scholia.net

*Devotions for Advent based upon the season's readings from the three-year
lectionary.*

Pastor Tim Pauls

Week 4: The Advent of God in Flesh

Thursday, December 23

Read Matthew 1:18-25

"Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit." (Matt. 1:20)

Even Joseph is scandalized by the news of Jesus' conception; but then again, who can blame him? Mary tells him that she's with child, but that she's innocent and the father is the Holy Spirit. Sure. Joseph's supposed to believe that.

It's a nasty trick of the devil that the wonders of God are often dismissed because we're so overrun by sinful copycats. In this case, God fulfills His promise that the Savior would be born of a virgin (Is. 7:14); but immorality produces so many illegitimate births that Mary seems like one more permissive girl. Nevertheless, an angel appears and sets Joseph straight, and he takes Mary to be his wife. The Child is to be named Jesus, "Savior." And sure enough, when He is born, Isaiah 7:14 is fulfilled. Immanuel, "God with us," is in Mary's arms. The almighty God has yet to discover His tiny toes.

The miracle of Christmas, and the theme of this Advent season, is the coming of God in flesh, the coming of "God with us" for us. The Babe in Bethlehem is become flesh in order to die for your sins; and He will come again, in glory, to judge the living and the dead. That's your hope: He who died for your sins declares you not guilty for His sake.

As the mother of Christ suffered scorn for her part in God's plan of salvation, so does the Bride of Christ, the Church. The Church will always seem useless and scandalous in the eyes of the world. There will be plenty of sinful copycats, religions that seem to do a better job at motivating people or bringing happiness. There will be social agencies that do a better job at meeting the physical needs of people. But for holding fast to the Gospel and proclaiming it to the nations, the Church should anticipate scorn from within and without.

But this is what the Bride of Christ has, why she survives: her Bridegroom is never far away. Even as she rejoices that He has come in flesh to redeem her, and even as she looks to His promised return in glory, her Savior is present. Your Savior is present. He is Immanuel, "God with us," now. The Incarnate, crucified and risen Son of God put His name on you at your Baptism, sharing His death and resurrection with you. The Word-made-flesh speaks His Gospel to you, cleansing you of sin so that you might be His spotless bride. He prepares a table and feeds you His body and blood (the same that Mary once held in her arms) for the forgiveness of sins—to strengthen and preserve you in the one true faith unto life everlasting.

No Incarnation would mean no crucifixion, resurrection, Baptism, Gospel or Supper. So Christ has become flesh that all these things might be for you. Do not learn of Him from the scorn of the world or the doubts of your sinful heart. Hear the Word of the Word-made-flesh, and rejoice: Immanuel, "God with us," is with you.

*O Savior, with protecting care Abide in this Thy house of prayer,
Where we Thy parting promise claim, Assembled in Thy sacred name. (TLH 70:2)*

**For Zion's daughter, the bride,
scattered and driven ever further into the wilderness.**

**Fear not, for the place is prepared for you,
and your Bridegroom comes.**

Week 4: The Advent of God in Flesh**Wednesday, December 22**

Read Romans 1:1-7

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Ro. 1:7)

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "When you strike at a king, you must kill him." If you must attack a ruler, find his weakness and make sure you finish the job; if the king survives and regroups, he will be sure to destroy you.

As St. Paul's epistle to the Romans begins, he declares himself to be a bondservant and apostle—a messenger. He is sent ("apostle") to bring the message of his Master, Jesus Christ. Like a herald or ambassador who would bring the message of a king, Paul lists the credentials of Christ the King, so that his hearers might know why they should listen. The One whom Paul represents is the eternal Son of God, born of the seed of David. The King in whose stead Paul speaks is no less than God who became flesh and was raised from the dead.

Raised from the dead? This means that the God-man died, crucified by sinful man. Man struck the King and killed Him; but Paul announces that the King is risen—with power. Given the history of avenging kings, the fact that Christ is back could leave us quaking in our boots.

But the King isn't risen for vengeance. Paul continues that Christ is risen not to take lives, but to give gifts. He has called Paul to be His apostle to declare forgiveness and faith to the nations, not impending doom. So to the saints of Rome, Paul does not say, "The Lord is back, be afraid." Instead, he proclaims, *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1:7)*. The Lord whom man crucified, and His Father who watched His only Son so abused, bring them grace and peace! He became flesh for this very purpose. And having been crucified for their sins, He is risen to call them as His saints, beloved by God, and to give them eternal life. Remember the risen Lord's first words to his fearful, doubting disciples in a locked room: "Peace to you" (Jn 20:19). He appeared to them to forgive, not rebuke them.

Many pastors begin each sermon with the greeting of Romans 1:7. It announces what you should expect in the sermon: grace and peace from your crucified and risen Savior. Christ became flesh to win grace and peace for you on the cross. He sends His messengers to proclaim the same. Any other message is not what He sends.

Kings covet immortality; your immortal King suffers death for you. Rulers hide their weaknesses, but Jesus comes meekly in flesh to be weak. He comes not to strike, but to be stricken for your salvation. His immobilizing swaddling clothes in Bethlehem remind us of the burial cloth wrapped around Him on Good Friday. And as we prepare for Christmas just two days hence, we dare not forget this reason that God becomes flesh, for it is thus that He brings you grace and peace.

*A Helper just He comes to thee, His chariot is humility,
His kingly crown is holiness; His scepter, pity in distress.
The end of all our woe He brings; Wherefore the earth is glad and sings:
We praise Thee Savior, now, Mighty in deed art Thou! (TLH 73:2)*

Week 4: The Advent of God in Flesh**Tuesday, December 21**

Read Isaiah 7:10-17

*Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name**Immanuel (Is. 7:14).*

Immanuel; that was to be the name of the Virgin's Son. Immanuel, literally "God with us;" and the literal meaning conveyed literal truth. In other words, the Son would not symbolize that God was here, but the Son would be God here. With us.

When Gabriel is sent to Mary to tell her that she would be the mother of Jesus (Lk. 1:26-38), he begins with an Immanuel sort of greeting: *"Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you."* The angel means exactly that: the Lord of heaven and earth is now a microscopic zygote clinging to the wall in Mary's womb, become flesh just like you and on the way to the cross.

Sinful man doesn't deal with the Incarnation well at all. If God is "way out there" somewhere, that's okay, because then He's out of touch and man can compensate with his sinful ideas. If Jesus is just a human being, that's okay, too, because then He's just one wise teacher among many and man can obey what he wishes. All sorts of "experts" waste a lot of journal articles denying that Jesus could be God and man. How arrogant of man to argue that God can only do things that we can understand and replicate, the virgin birth being a prime example. Man still wants God created in man's image. But man's "wisdom" is really Satan's deception to rob you of hope. If Jesus were only God, He couldn't take your place and die for your sin; if He were only man, He couldn't die for the sins of the world. When one denies the virgin birth, he is also denying the other miracles of Jesus that man cannot replicate, like His atonement for the sins of the world and the resurrection of the dead. Tragically, many would rather question Mary's virtue than believe in Christ for eternal life.

Ah, but for you there is far better. Before prayer in the Divine Service, the pastor greets you, "The Lord be with you!" As you then pray, you do not pray alone. Jesus prays with you. He is your High Priest who can sympathize with your weaknesses *because* He became flesh (Heb. 4:15), and who constantly prays and intercedes for you forever (Heb 7:25)—forever *because* He is also God. Even better, just after the Words of Institution, the pastor declares, "The peace of the Lord be *with you* always." Why? Because the Lord is present with His body and blood in the Supper, bringing peace and grace. And then you pray, because He is with you, "O Christ, Thou Lamb of God, that takest away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us." It's the same Lord with the same body and blood that was conceived in Mary, nailed to the cross, and raised from the dead for your salvation. Immanuel, "God with us," is with you.

*Hosanna to the living Lord! Hosanna to th' Incarnate Word!
To Christ, Creator, Savior, King, Let earth, let heav'n, hosanna sing. (TLH 70:1)*

Week 1: The Advent of Judgment**Sunday, November 28**

Read Psalm 50:1-15

Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God will shine forth. (Ps. 50:2)

The advent of judgment is coming: the Lord is coming to judge. Psalm 50 declares that He's coming with tempest and devouring fire, to judge His people with justice and righteousness. That ought to ring a bell: it sounds an awful lot like Sinai (Ex. 19:18-19), where the Lord declared His Law to Moses. Moses read it to the people, and the people responded, "All the words which the LORD has said we will do" (Ex. 24:3). Moses took the blood of a sacrifice and sprinkled it on the people, and the covenant between God and Israel was sealed.

The rest of the Old Testament records how terribly the Israelites broke the covenant and were judged, eventually carried off to captivity. We are made of the same sinful flesh that they were. In other words, the Lord's proclamation that He is coming to judge with righteousness and justice isn't a comforting thing, for we deserve His condemnation. Thanks be to God that the psalm doesn't stop with this message, though, for it has two more advents to proclaim.

For one, the Lord calls for a sacrifice of praise from the people, not a sacrifice of blood (Ps. 50:14); and covenants are sealed by the shedding of blood (Heb. 9:18). If the people do not make that sacrifice, it means that the Lord is making the Sacrifice instead. This is the reason for Jesus' advent at Christmas: He has come to shed His blood for the sins of the world. Because of His sacrifice, God, the righteous Judge, declares you forgiven and righteous.

But where is this forgiveness between Jesus' advent in Bethlehem and His advent on the Last Day? Psalm 50:2 points to Zion. "Zion" is wherever God is present to save His people. It was the temple in the Old Testament. Today, it's His Church, wherever His Word is proclaimed and His Sacraments given. The Lord comes in this advent of grace until the Last Day, speaking forgiveness, cleansing of sin, and giving you the blood of the new covenant (Mt. 26:28).

You will find the same theme in Hebrews 12:18-24: *For you have not come to the mountain that may be touched and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words, so that those who heard it begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore.... But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel.* And this is your reason to rejoice: the Lord is indeed coming to judge. But before He does, He has come meekly to die in your place. And until He does, He comes to forgive you by His Word and Sacraments.

*Arise, ye drooping mourners! The King is very near;
Away with grief and sorrow! For, lo, your Help is here.
Behold in many a place—O blessed consolation!—
You find Him, your Salvation, Within His means of grace. (TLH 69:3)*

Week 1: The Advent of Judgment**Monday, November 29**

Read Isaiah 2:1-5

They shall beat their swords into plowshares, And their spears into pruning hooks; Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, Neither shall they learn war anymore. (Is. 2:4)

Kings execute judgment. They make decisions and then enforce them—with the sword, if necessary. That's just the way it works in this world. People have often become a king's subjects unwillingly by being conquered. Isaiah's first audience was well aware of how the world works: they'd seen the northern ten tribes wiped from history by the Assyrians, and it was only a matter of time until the Babylonians level Jerusalem.

To them, Isaiah prophesied hope, the coming of the eternal King and His kingdom. He declared that this kingdom would be great, but it would not be one of coercion; instead of being coerced by sword-point, all nations would flow to it willingly (Is. 5:2). This kingdom would begin in Jerusalem, but then would go forth wherever God's Word goes (5:3). The Lord would judge between the nations; or, better, *among* the nations. In other words, this kingdom would not stake out a plot of land, but would be present throughout the nations of the earth (5:4). He would rebuke many people, convicting them of their sin; and as a result, proclaims Isaiah, *They shall beat their swords into plowshares, And their spears into pruning hooks; Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, Neither shall they learn war anymore.*

God is faithful, and this promise is fulfilled. His Church began in Jerusalem (Acts 2), and from there it continues to spread to all nations (Mt. 28:19). It spreads by His Word, by which the Holy Spirit convicts people of sin, righteousness and judgment (Jn. 16:8). The Lord does not force anyone into His kingdom. Rather, He declares that He has died and risen to ransom the world from the kingdom of death and grave; and by His Gospel, many are gathered into His kingdom. His people live lives of repentance, forgiveness and humility; thus there is no need of sword or spear to settle disputes, only His holy Word.

Ironically, part of Isaiah 2:4 adorns a wall at the United Nations, where man seeks peace by man's work of diplomacy, agenda and peacekeeping forces. (The beginning of the verse, that this is the Lord's work, is omitted.) Try as he might, man can't establish peace in this dying world. But behold your omnipotent, eternal King! Before He comes with irresistible judgment, He first comes humbly, born of a virgin. He rides a donkey into Jerusalem to wear a crown of thorns and suffer the cross. Risen, He declares that death to you, to draw you into His everlasting kingdom. He will come in glory to judge; but before that, He comes with His consoling Gospel to make you His people, that He might judge you forgiven and innocent on the Last Day.

*He comes to judge the nations, A terror to His foes,
A Light of consolations, And blessed Hope to those
Who love the Lord's appearing. O glorious Sun, now come,
Send forth Thy beams most cheering, And guide us safely home. (TLH 58:9)*

Week 4: The Advent of God in Flesh**Monday, December 20**

Read Psalm 24

Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? Or who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart... (Ps. 24:3-4).

Living in such a pragmatic age, we are constantly tempted to dismiss the birth of Jesus as a historical moment, but nothing helpful. However, the Incarnation—God becoming flesh—is a great miracle, and do not ever forget: what Jesus does, He does for you. He becomes flesh and blood to save you—flesh, blood and all. He lives a perfect life in order to credit you with His righteousness. He dies your death for your sin, to spare you God's eternal damnation. He rises from the dead to give you life, and He ascends into heaven, body and all, so that you might be raised to heaven, body and all.

David asks, "Who may stand in [the LORD'S] holy place?" For the sake of Christ, the answer is now an emphatic "You!" Your hands are not clean, for they have committed sinful acts; thus Christ accepted nails into His hands to suffer your cross. Your heart is not pure from sin, but still constantly strays from the Lord and His ways; so the Lord suffered the heartbreak of your condemnation, to create in you a clean heart by grace. Where you lift up your soul to an idol and trust in money, health, medicine, others, your own desires, etc., Jesus remained perfectly devoted to His Father's will for your salvation. Where your mouth has deceived or made false promises, Jesus has sworn by Himself to send out His saving Word (Is. 45:23), and He will not break that promise. All of this is yours because your Savior became flesh with hands, mouth, heart and blood in order to take your place on the cross.

In a Christmas sermon, Martin Luther tells the story of a man who shows no respect during the Creed when the congregation says that Christ was made man. The devil appears and knocks him to the ground, calling him a fool and saying that if Christ had become an angel, then he (the devil!) would certainly bow in awe that He had become the angels' brother. It's a fictional story, of course, but it drives the point home: How honored are we that Christ would become flesh like us. How thankful ought we be that He became flesh to die for us. As Johann Gerhard pointed out, Jesus' Incarnation has glorified our human nature more than Adam disgraced it.

How merciful is our God! Rather than forsake us for our sin, He takes our place and suffers our death. Risen again, He invites us into His holy presence in His Word and Sacrament, to strengthen and preserve us in the one true faith until life everlasting. There, we will stand before God in His glory, joyfully singing the worthiness of the Lamb who was slain, whose blood set us free to be His people forever.

*The everlasting Son Incarnate deigns to be;
Himself a servant's form puts on to set His servants free. (TLH 68:2)*

Week 4: The Advent of God in Flesh**Sunday, December 19**

Read Psalm 24

Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, He is the King of glory. (Ps. 24:10)

Christmas is coming! It's only five more days until Christmas, and the excitement is on the rise. Most people have some sort of expectation for the holiday—what's going to come about? But there's a better question: *Who* is coming? Who comes with judgment, righteousness and healing? The readings of this final week proclaim the miraculous answer, beginning with Psalm 24.

As much as you or I might eagerly wait for Christmas, it is nothing compared to the wait of the people of God throughout the Old Testament. From one step out of Eden, through a worldwide flood, during captivities in Egypt and Babylon, God's people were waiting for the Savior to come. God did not leave them hopeless: He promised the Savior already in Genesis 3, and renewed that promise repeatedly throughout the ages—including Psalm 24. David begins this psalm with the truth that the earth is the Lord's creation and possession. The Lord, Yahweh, is the one true, all-powerful God.

In verse 3, David abruptly switches subjects. Who may stand before God in His Holy Place? The obvious answer is the high priest, and David adds that the high priest must have clean hands and a pure heart, and God will bless him. "This is Jacob," says David in verse 6, "the generation of those who seek Him, who seek your face." God appeared to Jacob in a dream, at the top of a ladder on which angels were ascending and descending; there, God promised the Savior again (Gen. 28:14). Jacob called the place Bethel, "house of God," a holy place where he had stood. David switches again in verse 7: The King of glory is coming! He's coming with strength and might, and He'll reign forever.

Now, here's the kicker in this psalm: David doesn't start speaking of the Savior in verse 7: he's been speaking of Jesus all along. Jesus is the High Priest who has made the perfect sacrifice, and now sits at the right hand of God and intercedes for us (Heb. 8:1ff). He's the fulfillment of Jacob in that He referred to His cross as the ladder by which we have access to heaven (Jn. 1:51). Risen from the dead, He's the king of glory who reigns forever with power and might.

All of that is astonishing enough, a priest-king who reigns forever, but there's more. *Who is this King of glory?* asks David. The answer: *The LORD of hosts!* The Savior who comes is no less than Yahweh, to whom the earth and its fullness belong. Through David, the Lord declares that He Himself will come to save His people.

Psalm 24 foretold much about the Savior, much for us to marvel at still. However, add one more truth as you prepare for Christmas: Yahweh, the all-powerful Creator of heaven and earth, the perfect Priest and mighty King, is born in a stable and laid in a manger. He becomes flesh most humbly, because He's come to serve you in great humility, even unto death.

*Oh, come, Oh, come Emmanuel; And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here Until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel Shall come to thee, O Israel. (TLH 62:1)*

Week 1: The Advent of Judgment**Tuesday, November 30**

Read Romans 13:11-14

And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. (Ro. 13:11)

The Lord will return to judge all nations; and while we do not know the day of His coming, that day is closer now than ever before. We know, too, that the Lord warns us to watch for His arrival and not be caught unprepared (Mt. 24:42; 25:13). St. Paul gives the same warning in Romans 13.

What is the dangerous sleep? It's a lack of love brought about by sin. Paul mentions revelry and drunkenness, lewdness and lust, strife and envy. All of these lead to this sleep, this apathy about the Lord's return. Revelry and drunkenness ease one into indiscretion, not to mention denial of trouble, guilt and impending judgment. Lewdness and lust make one idolize the pleasures of this world, so that he doesn't care of the Lord's return. Strife and envy put one on a path to show others he's better; and in looking out for himself, he has no time to watch for the Lord's return.

Given the materialistic, sexualized world in which having fun is the worship of the common man, it's no surprise that many Christians are sleepy. In fact, none of us can say he is fully awake. What's the solution? Put on Christ, says Paul. Wear His merit, the perfect righteousness He displayed when He became man.

Although the Lord had no objection to a good celebration, festivities never distracted Him from your redemption. Rather than idolize physical pleasure, He gave His back to the scourge, His hands and feet to the nails, His body to the cross. Rather than strive against His enemies or envy those with an easier life, the Lord Jesus patiently accepted His Father's plan and died for the sins of the world—for you, too. He became flesh for precisely this suffering and death.

Put on Christ. How? Paul tells you elsewhere: *For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ* (Gal 3:27). In your Baptism, Christ removed your sins and clothed you in His righteousness. By daily repentance, you are living as a forgiven child of God. Forgiven, you're awake and prepared for His return; and your salvation is nearer than when you first believed.

Lo, the Lamb, so long expected, Comes with pardon down from heaven.

*Let us haste, with tears of sorrow, One and all to be forgiven,
That, when next He comes with glory, And the world is wrapped in fear
He may shield us with His mercy And with words of love draw near.*

(TLH 60:3-4)

Week 1: The Advent of Judgment

Read Matthew 24:37-44

"Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming."

(Mt. 24:42)

Except when it comes to the fiction of books or movies, we don't like suspense. The more serious the situation—the outcome of a battle or a loved one in surgery, the less we like to be uncertain. Certainty is comforting.

When it comes to His return in judgment, the Lord leaves us guessing. He teaches that He will come in a time as the days of Noah were: almost all had forsaken Him, but their normal activities like eating, drinking and marriage assured them that all was well until the first raindrop. So it will be with the Lord's return, and all those unprepared will be caught off guard.

(By the way, please note that when the flood came, it *took* all the unbelievers away to judgment (v. 39), while Noah and his family were *left behind*. Likewise, the man and woman who are taken in the next two verses are taken to judgment, while those left behind remain in the Lord's care. This is not a passage that teaches a sudden "rapture" of Christians before the end of the world, but one that tells that the end will come unexpectedly, with no second chance for unbelievers.)

The Lord leaves us in suspense as to the day of His return, and this is a blessing for the sinful likes of you and me. If we had a date to mark on the calendar, Old Adam would work overtime to lead us into all sorts of sin beforehand, tempting us that we could repent the day before and be ready. To oppose that temptation, the suspense is a good thing.

As we wait, however, the Lord also leaves us in certainty. He points to a manger in Bethlehem, so that you can be certain He's become flesh like you, for you. He points to a cross on a hill, so that you can be certain your redemption is won. He points you to His Word and His Sacraments, where He comes to you continuously to forgive your sins, to prepare you for His coming. You don't know the day or the hour that He will return, nor do you know what life holds for you in the meantime. But of this you are certain: forgiven of your sins, you're ready for Christ's return.

*Rejoice, then, ye sad-hearted, Who sit in deepest gloom,
Who mourn o'er joys departed And tremble at your doom.
Despair not, He is near you, Yea, standing at the door,
Who best can help and cheer you, and bids you weep no more.*

(TLH 58:5)

Week 3: The Advent of Healing

Saturday, December 18

Read Matthew 11:2-11

"For this is he of whom it is written: 'Behold, I send My messenger before Your face. Who will prepare Your way before You.'" (Mt. 11:10)

John prepared the way for Jesus. The forerunner foreshadowed the Savior. John baptized with water, proclaiming that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. John taught crowds, who multiplied when Jesus came. John rebuked Herod; Jesus testified before both Herod and Pilate. John died in prison for speaking the truth; Jesus died on the cross for being the Truth.

Is this a winning team? To the world, John looked like the wilderness man who had the nerve to scold a king and die for it. Jesus looked like a misguided teacher who took on a religious establishment that stoned blasphemers. No, not exactly a couple of success stories to the world. But then again, the world is usually wrong. No matter appearances, the One on the cross was the Son of God, atoning for the sins of the world.

Be prepared, because the world hasn't changed.. It's foolish to the world that you trust in a Man who died 2000 years ago, and declare that His death means life. Don't expect to be treated well for being a disciple. In the next verse after this text, Jesus warns, "*And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.*" However, it doesn't stop there. Even within the Church, you will face great criticism and skepticism for believing that the Lord visits you by His means of grace. You'll hear that you're foolish for clinging to His Word and Sacraments—that doing so will hinder your Christian purpose, or that honoring pure doctrine prevents evangelism. The means of grace seem foolish to many; and if we truly believe that the Lord comes with forgiveness in these, then we must also say that the Lord's coming to His people seems foolish to many—even within the Church!

The greater your suffering at any given time, the more you will be tempted to believe the same. What help is the Gospel if illness doesn't go away? What help does the Lord's Supper provide when the pain of grief doesn't lessen? It's then that the means of grace look as helpful as Jesus looked successful.

But don't forget: You walk by faith, not by sight. The Lord's Word is far more certain than what your reddened eyes see, what your sinful flesh feels, or what your exhausted emotions cry. In a world dying of sin, you and I can expect no better than trouble; but thanks be to God that this is not the end. Christ died and rose again. He will come again to raise you from the dead. In the meantime, He comes to you with the healing balm of forgiveness in His Word and Sacraments, with the promise of eternal life and healing. Of this you can be sure, for He has given you His Word.

*Then stilled are cries and lamentation, Then loosed is Satan's every band;
In death is hope and consolation, The soul is safe in Jesus' hand.
When we shall walk though death's dark vale, His rod and staff shall never fail.*

(TLH 65:5)

Week 3: The Advent of Healing**Friday, December 17**

Read Matthew 11:2-11

And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me. (Mt. 11:6)

Patience and trust don't come easily, especially during a time of suffering. So it proves for John the Baptist, or some of his disciples, while he languishes in prison. The forerunner is imprisoned for preparing the way—he is suffering for the truth, but Jesus seems to be doing little about it. He is teaching, working miracles, sending out disciples; John remains chained. Does Jesus care about His cousin? Or maybe is it that He isn't the Savior and can't? So two disciples of John come and ask: *"Are you the Coming One, or do we look for another?"*

Look how Jesus answers: He points them to the Word, including Isaiah 35. *"The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them."* Jesus is doing all the things that the prophets said He would do. He is not working to spring John from prison and back on the street; but then again, the prophets never prophesied that He would. Isaiah did, however, declare that Christ would proclaim liberty to the captive (Is. 61:6), so John can be confident that help and eternal deliverance is on the way.

Jesus continues, *"And blessed is he who is not offended by Me."* Plenty will be offended by the Savior. They'll be offended because He tells them that they can't save themselves, when He lovingly warns them that they're failing God's Law. They'll be offended because they want Him to help them with something that He's not there to do (Lk. 12:13-14). They'll be offended because He doesn't run the Romans out of Judea. They'll be offended when He heals (!) if that healing harms their agenda (Lk. 13:14). And they'll most certainly be offended when the Son of God permits Himself to be beaten, scourged and crucified. It's then that they'll mock Him most, calling out, *"He saved others; Himself He cannot save. If He is the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him"* (Mt. 27:42). That's sinful man in a nutshell: *"We'll believe in Jesus as long as He's the Savior according to our plan."* Otherwise, He remains a scandal to man's wisdom and demands for proof (I Cor. 1:23).

But man's plans lead to destruction, and Jesus steadfastly sticks with His Father's plan for our salvation. Isaiah also declared that He would be wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities (Is 53:5). At the cross, Jesus is still fulfilling prophecy as He wins your salvation, that you might be certain you are saved.

After this text, John will stay in prison and eventually lose his head to a drunken, erratic Herod. But this does not mean Jesus has failed him. Because Jesus goes to the cross, He'll raise John from the dead to life everlasting. He promises that John's captivity will end. He promises yours will, too.

*Our Hope and Expectation, O Jesus, now appear;
Arise, Desire of nations, O'er this benighted sphere.
With hearts and hands uplifted, We plead, O Lord, to see
The day of earth's redemption, That brings us unto Thee!* (TLH 72:4)

Week 1: The Advent of Judgment**Thursday, December 2**

Read Matthew 24:37-44

"For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark..." (Mt. 24:38)

The Lord saved Noah and his family from utter destruction by putting them on the ark and shutting them in. This deliverance did not happen overnight. Construction of the ark took about eighty years, while the preacher of righteousness (2 Pet. 2:5) and his family doubtlessly suffered the scorn and mockery of the people around them. Once the flood came, they were safe. They were on a closed ship tightly packed with every conceivable animal, bobbing up and down for days and nights. Scripture does not record the conditions or comfort while living inside the ark, but it may not have been the most enjoyable place to be, especially with the awareness of so much judgment, death and destruction just outside the door.

St. Peter calls the ark an antitype (a foreshadowing) of Holy Baptism in I Peter 3:20. As Noah and his family were saved through water, so are you; because Holy Baptism works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare.

Note what Baptism doesn't give or promise—freedom from suffering in this world, protection from scorn, or a carefree life. Because of the violent sinfulness of the world, Noah and his family were likely buffeted and uncomfortable, even as the Lord delivered them by water and His promise. Likewise, you will suffer the attacks of the devil, the world and your own sinful flesh, each seeking to persuade you to abandon those baptismal gifts. Why? Because they want you outside the ark, bathed in sin, destined for destruction at the Final Judgment.

But death is not yours at the Final Judgment, because you've already died. Jesus joined you to His death and resurrection in Holy Baptism (Ro. 6:3-4); and although you must still suffer physical death, the far more hideous second death is already gone. For now, you remain in the ark. In fact, during Divine Service, you sit in the nave, from the Latin for "boat." In Christ by Baptism, you're safe in the boat. The waves will toss and the wind will howl, but the voyage is certain. Heaven is yours as promised.

*Thus God shall from all evil Forever make us free,
From sin, and from the devil, From all adversity,
From sickness, pain and sadness, From troubles, cares, and fears,
And grant us heavenly gladness And wipe away our tears.* (TLH 67:7)

Week 1: The Advent of Judgment

Read Matthew 21:1-11

Then the multitudes who went before and those who followed cried out, saying: "Hosanna to the Son of David! 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!' Hosanna in the highest!" (Mt. 21:9)

Here comes the Judge, but it's not a courtroom. He rides on a donkey to fulfill prophecy (Zech. 9:9), and the people are hardly sitting in respectful silence. They're throwing palms and coats upon the road in front of him, a soft carpet for the donkey's hooves. They're shouting "Hosanna!"—"Save now!"

It's a strange thing to say, because judges don't save. They condemn the guilty and punish them. They spare the innocent, but the innocent don't have punishment coming. But here comes the Judge, and He's come to save the guilty!, save them now, because Judgment Day has not yet arrived.

It's not Judgment Day yet: The time has not come for sinners to suffer damnation for their sins; and, in fact, we still await that Last Day. But five days after His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the Judge suffers judgment on the cross. Why? Behold the mercy of He who will judge the living and the dead. All sinners deserve condemnation at His hand; but so loving and merciful is the Lord that He sentences Himself to suffer their judgment. The Son is damned by His Father on the cross in order to redeem mankind from sin and death.

You will hear, from time to time, that God is cruel. "Who is He to judge me?" someone will demand. Part of the answer is that He is your Creator, and that gives Him the right. But the answer doesn't stop there: He is the Judge who sentenced Himself to death in your place, to spare your life. All accusations that the Lord is cruel die at the cross. Could there be a judge more merciful than one who takes the place of those He must convict?

This is your confidence on the Last Day, the Day of Judgment. You know the verdict already, because the Lord tells you so. In Holy Absolution, He declares His enduring verdict to you: "I find you 'not guilty,' because I've already suffered for your sin." If your sin is gone and the sentence served, then all you have left is life and salvation.

*Jesus, Thy Church with longing eyes For thine expected coming waits.
When will the promised light arise And glory beam from Zion's gates?*

*E'en now, when tempests round us fall And wintry clouds o'ercast the sky,
Thy words with pleasure we recall And deem that our redemption's nigh.*

(TLH 64:1-2)

Week 3: The Advent of Healing

Thursday, December 16

Read James 5:7-10

Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand (Ja. 5:8).

Patience. Four times in four verses, James uses a form of the word. Since the Fall into sin, the people of God have awaited the Lord's coming. For centuries, the prayer has been in the liturgy: "Maranatha"—"Come, O Lord."

The prayer remains because the Lord still tarries according to His Word. Patience doesn't come easy. The world embraces any god while it denounces the Savior as intolerant. Within the Church, the means of grace are often ignored in favor of "how-to" Gospel-less sermons and a fear of offending by speaking of sin. Watching the world decay is difficult enough. Witnessing the same within the Church is gut-wrenching. Along with the big picture, every Christian faces personal sufferings and griefs. No, patience doesn't come easy.

But James warns against impatience for good reason. Without patience, there's grumbling. Israel grumbled against the Lord in the wilderness, impatient for food, water and a home. They doubted God would keep His Word, accusing Him of bringing them into the wilderness to die (Ex. 14:11). James warns of grumbling against one another: if the body of Christ doubts the Lord's promised deliverance, there is nothing left to hold the body together. After grumbling and disunity comes despair. With despair, there is no hope. Be patient.

That's Law, and it accuses each of us. Who does not become impatient? Who does not become frustrated? Who does not grumble that the Lord waits too long?

Here's hope: you're not saved by your patience. You're saved by Jesus' patience, because he patiently endured the cross and scorned its shame for you (Heb. 12:2). He's suffered for your impatience and taken that sin upon Himself. In its place, He gives His grace to you. How?

James points to the prophets as an example of patience, *who spoke in the name of the Lord*. While they witnessed the decline of Israel, they proclaimed the Savior who would patiently bear the sins of the world. They proclaimed the Word by which the Lord gives grace and life. By His life, they endured.

The Lord still speaks by His Word. Among other times, He speaks His Word over bread and wine, to give you His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. There, while you await His return, Jesus patiently comes to you to strengthen and preserve you in the one true faith. That's why "Maranatha" in the liturgy has come just before the Lord's Supper: Christ's people pray, "Come, O Lord." He responds, "Here I am. Take and eat, this is My body."

Rejoice, then, as you await the Lord's coming; for He comes to you even now to prepare you for that day.

*Oh, rich the gifts Thou bringest, Thyself made poor and weak!
O Love beyond expression, That thus can sinners seek!
For this, O Lord, will we Our joyous tribute bring Thee
And glad hosannas sing Thee And ever grateful be.* (TLH 69:6)

Week 3: The Advent of Healing**Wednesday, December 15**

Read Isaiah 35:1-10

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, And the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. (Is. 35:5)

Why does it have to *then*? Why can't it be *now*? Each of us is tempted to these questions when suffering. It may be the anguish of family strife, enduring illness, pervasive grief. With the psalmist, we cry out, "How long, O Lord?" (Ps. 13:1). Our situation—what we see and feel and suffer—argues that God isn't there or doesn't care. Why can't he heal us now?

There is a blessing for us in suffering, for this Law accuses us. Our sufferings remind us that we live in a dying world and go about our lives in dying flesh. Even with so much grief in the world, it is easy for us to take the Lord's grace for granted and believe this life is good enough without Him. If we did not have suffering to remind us of our need for healing grace, we would be far more likely to dismiss our need for Jesus altogether.

St. Paul admitted that he was tempted to think too highly of himself and dismiss his need for the Lord and His forgiveness; therefore, the Lord permitted a thorn in the flesh, something that troubled him no end. He prayed three times that the Lord would remove it ("How long, O Lord?"), but He did not. Instead, God declared, *"My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."* In response, Paul declared, *Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me* (2 Cor 12:9).

The Lord permits suffering so that we might rejoice in Christ's perfection and healing for us. Furthermore, He then uses us in our sufferings to accomplish His will. I know of one pastor who was forced to resign his call because of health problems. He has spent the past few years translating extraordinary books of doctrine from German to English, and I owe him a deep debt for the education his work has provided. The Lord has used a thorn in this man's flesh to benefit many.

Sometimes, the Lord may use us very passively. Luther writes that, at times, God may leave us incapacitated so that others may learn to serve by caring for us. There are few greater frustrations than to be so dependent upon others, yet even then the Lord is putting us to His good use.

That's hardly the great comfort here, though. The comfort is this: As we cry out, "How long, O Lord?" or "When?", there is most certainly a *then*. As surely as Jesus has come to redeem us, He promises a glorious advent when He will return to deliver us to heaven. That *then* is guaranteed for all of His forgiven people. And even in the midst of suffering, He gives you that guarantee repeatedly in His Word and Sacraments.

*Be righteous, ye His subjects, The King is just and true;
Prepare for Him a highway, Make all things straight and new.
For, lo, He means it well; Then willing bear the crosses
That He Himself imposes, Nor let your courage fail. (TLH 69:5)*

Week 1: The Advent of Judgment**Saturday, December 4**

Read Matthew 21:1-11

And when He had come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, "Who is this?" (Mt. 21:10)

"Hosanna" and "Who is this?" were the phrases of Palm Sunday. "Hosanna!"—"Save now!" shouted the crowds along the road; and those within the city wanted to know who was coming to save. The answer was twofold: The One coming to save was "The Son of David...who comes in the name of the Lord," and "Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth of Galilee." God-and-man-in-one was riding to Jerusalem to save.

No wonder the crowds shouted "Hosanna!" God Himself was visibly present with a human body, with human blood coursing through His veins. He wasn't "way out there" somewhere, but bodily, really present with them. Save now!

By Friday, the shouts had changed to "Crucify Him!" and "*Save Yourself!* If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross." (Mt. 27:40). But the Son of God didn't come down from the cross, spare His body or prevent His blood from being shed. He was there to save now, not save Himself. He was there to save you.

So that you can be sure that this salvation is yours, behold one more means of grace. Just before the Lord's Supper, you sing in the liturgy, "Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is He that comes in the name of the Lord!" You sing the song of the Palm Sunday crowds, when Jesus was present to save. Why? Because the same Jesus is just as present with you—really, bodily present. He is giving you His body and blood in, with and under bread and wine; the same body that suffered and the same blood that was shed. The same body and blood now risen from the dead for eternity, to strengthen and preserve you in the one true faith unto life everlasting.

This, too, is the gift of the One who will judge the living in the dead. By Baptism, you already have eternal life. By Absolution, you have already heard His judgment of you. By His Supper, He continues to "hosanna" as He forgives and prepares you for His eternal wedding feast. By these means, between His advent in Bethlehem and His second advent in glory, He comes to you again and again with gifts of faith and salvation. You can be sure you are prepared for Judgment Day, because the Lord is with you, to save you now.

*When Jesus comes,—O blessed story!—He works a change in heart and life;
God's kingdom comes with pow'r and glory To young and old, to man and wife;
Thro' Sacrament and living Word, Faith, love and hope are now conferred.*

(TLH 65:4)

Week 2: The Advent of Righteousness

Sunday, December 5

Read Psalm 72:1-14

He will judge Your people with righteousness, And Your poor with justice.

(Ps. 72:2)

Righteousness: a state of perfect, sinless obedience to God. The texts for the second week of Advent announce that Jesus comes with righteousness. As the psalm begins, God gives righteousness to His Son so that His Son might rule His people with righteousness and justice, with peace and care for those who are oppressed. So the Savior comes to rule.

To the world, though, such a kingdom is laughable. Pure righteousness doesn't work for running a kingdom in this world. Rulers rule by force, by compromise, and by deception at times; and all of these rarely have much to do with righteousness. To rule in this world, you have to impose your will on others with a serious degree of arrogance. You have to get your hands a little dirty, maybe a lot. Furthermore, since righteousness is beyond the reach of your people, you demand and reward loyalty instead. It seems to be the effective plan for ruling, given how poorly the Son's kingdom turns out in the world's eyes: all of Jesus' talk about love and holiness are fine, but they do nothing to prevent Roman soldiers from scourging and crucifying Him. Righteousness and servanthood seem a poor plan for running or keeping a kingdom.

But Jesus' kingdom is not of this world, and His ways are higher than the ways of man. When He rules with righteousness, He does not demand that people perfectly obey God or die; since they cannot keep that Law, He dies for their unrighteousness and gives them credit for His righteousness. To save His people, the Lord only gets His hands dirty in that He bears that filthy load of sin to the cross in order to redeem the world. So precious is the blood of the redeemed that He sheds His, not theirs, for their redemption. He rules by humble, selfless service, even to death. St. Paul records this wonder when he proclaims, *[God] made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Him* (2 Co. 5:21).

Give thanks, then, for your righteous King. If He ruled by power, demanding that you earn His favor by your righteous works, you would have no hope (cf. Ro. 3:9-19). But because He rules by giving you His righteousness, your place in His kingdom is certain—and His kingdom is everlasting.

*Jesus came the heav'ns adoring, Came with peace from realms on high;
Jesus came for man's redemption, Lowly came on earth to die;
Alleluia! Alleluia! Came in deep humility. (TLH 56:1)*

Week 3: The Advent of Healing

Tuesday, December 14

Read Isaiah 35:1-10

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, And the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, And the tongue of the dumb sing (Is. 35:5-6).

Age and disease have a way of preaching the wages of sin in a way that no sermon ever could. Eyesight fails and hearing gets hard. Arthritis cripples and speaking gets hard to understand. All of these are outriders of the truth that *Man is like a breath; His days are like a passing shadow* (Ps. 144:4). In the words of one beloved senior citizen, "Growing old isn't fun."

No, it's not; and it's painful to watch a loved one suffer the ravages of illness and aging. It's also alarming to witness it in your own body. Death wants it that way, to make you believe that the grave is your remorseless, undeniable end.

So keep this text in mind, because it goes a long way to kicking death in the teeth. For those waiting through dark Old Testament years for the Savior's coming, Isaiah 35 gave them some clues to look for. When the Messiah came, He would make the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame leap and the mute sing. All of this was fulfilled by Jesus as He performed miracle after miracle, making His way to the cross.

And as He healed the blind, deaf, lame and mute along the way, He was only getting started.

Jesus performed those miracles to fulfill the prophecy and demonstrate He was the Savior. But in doing so, He also gave us a glimpse of the Day of Resurrection. On that day, He will transform your lowly, sin-plagued body that it may be conformed to His glorious body (Phil. 3:21), never to suffer again.

This is your hope: the grave is not the end. Death bares its teeth and snarls, but it has lost its sting. It has been defeated by Christ at the cross, and your Savior now uses this captive to deliver His people to heaven. Whatever your afflictions, this is certain: you will see and hear clearly. You'll leap like a deer. You'll sing with the heavenly hosts.

How sure? It's already yours. You've been baptized into Christ's death and His resurrection. He has brought the abundant waters of His grace to you in the wilderness of this world. The resurrection of the dead is coming. For those who suffer, your eternal healing (already given!) is only a matter of time. For those who grieve, the Lord is coming with joy everlasting, and all your sorrow and sighing will flee away.

*Oh, how blest are ye whose toils are ended,
Who thro' death have unto God ascended!
Ye have arisen From the cares which keep us still in prison.
Christ has wiped away your tears forever;
Ye have that for which we still endeavor;
To you are chanted Songs that ne'er to mortal ears were granted.
(TLH 589:1,4)*

Week 3: The Advent of Healing**Monday, December 13**

Read Psalm 146

Do not put your trust in princes, Nor in a son of man, in whom there is no help (Ps. 146:3).

In his book *How We Die*, Dr. Sherwin Nuland insists that a doctor must always provide his patients with hope. A patient who has no hope has only despair, and despair is an enemy of healing. Although a physician, Dr. Nuland advises patients that they must not put their final hope in doctors or medical technology; they must find a better source of hope than that.

I appreciate Nuland because he knows the limitations of medicine. As much as I give thanks doctors and the healing that the Lord works through their skills, doctors are always playing a losing game. Eventually, every one of their patients will die, and so will they. Eventually, Psalm 146 is true of every physician as it is for every man: *His spirit departs, he returns to his earth; in that day his plans perish* (Ps.146:4). Christians do well to avoid a common temptation during time of illness: to place more trust in doctor and medication than in the Lord. It's a seductive idolatry when sickness strikes, but these perish. There has to be a better hope. And this is where Nuland falls: he's not a Christian, and suggests that each man must find a personal hope that works for him; but all these perish, too.

You have a better hope—a hope that isn't created by you, but given to you by God: *Happy is he who has the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the LORD his God* (Ps. 146:5). You have Christ as your hope, because Christ has made you His. No medicine or procedure in the medical world can prevent eventual death. But your Savior has conquered death and risen from the grave, never to die again. And now that He has conquered death, He uses this foe in His service to deliver you from every illness to eternal life, with an incorruptible body like His own (Phil. 3:21).

St. Luke records a story of healing in Luke 8:43-47. Though a doctor by training, he freely confesses that the woman with an issue of blood had an affliction that no doctor could heal. However, she was healed because Jesus was present there, speaking His Word to her.

The Lord Jesus is just as present with you by His Word and Sacraments. By water and the Word, He has already saved you from eternal death, a far more hideous dying than we can conceive. By His Absolution, He continues to cleanse you of that sin which brings sickness and death to plague you. By His Supper, He strengthens and preserves you unto life everlasting with the eternal medicine of His own body and blood. Give thanks to God for His gift of doctors and medications for this life, but rejoice all the more that your crucified Savior gives you life for eternity.

*He comes the broken heart to bind, The bleeding soul to cure,
And with the treasures of His grace T'enrich the humble poor.
Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace, Thy welcome shall proclaim
And heaven's eternal arches ring With Thy beloved name. (TLH 66:4-5)*

Week 2: The Advent of Righteousness**Monday, December 6**

Read Psalm 72:15-19

His name shall endure forever; His name shall continue as long as the sun. And men shall be blessed in Him; All nations shall call Him blessed. (Ps. 72:17)

“The king is dead. Long live the king.”

It's a familiar cry from history, an assurance to the people. Each monarch eventually died, but his subjects were not left without a protector. The crown was placed upon another, and those in the kingdom owed the new king the same honor and obedience as the one before. While the death of a monarch might bring mourning, a change in rulers could be good, for not every king ruled justly and wisely.

When Jesus was crucified, there was no doubt as to why He was executed. Pilate had pronounced Him innocent three times. The Jews wanted Him dead for calling Himself a king (Jn. 18:21), and the Roman soldiers hailed Him as such (Mt. 27:29). When Pilate posted the charge on the cross above Jesus' head, he announced to the world with all gravity that Christ was dying for being the King of the Jews, and had no interest in editing his judgment (Jn. 18:21-22).

In other words, Jesus was crucified precisely for being a sinless King.

Injustice? Absolutely. From the rancor of the campaign season just past, it is obvious that man doesn't like the thought of a ruler that disagrees with his own agenda. For sinners, the prospect of a righteous King ruling for eternity is abhorrent. Crucify Him! So they did.

But Christ rose from the dead three days later, and so the Christian's cry of their King's death is a little different: The King *was* dead. Long live the King! Risen from the dead, your King will never die again. His name and His rule endure over all nations forever.

Man still rebels against this reign, seeking to have the Lord and His Gospel removed from public life here, persecuting and killing His people there. The opposition to Christ's rule remains fervent and violent. But this is only because they have the message wrong.

Your King's name and reign of righteousness endure forever, and this is a declaration of mercy. There will never be a time where He does not give forgiveness, where He does not credit repentant sinners with His righteousness. There will never be a time where He who died for the sins of the world does not offer that salvation to all nations. There will never be a time when you need wonder if He has forgiveness left for your sins. He died once for all; He lives eternally to bless all men with grace. Your King lives. So do you.

*My hosannas and my palms Graciously receive, I pray Thee;
Evermore, as best I can, Savior, I will homage pay Thee,
And in faith I will embrace, Lord, Thy merit thro' Thy grace. (TLH 55:3)*

Week 2: The Advent of Righteousness**Tuesday, December 7**

Read Isaiah 11:1-10

His delight is in the fear of the LORD, And He shall not judge by the sight of His eyes, Nor decide by the hearing of His ears; But with righteousness He shall judge the poor... (Is. 11:3-4a)

Isaiah 11:1-2 declares two great mysteries—the Trinity and Incarnation. The Lord rests His Spirit upon His Son, who becomes flesh and is born of Jesse’s descendants to save you. It’s a formidable, all-powerful team, and Old Adam revolts at being so out-classed. However, be careful as you read this passage, lest you trust in the Law and not the Gospel for salvation.

Christ doesn’t judge with His eyes. He doesn’t save based upon outer beauty, financial success or social status. Given that vanity, greed and pride are dangerous sins, we do well to repent of them. Be careful, though! This *does not* mean that you’re saved by what’s inside you. But many will tell you that you are saved by your inner beauty, by your character or concern for others. Others teach that God does not measure you by actions, but by intentions: as long as you mean well, you’re all right. Still others will preach that, since the Lord looks at what’s inside, then what your heart tells you must be what He says.

None of this saves, but condemns. If we believe that we are saved by inner beauty or character, we must confess God’s Law that *we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags* (Is. 4:6). Our best intentions are still filth before the Lord, and to try to save ourselves by our intentions or what we feel in our heart is hopeless. If we believe that whatever our hearts tell us must be true, then Jeremiah preaches, *The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked; Who can know it? I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, Even to give every man according to his ways, According to the fruit of his doings.* (Jer. 17:9-10). If you want to be part of Christ’s righteous kingdom, the fact that He looks inside isn’t good news. What’s inside you is deceptive, killing sin.

Here’s the Good News: When the Lord judges with righteousness, He gives His righteousness first. In Baptism, He robes you in Himself (Gal. 3:27), and by His Word and Supper He continues to forgive you. For the unrepentant, His righteous judgment is terrifying, for the Lord will declare, “When I look upon you, I see only vile filth, rebellion and unrighteousness; you are unclean, and you may not enter My kingdom.” Thus the unrepentant stand condemned. But to the penitent, baptized child of God, He declares, “When I look upon you, I don’t see your sin. I see My righteousness, because by cross and font I have taken your sin and clothed you in Me. Heaven is yours—not because of who you are, but because I have cleansed you of all of your sin.”

Rejoice, dear baptized! Because the Lord’s righteousness never changes, your salvation is never in doubt.

*Worthless are my prayers and sighing; Yet good Lord, in grace complying,
Rescue me from fires undying.* (TLH 607:14)

Week 3: The Advent of Healing**Sunday, December 12**

Read Psalm 146

The LORD opens the eyes of the blind; The LORD raises those who are bowed down; The LORD loves the righteous. (Ps. 146:8)

Jesus comes to bring healing. That’s the theme of this third week of Advent.

Sin isolates as it kills. In relationships, it wields pride, greed, lust and selfishness; and each of these daggers is designed to make man use others to elevate himself. Each one breaks the relationship and leaves man alone, estranged. In health, it attacks with afflictions of all sorts, and the one who is stricken is shut-in, bedridden, deprived of the daily encounters that so many take for granted. Sin’s greatest isolating wage, of course, is death. The grave is the greatest loneliness, cut off from the land of the living. Those who remain to mourn are deprived of a parent, a mate, a friend; and often, because acquaintances are afraid of saying the wrong thing, mourners are left to grieve alone when they most need the company of others.

More than once, hell has been described as a place of unendurable loneliness, where those who dwell there want no contact with each other or God for eternity. Each condemned soul wants to be his own god, and gods who desire supremacy don’t get along with each other very well.

Sin isolates as it kills. It seeks to inflict all with a despairing ache of loneliness.

Jesus comes to bring healing, and so the week begins with Psalm 146. The Lord watches over the oppressed, the hungry and the prisoner, restoring them to His kingdom where they are fed and set free. He heals the blind and the bowed down, removing those ailments that would leave them alone. He watches over the estranged, the fatherless and the widow, granting them grace to endure. By grace, He heals by forgiving sins and bringing people into His Church—His *body* (Ro. 12:5), His *communion* (I Cor. 1:9). What lonely words these are *not*!

This has not come without a price. In order to heal and restore you, Jesus suffered the oppression of sin. He bore your infirmities to the cross. He endured all affliction and suffered the isolation of bearing all sin so that He was rejected by both God and man on the cross. He was even cut off from the land of the living, so that you might be raised to eternal life (Is. 53:3-12).

This is why He comes, born of Mary. He becomes flesh to take your place in isolation, to be forsaken even by His Father for your sin. Because He has paid that price and suffered your judgment, He brings you healing. The day will come when you are delivered from all of your suffering, and that day knows no end. Sin seeks to make you think that the isolation you must suffer is eternal; but this psalm declares that, along with healing, Jesus keeps truth forever. Do not despair from sin’s lies; because Jesus comes, your deliverance is near.

*Once He came in blessing, All our ills redressing;
Came in likeness lowly, Son of God most holy;
Bore the cross to save us, Hope and freedom gave us.* (TLH 74:1)

Week 2: The Advent of Righteousness**Saturday, December 11**

Read Matthew 3:1-12

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance..." (Mt. 3:7-8).

John the Baptist picks up where Malachi left off, preaching that the Lord's day of wrath is coming. It's only a matter of time until righteous God judges sinful man. You don't want to be unrighteous when the Lord comes to judge.

You don't want to be *self-righteous*, either, and this is the problem with the Pharisees who listen to John's sermon. They have no use for this wilderness preacher, because they see no need for repentance. They believe that they've done enough to earn God's favor by keeping their own careful list of rules, and by looking down their noses at others.

Some might think, in a society as carnal as ours, that Pharisees are hard to find. Not so. True, there are few outspoken leaders who set a high standard and say, "Keep these rules and only then you'll get to heaven." Instead, man has simply lowered the bar: "Forget the rules. Believe what you want, do what you want; just be good enough and you'll get to heaven." Even though it might often be practiced by those whom New Testament Pharisees would call "sinners," the sloppy religion of the 21st century has a common doctrine with them: you can save yourself by your own works, by your own righteousness.

There's a reason why the Pharisees' religion doesn't die: it's the basic doctrine of the sinful nature. Ever since Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent, man wants to blame others for sin and claim innocence. That's why it's called *self-righteousness* and *self-justification*—we declare ourselves "not guilty" for our sins, and expect our verdict to stand before God! That Pharisees' creed is very much alive in your old sinful nature. Mine, too.

To declare ourselves righteous is damning folly enough, but do not miss the flip side of the coin. To say that we can save ourselves is to say that we don't need Jesus. The one who says he can earn salvation on his own declares that Jesus died for nothing (Gal. 2:15)! For those who hold to such a faith, there is nowhere to flee from the wrath to come.

So John preaches to us today, "Bear fruits worthy of repentance." Repentance has two parts. First, it involves contrition, sorrow over sin. It means confessing that we are sinful and cannot justify ourselves before God. Second, it trusts that Christ has died for something—namely, the redemption of sinners. This is the opposite of the Pharisee, a gift given only by the grace of God. Because you can't be self-righteous, the King comes to give you His righteousness with forgiveness. And where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.

*For Thou art our Salvation, Lord, Our Refuge, and our great Reward.
Without Thy grace our souls must fade
And wither like a flow'r decayed.*

(TLH 63:3)

Week 2: The Advent of Righteousness**Wednesday, December 8**

Read Romans 15:4-13

Now I say that Jesus Christ has become a servant to the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made to the fathers, and that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy... (Ro. 15:8-9a)

One of the least-celebrated church holidays is no doubt The Circumcision of Our Lord. Part of the problem is that this holy day takes place 8 days after Christmas—January 1, when most aren't interested in a morning service. But part of the problem is this: why would we want to celebrate a circumcision? Who even wants to talk about it? Ah, but there is Good News here for you.

Circumcision was the law in the Old Testament. The Lord declared (Gen. 17:10-14) that it was the mark of His covenant with His people. Boys who were circumcised were part of the people of God; boys who weren't so marked were cut off from God's people. (We note in passing that an 8-day-old boy wasn't old enough to decide to join God's people. Rather, the Lord saved the little one without his work or decision. Likewise, God does not require the decision of children to baptize them, but gladly welcomes infants among His people.) Now, as the 2nd person of the Holy Trinity, Jesus was clearly already among God's people, so why would He be circumcised? As with all the Lord does, He did it for you.

Jesus came to fulfill the Law of God, to live it perfectly on your behalf. Since the Law required circumcision, Jesus was circumcised. Thus He remained righteous before His Father. Thus He remained the perfect Sacrifice who would atone for the sins of the world, as prophesied throughout the Old Testament. Or, as today's reading puts it, He underwent circumcision so that the truth and promises of God might be confirmed.

Note that on the day of His circumcision, the Son of God received His name "Jesus," because He would save His people from their sins (Mt. 1:21). His name came with His first keeping of the Law for you. Note also this: when the 8-day-old Jesus first kept the Law for you, it involved the affliction of His body and the shedding of His blood. The King of Righteousness was already at work in service to you, already on His way to the cross to be made sin for you, that you might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Co. 5:21).

*His infant body now Begins the cross to feel;
Those precious drops of blood that flow
For death the Victim seal.
Today the name is Thine
At which we bend the knee.
They call Thee Jesus, Child Divine;
Our Jesus deign to be. (TLH 117:3-4)*

Week 2: The Advent of Righteousness

Thursday, December 9

Read Romans 15:4-13

And again he says: "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people!" And again: "Praise the LORD, all you Gentiles! Laud Him, all you peoples!" (Ro. 15:10-11)

Circumcision divided in the Old Testament: men were either circumcised or not, and this marked them as the people of God or not (cf. Jdg. 15:18; 1 Sam 31:4). To be uncircumcised was to be a heathen and an unbeliever, apart from the Lord and His righteousness. A Gentile could convert and be circumcised, though one imagines that this requirement was a bit of an obstacle to evangelism. Still, it could not be set aside, for it was the command of the Lord.

But note what Romans 15 declares: Christ was circumcised not just for the [circumcised] Jew, but for the Gentile also. He did not come with righteousness only for one people, one nation, but for all. Furthermore, this righteousness is not given through circumcision, which is no longer required (Gal. 2), because it pointed to Holy Baptism (Col. 2:11-12). By His Word and Sacraments, the crucified and risen King gives grace to all; and Romans 15 rejoices that Jew and Gentile *may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ* (Ro. 15:6). One mind, one mouth.

In our world today, "cultural diversity" and "tolerance" are sacred buzzwords. We are told that all cultures are equal and deserve respect. In terms of Christianity, we are told that worship will vary from culture to culture, and therefore it is right that each Christian congregation worship as it sees fit. Therefore, each one may form its own worship style to fit its own preference, and a congregation may end up with three or four different preferred styles. A church is permitted to confess or deny the Sacraments as means of grace.

This so-called "unity in diversity" receives no kind word in Scripture. It does not unite, but only divides. It hinders the Church from a common confession of faith as it caters to the desires of individuals. Why would we want human culture to guide Christian worship, the Divine Service of God? How could we accept the notion that it is somehow only "German" to sing "Lord, have mercy upon us," or that the Sacraments are only "Lutheran," but not "Christian"?! Such an idea implies that the Lord has different messages for different people, with different variations on the way to heaven. Sadly, on the pretext of evangelism, Christianity is fragmenting more and more. That's the way of things in this world: they fall apart.

Christians do well to remember and rejoice in the reason for Christ's coming: He comes with righteousness. He gives you His righteousness along with mercy and grace, for that is why He has gone to the cross. This mercy, grace and hope are the gifts that define His service and unite all Christians together, for they are what the Lord comes to give.

*E'en babes with one accord With thee shall praise the Lord
And every Gentile nation Respond with exultation:*

Hosanna, praise and glory! Our King we bow before Thee. (TLH 57:7)

Week 2: The Advent of Righteousness

Friday, December 10

Read Matthew 3:1-12

For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight.'" (Mt. 3:3)

At the end of the Old Testament, there isn't much left of the kingdom of David. Because of sinful rebellion and idol worship, the kingdom has been split, suffered civil war, and eventually been conquered. The Assyrians have carried off the northern ten tribes, and they disappear from history. The Babylonians have destroyed Jerusalem, although a remnant has been returned to rebuild the temple. Thanks to the idolatry of man, the kingdom isn't much at all.

But the Lord is faithful. So at the very end of the Old Testament, He speaks through His prophet Malachi. And at the very last chapter of this last book, Malachi speaks of things to come. For one, the "great and dreadful day of the Lord" is coming (Mal. 4:5), and those who are unrighteous face a final judgment of consuming fire that will make the Babylonian attack pleasant by comparison. With the history of man's unholiness both in and out of Israel, this is not comforting news. This, however, is not the only advent that Malachi prophesies, for two will come before the Judgment. One will be the Sun of Righteousness (Mal. 4:2), most glorious; but He does not come to sear and punish the sinner. Instead, He will come with healing in His wings to transform sinners into the righteous people of God. In other words, as the Old Testament closes and the Lord is silent for almost 500 years, He concludes by repeating that the Savior is coming.

But one will come before the Sun. The Lord declares that He will send Elijah the prophet (Mal. 4:5), a herald to prepare the way.

This promise is kept in Matthew 3, for John the Baptist is the Elijah who prepares the way for Jesus (Mt. 17:11-13). His coming foretold by Isaiah (Is. 40:3), he dresses like Elijah (2 Kgs. 1:8) and preaches in the wilderness. He prepares the way for the Son of Righteousness, and the Savior comes to heal. He heals you by bearing your infirmities and afflictions to the cross, by suffering the death and bloodshed for your sin.

One marvelous lesson from John's appearance is found in the epistle for this week: *For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope* (Ro. 15:4). The writers of the Lutheran Confessions cite this verse three times to affirm that the Lord's promises are certain. He always keeps His Word, and keeps it to give you hope. As promised, the Savior came. As promised, the Savior comes by Word and Sacrament to heal you. No matter your sin, do not fear, for the Lord does not cease to make you righteous with the forgiveness He has won.

*So in the last and dreadful Day, When earth and heav'n shall melt away,
Thy flock, redeemed from sinful stain, Shall swell the sound of praise again.*

(TLH 70:4)