

A New Song

Devotions for the Season of Advent
Corresponding with the Readings of the Church (Series B)

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By way of introduction...

I won't say which store it was, but the Christmas displays were already starting to appear in mid-October. Forget autumn. Forget Thanksgiving. Forget Reformation, of course. Let's start talking Christmas.

When people stomp on other holidays and holy days, it makes me grumpy.

And for the third year running, I fully expect a major department store to advertise the “Twelve Days of Christmas” as the final dozen shopping days *before* December 25. But those twelve days of Christmas are December 25-January 5, with Epiphany the following day. Technically speaking, the Church doesn't begin to celebrate Christmas until its Eve in the dark of December 24.

Until then, December isn't the Christmas season. It's the season of Advent.

Advent is more than just a run up to Christmas: it's a season unto itself. The word “advent” on its own means “a coming;” and certainly part—a big part!—of the message of Advent is Jesus' coming in the flesh, born of Mary in Bethlehem. Without Christmas following, Advent would have very little joy. But Advent connect Christmas so wonderfully to Jesus' other comings, too. We hear in the Sunday readings that Jesus is coming on the Last Day to judge all people; and so we rejoice that He has already come to redeem us on the cross. We also hear that our Lord comes even now to be present with us in His means of grace, His Word and Sacraments. As we rejoice that Jesus has come, we give thanks that He comes and is coming! All of that is part of the Advent season.

This booklet contains devotions on the Scripture readings of the Series-B church year. If your church follows the 3-year series, then these will be the same readings that you hear on Sunday morning. It is certainly a preparation for Christmas, and often speaks of the Infant in the manger. But more than that, rejoice—the Lord makes His advent among you even now by His means of grace, to prepare you for His advent in glory for life everlasting.

A blessed Advent to you.

Pastor Tim Pauls, repentant grump.

Advent 1: Sunday**Read: Psalm 98**

Oh, sing to the LORD a new song! For He has done marvelous things; His right hand and His holy arm have gained Him the victory. (Ps. 98:1)

There's new, and then there's new.

“New” can mean “same as the old stuff, but unused;” as in, “Can you get me a new pen out of the drawer?” It can also mean “original, fresh, previously unknown;” as in, “That's a completely new way of building an engine.” As in, “I ain't never seen anything like that before.”

“Oh, sing to the LORD a new song!” declares the psalm. And what sort of “new” song does the Lord have in mind? A song so original that man could never conceive of it apart from the grace of God.

Throughout history and across the world, every religion eventually sounds the same: a god is out there, somewhere and powerful. If you want its help and blessing, then you'd better do enough good works to please it. The good works will vary from religion to religion. In some, you please the god by keeping its rules enough. In others, you earn its favor by slaughtering enough infidels. In bad movies, you pacify it by throwing a virgin into a volcano. In mystical religions, you earn its help by meditating enough. But whatever the works, every religion comes back to this: God helps you because you earn it.

It's the same old song.

But as this Advent season begins, you have this cause for joy: the one true God sings a new song to you. It goes like this: because there was no way that you could possibly earn God's favor, He has done all the work to save you. He has sent His Son to be born of Mary and to go to the cross to die for the sins of the world; and among those sins of the world are yours. Jesus has earned God's favor for you by His life, death and resurrection. Because of what He has done, God the Father delights to give you every good gift, including grace and faith and salvation and eternal life. That the new, elsewhere unheard-of, song that He sings to you.

At Christmas, the song will include the angels' stanza, “Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” Incredible! God brings peace to sinful man, for He sends His Son to accomplish His good and perfect will. On Good Friday, the song will include the sacred solo, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Lk 23:34). Rather than destroy man for such open rebellion, the Son of God dies for their salvation.

The new song is nothing but the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. He sings it first to us. In praise, we sing it back to Him. For why would we sing of our own hapless works, when we can sing of His salvation for us? Truly, this is a most marvelous thing.

*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)*

Advent 1: Monday**Read: Isaiah 63:16-17, 64:1-8**

Doubtless You are our Father, Though Abraham was ignorant of us, And Israel does not acknowledge us. You, O LORD, are our Father; Our Redeemer from Everlasting is Your name. (Is. 63:16)

Growing up, I didn't like being punished. That's hardly a profound statement, since nobody does. But there were times when I'd do wrong and have to sit out for a while. The worst part wasn't, say, a swat or two. The worst part was the silence that lasted while my parents let me think about things—and perhaps while they cooled down. It was a great relief, after I'd served the sentence, to know that they were still Mom and Dad. I knew it anyway, but I loved to have that relationship restored.

In chapter 63, Isaiah recounts God's faithfulness and Israel's disobedience. He deftly remembers that God saved them with the Angel of His Presence at the Passover and led them out of Egypt by Moses' hand. He made them His people and Himself their God. He promised all good things to them. In return, they rebelled against Him, turned to other gods and idols. He was a Father to them, but they wanted to run away from home.

Because they didn't want His help, the Lord did not force it upon them. He withdrew His protection, and Israel became easy pickings for any enemy that came along. The people of Israel suffered much for their sin; and among them were the faithful remnant—those who still trusted the Lord and His promises, but were caught in the tribulations of an unfaithful nation. In a world of sin, the relatively innocent suffer along with the guilty.

Babylon was knocking at the door, preparing to destroy unrepentant Jerusalem, but Isaiah still proclaimed hope for the penitent people of God. “Doubtless You are our Father,” he declared, and it was doubtless indeed: for no matter the faithlessness of Israel, God had promised to be faithful to them. No matter how far they rebelled, He stood ready to forgive and restore them. He called God “Father.” Not “King,” because kings demand a subject's service before they'll help. Not “Master,” because servants owe a debt of labor before they receive the master's aid. He called God “Father,” because God would help His people even though they had nothing to offer in return. He was the “Redeemer from Everlasting,” and He would take on human flesh to die for their sin, to make them His family once more.

You have the privilege of praying the Lord's Prayer, which begins with the words, “Our Father, who art in heaven.” Rejoice in those words and the comfort they proclaim. God is not a distant slave driver who demands mighty acts from you before He deigns to help. He doesn't demand that you make up for your sin before He helps you again. He declares Himself to be your Father, one who has adopted you in Baptism at the cost of His Son's own blood. No matter the trouble that today brings, you have the doubtless hope that He remains faithful, your Redeemer from everlasting...to everlasting.

*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)*

Advent 1: Tuesday**Read: Isaiah 63:16-17, 64:1-8**

Oh, that You would rend the heavens! That You would come down! That the mountains might shake at Your presence—As fire burns brushwood, As fire causes water to boil —To make Your name known to Your adversaries, That the nations may tremble at Your presence! (Is. 64:1-2)

It's not easy being a Christian in current times. It's easier in America than, say, Saudi Arabia; I don't mean to sound self-pitying, as I don't risk arrest and persecution for writing this devotion about Jesus. Even here, though, it's frustrating to live by faith. Society trumpets immorality and laughs at marriage. It points to incredible scientific breakthroughs and asks, "What need do we have for God?" It looks at the people of God, gathered around Word and Sacrament, and categorizes them as foolish, old-fashioned and perhaps a danger to the "freedoms" of their sinful desires.

So it's frustrating to live by faith, trusting in the promises of God. It gets worse, because it gets personal. Troubled by financial woe or health problems, it's difficult to be patient, to wait upon the Lord and trust in His promises. When the pressure builds, you'll want to shout with Isaiah, "Oh, that You would rend the heavens! That You would come down! That the mountains might shake at Your presence!" Enough of this living-by-faith-not-by-sight stuff. Come down, O Lord, and knock some heads together. Show Your power to all.

He will—on the Last Day. He will come with the sound of a trumpet and judge all. He'll come like He did at Mt. Sinai, when He gave the Ten Commandments—with visible glory that will make every knee bow in heaven, on earth and under the earth. Be careful what you wish for, though: when the Lord descended on Mt. Sinai, even His own people were terrified of Him. They wanted to stay far away (Ex. 20:19). Though you and I might desire God to throw His weight around more, He doesn't save by displays of power and might.

No, the Lord gives salvation because, in between Isaiah and you, He has already come down. But instead of consuming fire, He came in the form of an Infant Son, born to Mary in Bethlehem. Rather than rule with coercion and demand that every knee bow, the incarnate Lord lived a life of service for you, even to death on the cross. He didn't come to break bruised reeds and knock some heads. It's by His mercy and sacrifice on the cross that you are saved, not His awesome power and might.

The same holds true today. While you might be disappointed that the Lord doesn't come with more evident power, He promises that He still comes. The new song of the Gospel is one of mercy and grace, not Law and punishment. Christ comes to you meekly in His means of grace, still mercifully forgiving you and keeping you in the one true faith to life everlasting. He has made His name known to you: not to terrify you with His irresistible power, but so that you might know the One who has died to give you everlasting life.

*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)*

Advent 1: Wednesday**Read: I Corinthians 1:3-9**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
(I Cor. 1:3)

Before the Gospel came to Corinth, it was quite the ungodly city. Because it was a port city, a lot of goods and commodities came though, and with them temptations of covetousness and greed. Since lonely sailors came ashore, it was known as a swinging city where immorality was widespread. As the sight of important athletic competitions, the idolatry of fitness would come easy. It was a place not particularly sympathetic to the holy things of God.

After the Gospel came to Corinth...things were pretty much the same way. Many heard and believed in Christ; and they rejoiced to be forgiven and sought to live according to God's Word. Around them, though, the city continued on its merry sinful way. If any Corinthian Christians thought that their faith would turn the city around, they were in for a rude awakening. In fact, reading through 1 and 2 Corinthians, you'll find that the world's sins around them kept creeping into the congregation far faster than they were influencing society.

So was the church in Corinth a disaster? No. It was pretty much like any other congregation—a gathering of penitent sinners, still prone to sin but desiring forgiveness. To them Paul sent the greeting, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." No matter the struggles and sins of the Christians there, the Lord continued to shower them with grace for Jesus' sake; and because they were forgiven, they had peace with God. "God is faithful," reminded Paul (v. 9). Although their eyes saw only sin and immorality around them, Paul reminded them of the faith, their hope: Jesus would be revealed in glory. Until then, He would visit them by His Word, keeping them blameless so that the Last Day would be one of deliverance, not death.

You probably don't live in Corinth. But wherever you are, you can recognize how the world rebels against God and revels in all sorts of sin. The world exalts immorality, defends abortion and encourage greedy materialism every chance it gets. That's the world apart from the Gospel. Sometimes, Christians get the idea that they are only successful Christians when they've reformed society. Now, surely we should do our best to be good citizens, and surely God can bring about repentance and reformation on a grand scale if He so desires. But He didn't in Corinth, and He doesn't promise to now. Instead, He tells you that Jesus will be revealed in glory on the Last Day, and then all sin and wickedness will be vanquished. He also tells you that you need not fear, because Jesus visits you now in His Word. You were stained by sin, but He declares you blameless because He has died to make you pure and without blemish.

Thus many a pastor begins his sermon with these words of I Corinthians: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Joy! The Lord comes to give you grace, and you have peace with Him forever.

*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)*

Advent 1: Thursday**Read: Mark 13:33-37***Take heed, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time is. (Mark 13:33)*

A lot of Christians focus their attention on the End Times, the events leading up to the end of the world. The “Left Behind” series of novels has sold millions of copies, while internet chat groups discuss potential signs of the end. Armageddon could be close at hand, so you'd better watch and be ready. Jesus tells you to watch, right?

Yes, but watch what? Those who spend large amounts of time speculating about the end are doing just that: speculating. Doctrines like “the Rapture” are products of human guessing, not solid Scripture. Jesus plainly says in this text that “you do not know when the time is” of His return in glory. It's not His desire that His people spend their time discussing things that they don't know—can't know. Trying to predict the day and time of the End is not what Jesus means when He says to “watch.”

What does He mean? This text tells us. Jesus speaks of a household where the master leaves for a far country, to return unexpectedly. The servants should be ready for his return—how? By spending their time wondering what the master is up to? By starting a web-based countdown clock to predict when he'll return? No. They are to be prepared by doing what he has given them to do: he's given them authority and work, and commanded the doorkeeper to guard the door. As long as they're fulfilling the wish of their master, they're ready for his return, whenever it might be.

Now, what authority has Jesus given to His Church until His return? The authority to forgive sins. How are sins forgiven? By the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments—by the proclamation of Christ and Him crucified. He does not desire that you speculate about what you cannot know; rather, He calls for you to remember and repeat what He has told you for sure. Remember that He became flesh at Christmas in order to die on the cross for you. Remember that He is risen again to give you life.

Then go about what He has given you to do—what He has died to give you to do. Be forgiven. Hear His Word that He forgives you for all of your sins. Remember your Baptism, that He has placed the mark of His name on you, and that no one can snatch you out of His hand. Take, eat and drink His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins, for by it He sustains you for everlasting life.

Then, as a forgiven member of your master's house, go about the tasks He's given you until He returns. If you're a teacher, teach. If you're a student, study. If you're a plumber, plumb. And even if the Lord returns to find you underneath a leaky kitchen sink, you're prepared for His coming—because you're forgiven.

*Therefore my Intercessor be and for Thy blood and merit
Declare my name from judgment free with all who life inherit,
That I may see Thee face to face
With all Thy saints in that blest place
Which Thou for us hast purchased. (TLH 611:6)*

Advent 1: Friday**Read: Mark 11:1-10***"And if anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord has need of it,' and immediately he will send it here." (Mk. 11:3)*

The readings for the first week of Advent offer a choice between Mark 13:33-37 (see yesterday) and Mark 11:1-10—the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. This may seem a bit out of season in the weeks before Christmas, but the Triumphal Entry has been the historic Gospel lesson to begin the season of Advent.

Jesus rides into Jerusalem to the loud shouts of “Hosanna!--Save now!” and “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!” The crowds are tuned up, delighted and excited that the Savior has come into their midst. As they wave their palms and spread their garments, they must wonder what He will do next, what glorious things await.

And yet, as the people make a big deal of His coming (and rightly so!) He makes His entry on the back of a borrowed donkey. The Lord who created all things, animals included, has the need to borrow the colt He created to ride into the city. The act fulfills prophecy (Zech . 9:9). It demonstrates that He comes in humility to serve. It also hints that He's not interested in the show of power that the crowds seem to expect. Yes, He's the Savior; and yes, He's about to save them. But it won't be through a show of force—were that the case, He'd ride a commander's warhorse into the city. The donkey points to even more humble circumstances to come: Jesus is going to save by the humiliation of crucifixion for the sins of the world.

People tend to like hype, and that's nowhere more true than the Christmas season, where stores have already had holiday displays since October. The crescendo of celebration—sometimes tacky and sometimes moving—is only going to build for the next three weeks. But don't lose sight of the reason for the festival: a helpless baby born to poor parents, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a used manger. He's not there to be cute, to inspire gift exchanges. He's there because He's become human flesh to save. The cries of “Save now!” on Palm Sunday echo the angel's message to shepherds: “There is born to you this day in the city of David a *Savior*” (Lk. 2:11). No matter the hype that people put on it, Jesus is born to go to the cross. The central message of Christmas is not our joyful interaction with one another, but the enfleshment of the Savior to die for your sins. That Jesus would consent to become flesh is astonishing: that He would allow Himself to be nailed to the cross is far more so.

Why? Because you have need of it.

Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.

*Ride on, ride on, in majesty!
In lowly pomp ride on to die.
Bow Thy meek head to mortal pain,
Then take, O Christ, Thy power and reign. (TLH 162:5)*

Advent 1: Saturday**Read: Mark 11:1-10**

Then those who went before and those who followed cried out, saying: "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!" (Mk. 11:9)

The crowds cried out “Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!” Their reason for doing so was obvious: Jesus was there, riding before them on a donkey. They weren't shouting at empty space, but the present Savior. He was there to answer their prayer of “Hosanna!” He was there to save now, and His death would accomplish the salvation in just a few days time.

“Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!” We sing the new song of Palm Sunday as part of the liturgy of Holy Communion. Before we receive the Supper, we cry out, “Save now!” Nor do we sing out to empty air or a God far away in heaven. The Lord promises that He is really present, His body and blood in bread and wine. We sing, “Save now,” and He responds, “Take and eat, this is My body. Take and drink, this is My blood for the forgiveness of sins.” He is not far away. He's present in His means of grace to save. Now. That Supper is no mere remembrance or ceremony: the Lord is there to strengthen and preserve you in the one true faith unto life everlasting.

Note the pattern: faith delights to find Jesus, no matter how humble the circumstances. Unbelief doesn't. Hearing the Word, the shepherds believed and ran to the Infant in Bethlehem—but nobody else did. The crowds shouted out “Hosanna!” to Jesus on Palm Sunday—while the Pharisees gathered to plot His execution. We look today at the crucifixion and give thanks by faith for God's mercy and compassion upon us; unbelievers see the cross as a mistake, an accident or simply a meaningless death.

So also many today will dismiss the Lord's Supper as empty ritual, superstition, a waste of a fishing day. It shouldn't surprise or discourage. By faith, you know better and so you rejoice: you do not follow a Savior who came to save and now is gone. Your Lord continues to attend you now, to deliver you to heaven forever.

*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)

Advent 2: Sunday**Read: Psalm 19**

The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament shows His handiwork.

(Ps. 19:1)

The greatest argument against the notion of the Big Bang Theory and evolution is creation itself. The laws of science dictate that nothing comes from nothing: ergo, everything came from something—or, more specifically, Someone. The existence of a creation declares a Creator.

But creation does more than that: it declares God's glory and power and handiwork. Physicists point to the perfect distance between earth and sun to sustain life, not to mention the thickness and composition of the atmosphere. Microbiologists look with wonder at intricacies in cells that they've never seen before and insist that they were designed by an intelligent being. Day and night declare the power of God to all, for *There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard* (Ps. 19:3). The atheist has no excuse.

However, we must be precise in what creation does and does not proclaim. Specifically, creation declares God's glory and handiwork: this is called the *natural knowledge* of God. However, it does not declare God's specific identity or salvation in Christ. That requires His *revealed knowledge*, His Word.

People sometimes remark at the end of a beautiful day that creation and nature declare the love of God, but I would caution against that statement. Nature is full of twists, and the weather always changes. A beach house owner might enjoy a month of sun and languid surf, and conclude that God is love. The following week, however, a Category-5 hurricane might strike the same place and carry the house away. If the owner tries to read God's will in the weather, he's going to decide that God is a capricious God who loves him one day and hates him the next. Give thanks to God for the wonders of nature, but don't use creation as proof of His love. Creation is destined for destruction; God's love will never end.

A particular pet peeve of mine is a campfire song that was popular while I was growing up, “Have You Seen Jesus, My Lord?” One of the verses, for instance, declared that if you've seen a beautiful sunset, then you've seen Jesus. This isn't just schmaltzy: it's absolutely false. You do not find Jesus hidden in a beautiful sunset. You find Him visibly located in a manger wrapped in swaddling clothes. You find Him nailed to an ugly cross, bleeding and dying. You hear Him speak in His Word, telling you of His grace and mercy *despite* the disasters you see in nature. He's in plain view—in Word and Sacrament.

That's why the psalm doesn't end with God in creation. It moves on to speak of God's Law, His Word. Rather than hide in a sunset or storm so that you can vainly search Him out, He speaks His Word specifically to you, so that you might be sure of His love for you in Christ Jesus.

*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)

Advent 2: Monday**Read: Psalm 19***Who can understand his errors? Cleanse me from secret faults. (Ps. 19:12)*

While creation tells you much about God's power and handiwork, it stops short of declaring the Gospel; that's why Psalm 19 goes on to declare the marvel of the law of the LORD.

This psalm can generate confusion among Lutherans who are steeped in an understanding of Law and Gospel. The purpose of the Law is to show us our sin, while it is the Gospel that gives forgiveness, creates faith and bestows eternal life. So how is it that this psalm says that the law of the LORD converts the soul? The answer is one of translation, for "law" is used in English to translate different words from Old Testament Hebrew. In this case, "law" is a translation of the Hebrew "Torah," which means both "law" and "doctrine, instruction." In the Hebrew Old Testament, the first five books are grouped as the "Torah," the law: yet these books clearly contain both God's commands (Law) and promises of the Savior (Gospel). When the psalm declares that the Torah converts the soul, it is speaking of God's Word in totality: His Law shows us our need for the Savior, and His Gospel declares the Savior and converts us by grace.

So the psalm tells you that while nature is quirky and unpredictable, God's Word is, among other things, perfect, right, pure and sure. It will not mislead. It will not expire. In a world where everything changes—and little for the better, God's Word remains certain: you are His beloved child for Jesus' sake. In God's Word, you know all that you need to know for salvation.

Here's more Good News: God knows everything for your salvation, because He knows more about you than you do. You will sin in ignorance today; worse, you'll sin without even realizing it. Not knowing your transgression, it's a bit difficult to repent specifically for it. But the Lord declares that Jesus has died for all of your sins, not just the ones you remember—thus He cleanses you of your secret faults.

What comfort! Prior to discovering the Gospel, Luther was tortured by the knowledge that he could not remember all of his sins to confess. And since he was taught he had to confess each sin to be forgiven, how could he ever receive God's grace?

But the Gospel has better news. You are not saved because of your good work of remembering all of your sins. You are saved because Jesus died for all of them, whether you remember them or not. Where a particular sin troubles you, visit your pastor for private confession and absolution. Where no sin troubles you, repent of your failure to recognize your true condition. And always rejoice to confess your sins—because the Lord seeks to take them from you, replacing them with grace upon grace.

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

Advent 2: Tuesday**Read: Isaiah 40:1-11***"Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her, That her warfare is ended, That her iniquity is pardoned; For she has received from the LORD's hand Double for all her sins." (Is. 40:2)*

It was Sean Connery's character in "The Untouchables" (1987) who summed up the "Chicago Way" of fighting Al Capone's gang: "they pull a knife, you pull a gun. He sends one of yours to the hospital, you send one of his to the morgue!" We live in a world that likes to pile on the punishment. When a lawsuit is won, juries first award actual damages, then *punitive* damages to make sure the offender has learned his lesson. Or, as a playmate used to say as he balled up his fist, "We're not even until I'm one up." Ow.

To the city of Jerusalem, God prophesies through Isaiah, "Her iniquity is pardoned, for she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins." This is a city that has earned some serious consequences. The people have turned from the one true God to idols, to the extent that they've added their graven images to His temple. They've sanctioned immorality and devastated the poor. Worse, when the Lord has warned them of their sin by sending prophet after prophet, they've beaten and killed the messengers. Save for a few faithful, this is an unrepentant city.

So when many hear that she has received double for all her sins, they believe it to mean that the Lord is going to punish them double for all of their iniquities; and once they've suffered enough, then He'll finally pick them back up. And when the Babylonians destroy Jerusalem and carry the people into captivity, this seems to back it up.

But that's hardly comfort if God says, "After I've made you suffer enough, I'll stop;" and that's hardly what He means. The comfort is that Christ will die for all of their sins: indeed, He'll die for more sins than they can ever commit! When the Lord declares double for all of Jerusalem's sins, He declares grace upon grace, that He will shower them with more forgiveness than they need.

There are still consequences in this world: Jerusalem still goes into captivity. But all who repent are forgiven, and the Lord will deliver them to heaven.

This is your comfort, too. Perhaps you have committed a sin so grave that you wonder if there is enough forgiveness. Perhaps you have committed the same sin so many times that it's hard to believe the Lord would still forgive you. Perhaps you've become a Christian later in life, and your conscience wonders if the Lord will forgive for all the years wasted before you believed.

The Lord speaks this comfort to you: you receive from His hand double the grace for all your sins, more than you need. Jesus doesn't say, "I forgive you for *some* of your sins," but "*all* of your sins." There may still be temporal consequences for your actions, yes; but for Jesus' sake, the Lord has nothing but redemption and life for you forever.

*Comfort, comfort, ye My people, speak ye peace, thus saith our God;
Comfort those who dwell in darkness, mourning 'neath their sorrow's load.
Speak ye to Jerusalem of the peace that waits for them;
Tell her that her sins I cover and her warfare now is over. (TLH 61:1)*

Advent 2: Wednesday**Read: Isaiah 40:1-11***The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever."*

(Is. 40:8)

The grass withers, the flower fades. You have ample testimony of the literal truth by the time that Advent begins. Grass and flowers often wither in the heat of summer when the rains fail; whatever makes it into fall freezes and browns and falls. It happens again and again.

The grass withers, the flower fades. Pastors speak this verse all too often: it's part of the liturgy for a Christian funeral service. Ministers attend more funerals than most, often having visited the dying for weeks and months before. Time and time again, it's reinforced that the verse is true about more than vegetation: all flesh is grass. Because of sin, everyone is going to wither and fade. The sobering specter of death is always nearby.

You know already, of course. Aches and pains and diminished energy begin to build all too soon in life; in some cases, the body has never quite worked the way it was supposed to. Doctors run tests and bring bad news, that surgery and chemotherapy are necessary if you're going to stand a chance. It's not supposed to be this way. But because of sin, it is.

Into this dying world was born the Son of God. Perfectly holy and sinless, He didn't have to wither and fade, suffer and die. But He did. He bore your sins and infirmities to the cross. He suffered God's judgment for your iniquity. Then He rose again.

So will you. "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever." This would hardly be a comfort if it meant that the Lord kept talking long after you died; but the point of the verse is that the Lord speaks this Word *to you*. Speaking grace to you in Baptism, Jesus joined you to His death and resurrection. You've already died and risen in Him, and He promises to use the death of your body to raise you up fully restored. He speaks His forgiveness to you in Holy Absolution: and where there is forgiveness, there is also life and salvation. He speaks His Word to make bread and wine into a Holy Communion with Him, His body and blood—to preserve you in the one true faith unto life everlasting.

The grass withers. The flower fades.

But the Word of the Lord stands forever.

His Word to you is, "I forgive you," and that Word stands forever.

Therefore, you will live forever, too.

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)

Advent 2: Thursday**Read: 2 Peter 3:8-14***Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. (2 Peter. 3:13)*

I hate buying a new car. The entire process is horrible. Shop around, learn the options, select the model. Contend with the salesman, manager and financial guys. Wonder if you really did get a good deal, sign the papers...and watch the value of your vehicle plummet even before you turn the key for the very first time.

I suppose I ought to be grateful to the automobile industry for such a vivid—and expensive!--reminder of the law of entropy: everything falls apart. Nothing lasts. This is a good thing to keep on mind as the Christmas presents gather.

Persnickety guy that I am, I like quality things, and I make sure to take care of the things that I have. Doesn't matter, though; it all goes. The laptop on which I write this has a cracked case, my car is missing a hubcap (it's in the South Fork of the Payette River at milepost 87), and the new pair of dress shoes already has a gash on one toe that no amount of polish will cover. Drives a neatnik like me absolutely nuts.

All of this preaches the law that I ought not put my trust in material things. Materialism is a false god that seduces for the moment before it surrenders to rust. Even if my stuff lasts until Judgment Day, it's going to perish in a fervent heat then.

My body's not faring any better. I'm still relatively young, but I'm not as young as I used to be. I think my kids are getting their extra energy by draining me of mine. Various stresses of our current times lead me to remember the words of a college prof: "The older I get, the more I like the sound of eternal rest." Like the Isaiah passage yesterday, this text from 2 Peter reminds us that we're withering grass. The wages of sin is death, and it's foolish for us to believe that we're going to last forever. That is, by the way, the great difficulty in church youth work today: as the world tempts everyone to stay as young as possible, it especially convinces young people that they're never going to die. If they're never going to die, then they don't need to worry about forgiveness.

Learn the lesson of the depreciating car, the hubcap, the laptop and my shoe: everything in this world falls apart. Until the Lord returns, everyone in this world is going to die.

So it only makes sense to treasure those things that last forever: namely, the promises of God. He promises heaven to you because Jesus died and rose for you. It's sin that's killing you, pushing you always toward its wages of death; but Jesus has conquered sin to give you everlasting life. Your body may not make it through tomorrow in this world; but Jesus promises that He'll raise it from the dead—fully restored and never to die again.

As the old song lyric goes, "He is no fool who gives what he can't keep to keep what he cannot lose." Even better news is this: far from the things of this world that decay, Jesus promises that no one can snatch you out of His hand.

*Lay on the sick Thy healing hand and make the fallen strong to stand;
Show us the glory of Thy face till beauty springs in every place. (TLH 63:4)*

Advent 2: Friday**Read: Mark 1:1-8**

As it is written in the Prophets: "Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You." (Mark 1:2)

He may be wearing strange clothes in a strange place and saying strange things, but he's there for a reason.

He's wearing strange clothes—camel's hair and a leather belt—because that's an Elijah outfit (2 Kings 1:8). Elijah proclaimed God's Word to point people from false gods that can't save to the one true God who does; and that's exactly what John is doing in the wilderness. He's Elijah all over again. In fact, God proclaims in the last two verses of the Old Testament, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And he will turn The hearts of the fathers to the children, And the hearts of the children to their fathers, Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse" (Mal. 4:5-6). He's talking about John the Baptist (Mt. 17:11-13).

Speaking of Malachi, the Lord also declares, "Behold, I send My messenger, And he will prepare the way before Me" (Mal. 3:1). Again, it's about John the Baptist (Mk. 1:2). Just as the Old Testament ends, the Lord says to watch for this man...because the Savior is coming just after he arrives.

Of course, John is also fulfilling Isaiah 40:3: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the LORD; Make straight in the desert A highway for our God.'" That's part of our Old Testament reading this week, as Isaiah declares that the Savior will come to bring pardon and life for the withered and dying world.

John's in the wilderness to fulfill that prophecy. While not explicitly stated in Scripture, the symbolism is extraordinary: Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years before crossing the Jordan to enter the Promised Land. John preaches to those who are desolate in their sins; by baptism in the waters of the Jordan, they are brought into the Promised Land of the kingdom of God.

All this is to say that John is not a solo act. He's saying nothing new. As he prepares the way for Jesus, he is in a long line of men whom God has used to declare that the Savior is coming. As all the OT prophets pointed to Jesus, he's sort of a review of all of them put together. Given the turbulent history of Israel, it's clearly only by the grace of God that the message has remained: behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. And despite sinful man's history for the last 2000 years, the Lord graciously preserves that same saving Word today. He still calls men into His Office of the Holy Ministry to preach it publicly. He still gives you the privilege of hearing it, speaking it to friends, your kids and coworkers. You see, God didn't just send John the Baptist to prepare the way in Judea: He sent him to prepare the way for Christ to you.

May your Advent preparations for Christmas be a reminder that the Lord has prepared you for salvation by His Word—the Word that He has preached to His people from the beginning to eternity.

*On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry Announces that the Lord is nigh;
Come, then, and harken for he brings Glad tidings from the King of kings.*

(TLH 63:1)

Advent 2: Saturday**Read: Mark 1:1-8**

John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. (Mark 1:4)

"Yee-haw! Another sermon about repentance!"

We pastors hear this all the time. No, actually, we don't. In an age of terror, loneliness and pragmatism, repentance seems irrelevant to many people. Look at churches that spend lots of money on slogans and ads: "We're all about relationships!" "The friendly church!" You don't find many that say, "Come to our place and repent!" I daresay they wouldn't get a lot of return on their advertising dollars. Talk of repentance makes people roll their eyes.

This is not because repentance is boring and irrelevant. It's because your Old Adam wants you to think that repentance is boring and irrelevant.

When John preaches repentance, all of Judea goes out to hear him. This isn't a ten-minute bus ride to the stadium; instead of coming to the people, the people have to go to him. They do—in droves—to hear him preach about repentance! Why? Consider the average hearer in Judea. They live under the local rule of the Pharisees, who insist that you must keep lots of rules in order to be saved. Associate with the right people, do the ceremonies correctly and wash your dishes just right, and you might have a shot at earning God's love. They also live under the iron fist of the Roman Empire, which has an easy strategy for keeping the peace: anyone who disturbs the peace suffers horribly as a public example to everybody else. The streets are safe to walk, but it's obvious to everyone that death is very, very near.

It makes sense, then, that you have tax collectors coming to hear John: they know they haven't been keeping the Pharisees' rules, much less the Ten Commandments. Their acts have only dug them deeper in the hole: they're ready to repent. Likewise, soldiers come: witnessing the brutality of their profession, they understand duty and abuse...and how they go too far. They come to repent.

For what is repentance? It has two parts: the first is contrition, or godly sorrow over sin—this the people receive from the Law, preached by John and their conscience. The second part is the forgiveness of sins—and that's what John gives them as he baptizes and preaches the Word. The crowds go back home afterwards, with the same lives and worries: but they know that God won't hold their sins against them, because He's forgiven them for the sake of the Savior who's about to arrive.

Repentance: contrition and forgiveness. Is it irrelevant? Hardly. The problem, I daresay, is that we too easily forget the severity of sin and the reality of death in our sanitized world. They are all too severe and real. For such forgetfulness, we...repent. And God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 Jn. 1:9).

*Yea, her sins our God will pardon, Blotting out each dark misdeed;
All that well deserved His anger He no more will see or heed.
She hath suffered many a day, Now her griefs have passed away;
God will change her pining sadness Into ever-springing gladness.*

(TLH 61:2)

Advent 3: Sunday**Read: Luke 1:46b-55***For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed. (Lk. 1:48)*

This week's psalm comes from the Gospel of Luke.

It's quite a speech by an unwed teenage mother-to-be; and one might ignorantly decide that Mary must be a haughty young thing all stuck on herself. She speaks in the form of an Old Testament psalm, the kind that priests voice around the temple, where God lives with His people in the Holy of Holies; it's hardly the style of the Nazareth youth set—talk about putting on airs! Furthermore, listen to what she says: “The Lord does not bless the proud, the mighty or the rich—but me!” Again, it hardly strikes one as a humble statement. And finally, quite over the top, is the statement that “all generations will call me blessed.” If she's going to speak Old Testament-style, we'll just take a look at the Old Testament. Not many blessed things last for all generations. The Lord's name does (Ex. 3:15). So does His will (Ps. 33:11). So does His praise (Ps. 79:13), His faithfulness (Ps. 89:1), and His fame (Ps. 146:10). So does His truth (Ps. 100:5), His absolution (Ps. 106:31), and His presence (I Kings 8:12-13). And Mary says that all generations will call *her* blessed?

It would be a haughty, pride-filled song indeed, except that Mary is singing about the Child inside her belly. He is the Son of God—He is God's truth, faithfulness, absolution and presence with His people. He brings salvation for Mary and the world—not by their works of pride, might or wealth, but by His life, suffering, death and resurrection. That's why all generations will look back and call Mary blessed, because the Lord is present with her, full of grace and truth. He might be the size of a pea, but He's fully the all-powerful Son of God. Blessed are all among whom the Lord dwells with His forgiveness and life.

Properly understood, the song of Mary is not about herself at all; she is simply the instrument that God uses to bring His Son into the world. The song isn't about her; it's all about the Baby.

It's all about the Baby; and to be all about the Baby, it must be all about *all* the Baby. In other words, one does not really speak of Jesus if he only speaks of an infant in a manger, as department stores and Christmas TV specials like to do. One truly speaks of Jesus when he acknowledges that the Baby in Mary's womb is the Incarnate Son of God; that He is the Prophet who speaks the Word because He is the Word made flesh; that He is the King who rules over all things; and that He is the Priest who offers the ultimate Sacrifice for sin—Himself. You can't speak all about the Baby until you have spoken of the cross; it is why Mary first speaks of God as her Savior. Her—and His!—Son will save the world from sin.

*Nails, spear shall pierce Him through, The cross be borne for me, for you;
Hail, hail the Word made flesh, the babe, the son of Mary. (LW 61:2)*

Advent 3: Monday**Read: Luke 1:46b-55***For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed. (Lk. 1:48)*

It's astonishing, really. The almighty Son of God, begotten of the Father from eternity, is developing tiny toes in Mary's womb. Jesus is becoming flesh to be the Redeemer, and little ol' Mary from Nazareth is the Lord's chosen temple in which this takes place. No wonder all generations call her blessed, even though many an unbeliever in each generation will scorn her.

Mary is blessed because Jesus dwells in her. The Lord of life is present in her womb, with all of His holiness and grace. He's the same Jesus from everlasting. He's the same Jesus who will be baptized in the Jordan. He's the same Jesus who will die on the cross. And rise again. And ascend into heaven.

Bear in mind, that while all of this is true, Mary looks like an unwed mother in a society that doesn't tolerate promiscuity. We have no record in Scripture, but it's hard to believe that Mary had an easy time of it.

I'm quite sure that all generations, my own included, don't have the same opinion of me. There are people who like me, and there are people who definitely don't. I've been called a few things, not all of them complimentary. Likely, the same is true for you; and part of the painful nature of things is that people won't like you because of the things you hold most dear.

So if you are one who takes some heat and suffers for doing the right thing or making the right confession, here is some comfort for you. The same Jesus, who was so present with Mary, is present with you. The Word made flesh is present in His Word with water at the font; and there, He has already joined you to His death and resurrection. The same Jesus, through whom all things were created (Jn. 1:3) as the Father spoke, speaks His Word to you to create and preserve your faith. The same Jesus, whose tiny body was enclosed in the Virgin's womb, gives you His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. By these means of grace, He visits you with all His gifts of forgiveness, life and salvation. He promises to work all things for your good (Ro. 8:28). He who died for His foes promises to raise you from the dead. And He, no one else, will be the Judge on the Last Day: His Word is the one that counts, and He already declares you not guilty, forgiven.

The same Lord who dwelt in Mary is with you by His Word and Sacraments.

All generations might not call you blessed. That's ok; it's going to be like that in a sinful world.

But rejoice. No matter what the generations say, the Lord calls you blessed because He is with you. For now. Forever.

*Once did the skies before Thee bow; A virgin's arms contain Thee now,
While angels, who in Thee rejoice, Now listen for Thine infant voice.
Hallelujah! (TLH 80:2)*

Advent 3: Tuesday**Isaiah 61:1-3, 10-11**

To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD... (Is. 61:2)

In the Old Testament, it happened once every fifty years. Trumpets would sound throughout the land, and the year of Jubilee would begin (Lev. 25). All land that had been given up or sold was returned to the original owner. All debts were forgiven. All slaves were set free.

How nice would that be today? Even if you made some terrible financial decisions, or a health crisis forced bankruptcy, it would be no more than fifty years until all was returned to you or your descendants. It was a giant reset button to the economy and society of the land. In fact, many have written that God built in the year of Jubilee for precisely that reason—to prevent economic depression, poverty and societal ill-will. But God wasn't primarily concerned with economics. He had a better reason: it was to point ahead to Jesus.

Shortly after the Temptation in the Wilderness, Jesus came to Nazareth on the Sabbath (Lk. 4:6-21). He was handed a book in the synagogue, and He read this prophecy from Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, Because He has anointed Me To preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives And recovery of sight to the blind, To set at liberty those who are oppressed; *To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD*" (Lk. 4:18-19). Then He sat down to teach and said, "Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk. 4:21).

Jesus was there, among other things, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord—the Jubilee. But He wasn't pointing to a time far off. He was pointing to Himself. In Him, all that was lost in sin would be restored: and rather than receive a land that would be lost again on earth, His people would receive the kingdom of heaven. Where they had an unpayable debt of sin before God, He would forgive that debt by dying in their place on the cross. Where they were slaves to sin and unable to free themselves, Jesus would set them free by His death and resurrection.

Jesus is your year of Jubilee—not twice a century, but now and forever. He has forgiven your debt and set you free. For that matter, He sends forth His Spirit to preach the Gospel to you, to give you the kingdom of heaven; and to heal the brokenhearted by creating a clean heart that is holy before God.

You know by now that this is a life of loss: things fall apart, health fails and all eventually die. But Christ Jesus has suffered the loss and borne your sins to the cross. Having died, He's conquered death for you, and sends His Word forth so that you might know.

Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing, and all that you have lost is restored in Christ.

*Who is this that comes in glory With the trump of jubilee?
Lord of battles, God of armies, He hath gained the victory.
He who on the cross did suffer, He who from the grave arose,
He hath vanquished sin and Satan; He by death hath spoiled His foes.*
(TLH 218:2)

Advent 3: Wednesday**Isaiah 61:1-3,10-11**

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, My soul shall be joyful in my God; For He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness... (Is. 61:10)

Many a Christmas present will reveal clothes when the wrappings come off. But don't forget the outfit that Isaiah proclaims. As Martin Luther says, the prophet speaks for the church in 61:10. He speaks of the clothes the Lord has for you; and, as always, they are yours because of Jesus.

Your Savior's first baby clothes are described in Luke 2: "And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn" (Lk. 2:7). The eternal Lord of all was wrapped tight in a blanket, unable to move as He took His first few breaths of air. He was born, helpless and vulnerable, happy as a baby to be swaddled.

Jesus' burial garment is curiously similar to the first: "Then he bought fine linen, took Him down, and wrapped Him in the linen. And he laid Him in a tomb which had been hewn out of the rock, and rolled a stone against the door of the tomb" (Mk. 15:46). Once again, having died, the Lord of life was wrapped immobile in a cloth and laid to rest.

In between, He had mercy on all who didn't reject Him. Tax collector, harlot, Canaanite, Roman...no matter the garb or the stains of sin, He had mercy. He was going to the cross, bearing their infirmity and iniquity. He was going to be crucified for their sin, so that they might be cleansed and purified, forgiven and clothed—clothed in His righteousness. This is the good news that Isaiah announces on behalf of God's people: "He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness. As a bridegroom decks himself with ornaments, And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels" (Is. 61:10). No matter the past sins, God's forgiven people are forgiven and made holy for Jesus' sake.

No matter your sins, the same is true for you. Jesus has covered you with the garments of salvation, with the robe of righteousness. When? How? "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27). At your Baptism, Jesus washed away all of your sins. He clothed you with His own righteousness. He cleansed and sanctified you so that He might present you, as part of His Church, to Himself as His glorious bride, not having spot or wrinkle or blemish or any such thing.

You know your sins, and there may well be some that make you want to cry in shame. But while you remember them, the Lord does not. He's clothed you with His righteousness, and He remembers your sin no more. He's made you part of His bride, and the eternal feast is coming. And when He presents you to Himself in glory, you'll be wearing white, all guilt gone.

*O bride of Christ, rejoice; Exultant raise thy voice
To hail the day of glory Foretold in sacred story.
Hosanna, praise and glory! Our King, we bow before Thee.* (TLH 57:1)

Advent 3: Thursday**Read: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24***He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it. (1 Thess. 5:24).*

If the New Testament were a symphony, this text would be the staccato portion—a rapid fire of short verses, excellent counsel from St. Paul as the epistle winds down: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies. Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.”

Excellent counsel: this is, after all, the Word of the Lord. But it's also Law, telling you what to do; and there's enough here to drive you to despair if you think you'll save yourself by doing it.

Rejoice always, even when the day's been horrible, or the doctor wants to see you again, or the bills are stacking up, or someone at work is out to get you.

Pray without ceasing, all the time. Not just when you're worried. Not just when you need a favor. If you're going to be a law-abiding Christian, you pray unceasingly. If you don't, then you're not obeying God as you should.

In everything give thanks: see the possibilities under “Rejoice always,” above, and add a few more horror stories that can really happen. And rather than get mad with God, cheerfully acknowledge that He's allowing this for your good.

Do not quench the Spirit—never indulge in any sort of sin, no matter how attractive, easy or pleasurable. Don't get bored with hearing sermons or reading the Word, either. In other words, *Do not despise prophecies*.

Test all things; hold fast to what is good. Whenever someone suggests some false teaching, no matter how happy or excited it makes them, love them enough to lovingly share the truth.

And just in case you think you can still do it, here's one more: *Abstain from every form of evil*. Uh-huh. That one needs no commentary.

All together, that's a big dose of Law. It's enough to kill you. If you honestly examine yourself by God's Word, you'll clearly confess that you don't keep these verses as you ought. You can't. If you're going to be saved, you need someone else to do the saving.

That's why the next two verses are so marvelous to hear! “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it.”

God Himself sanctifies you—He makes you holy! How? He's given His Son to be born of Mary, born pure and sinless. Jesus has kept this Law for you perfectly. He's prayed unceasingly, given thanks in everything and held fast to what is good. Holding fast to His Father's good will, He's taken your blame and died for your sin. There is no doubt that you are forgiven—why? Because God is faithful. Always faithful. You're free.

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)

Advent 3: Friday**Read: John 1:6-8, 19-28***He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." (Jn. 1:20)*

There's a bunch of sent people in John 1. “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John” (1:6)—sent by God to prepare the way of the Lord. Then there are chief priests and Levites, sent by the Pharisees (1:19,24)—sent to find out who John is, what he's doing, and why.

It's quite the disagreement between these two. For those sent by the Pharisees, religion is all about them. They mistakenly think that, if they keep the rules and do enough, then they will earn God's favor; worse, they believe that they're getting it done! In effect, they believe that they are their own saviors. In their religion, it's all about them.

For John, it's all about *not* him. He's quite happy to confess that he's not the Christ. He's not going to save himself or anybody else. He's a poor miserable sinner in need of the Savior. He spends a lot of his time explaining who he's not. The Pharisees' sent ones keep pressing, though: “*Who are you?*” *John responds, "I am 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Make straight the way of the LORD," ' as the prophet Isaiah said."* (1:23). He's a voice. He's the medium, not the message. He's been sent by God to proclaim God's Word. There's no power in John: he's just been given the privilege to talk about Jesus.

You and I have the privilege of talking about Jesus, too. Pastors are called into the Holy Ministry to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments publicly, on behalf of the Church. That's their vocation. All Christians have the privilege of speaking God's Word in their vocations as well: “always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet. 3:15). If you're a parent, you get to tell your kids. If you're a friend, you get to tell a friend. We get to be voices, voicing His Word of salvation.

The big temptation is to be like the Pharisees, believing that the message depends on us. It's always tempting to believe that, if we just put enough persuasive emotion into our argument, that God's Word will be more effective; or if we tell someone the Gospel and they believe, it's because we finally nailed our Christian witness and stuck the landing. On the other hand, it's easy to cower from talking about Jesus, making the excuse that we're just not very good at speaking, and our stumbling will weaken God's Word. Moses tried that one. He argued that he couldn't be God's spokesman to Pharaoh because he was a lousy speaker. Yahweh responded, “Now therefore, go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall say.” (Ex. 4:12) Whether we take pride or shame in our speaking abilities, it's a sinful temptation to believe that we make the message effective.

Rejoice: you're just a voice. Jesus is the Savior, and His Word of grace to you is always effective and certain.

*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 65:1)

Advent 3: Saturday**Read: John 1:6-8, 19-28**

John answered them, saying, "I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know." (Jn. 1:26)

Crowds gather around John as he preaches beyond the Jordan: "all Judea" goes out to hear him, says Matthew 3:6. What's the draw? For some, it's to test out the prophet and see what he's made of. Likely, given human nature, some want a look at the man who wears the strange clothes and lives on the locust-honey wilderness diet. In the end, it's the message that's compelling: many repent and are baptized. In any event, John the Baptist stands out. He draws a crowd.

And he makes clear he's just the voice, not the Savior. He's simply preparing the way for the Christ who is about to arrive. In fact, when the Pharisees' men continue to pester him, he tells them, "I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know."

Did you catch that? I think I missed it about the first hundred times I read it. "There stands One among you." How near is Jesus? He's among them. He's standing in the crowd. He's listening to the exchange between John and his interrogators. He's *present*.

He's present, and no one notices. He's become flesh so much that He doesn't stand out at all. The Christ is there, and all eyes are still on the voice instead. This fits in with Old Testament prophecy: "He has no form or comeliness; And when we see Him, There is no beauty that we should desire Him" (Is. 53:2). In fact, how are the people going to find out that Jesus is there? Only because John *tells* them: "The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, 'Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'" (Jn. 1:29)

That's how it is: people believe in Jesus because they hear the Word; otherwise, they don't recognize Him. He's born and laid in the manger: shepherds come to behold the King because angels have told them, but the rest of Bethlehem sleeps. He's put on a cross, as He *said*, because He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world; but those who do not hear His Word see a crucified criminal, not the perfect Sacrifice.

So it is today: those who hear the Word and believe will rejoice in the Incarnate Savior in the manger; those who don't will pin their happiness on a sweater that's going to snag. Those who hear the Word will look with awe at the sight of God on a cross; those who don't will make Easter about boiled eggs, marshmallow chickens and chocolate lagomorphs.

One more: those who hear God's Word will look for Jesus where He is—in His Word and Sacraments. It's in those means of grace that you'll find the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. They'll just look like water, bread, wine and someone talking: but there stands One among you to forgive and deliver you.

*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)

Advent 4: Sunday**Read: Psalm 98**

All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God. (Ps. 98:3)

The readings for the final week of Advent take us back to Psalm 98 as the angels prepare to sing the new song of Jesus' birth. Psalm 98 declares more good news: it's not just a song for some, but a song for all—for all the ends of the earth.

The salvation of our God in Christ is a phenomenal advent in the world. At the time, Romans have gods for Romans, and Canaanites have gods for Canaanites. Gods are for specific peoples, not for others. One might add that there is also the human notion that, within a nation, the god obviously loves the wealthy and successful far more than the poor and the sick. It only makes sense.

But this incarnate Son of God is not just for the Jews. As Simeon will sing when he cradles the Infant, Jesus is "A light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, And the glory of Your people Israel" (Luke 2:32). Wise men will come from the area of hated Babylon to give the Christ gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh (Mt. 2:1-12). The Canaanite woman will seek out the adult Jesus and hold Him to His promise that He has mercy on both the children of Israel and the "dogs" around them (Mt. 15:21-28).

Furthermore, this Savior is not just for the select healthy and wealthy of society. He is born to Mary, the lowly maidservant of the Lord who lives in Nazareth; and when He is born, the angels go first to scruffy shepherds and say, "There is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Lk. 2:11). Even to you, shepherds. Especially for you.

And, of course, when Jesus sends out the apostles to make disciples by His Word and Baptism before He ascends (Mt. 28:18-20), He sends them out to *all nations*, because He has died for the sins of the world. He carefully chooses His means of grace so that elements are readily available: where will you find man where you will not find water, bread and wine? And heaven will feature the people of God from every tribe, tongue, people and nation (Rev. 5:9).

So here is your cause for joy. If the Lord has died for all, then the Lord has certainly died for you. There is no one for whom He did not sacrifice Himself on the cross. There is no one for whom God desires death. The devil will use every trial and suffering you have to persuade you that God has left you out of His redemption. Some misguided Christians will even offer up the bad doctrine that Jesus only died for the elect; if you're not among them, too bad.

But no matter what you see with your eyes, suffer in your body or hear in the world's constant jabber, you can be sure of this. When the angels declare "There is born to you a Savior" to the shepherds, they are saying it to you, too. The Savior of all the world has put His name on you in Baptism. He feeds you His Supper even while He speaks His Word to you. Even if you find yourself at the end of the earth, Christ is your salvation.

*From heav'n above to earth I come to bear good news to ev'ry home;
Glad tidings of great joy I bring, Whereof I now will say and sing:
To you this night is born a child of Mary, chosen virgin mild;*

This little child, of lowly birth, shall be the joy of all the earth. (TLH 85:1-2)

Advent 4: Monday**Read: Psalm 98**

For He is coming to judge the earth. With righteousness He shall judge the world, And the peoples with equity. (Ps. 98:9)

God is coming to judge the earth. It doesn't sound like good news to a lot of people. Old Adam wants to do what he wants to do; by nature, he wants to decide what's right and what's wrong. This means, of course, that he doesn't want God to tell him what's right and what's wrong; and the fact that God would actually judge him for his sin sounds absolutely unfair. And if God is going to judge with righteousness, that's even worse news! Unrighteous sinners can't hope that God won't notice their sin when they stand before Him, or that He's going to let their unholiness slide. Therefore, they consider God to be cruel, unfair and worse.

But Old Adam only hears half the story: he understands law, and he hates it. But Old Adam refuses to hear the Gospel. The new song of righteous judgment is very Good News.

Before Jesus comes to judge the world with righteousness, He has already come. He's become flesh and been born of Mary. He's lived a perfectly sinless, righteous life. He has also suffered God's judgment for all the sins of all the world on the cross. He has already suffered God's judgment for your sin.

At your Baptism, He joined you do His death and resurrection (Ro. 6:1-6). He gave you the credit for His perfect life, and took away your sins that He died for on the cross. Taking away your sins, He has given you His righteousness. Thus, long before Judgment Day, you are prepared. God looks upon you and says, "Heaven is yours, because My Son has given you His righteousness. You need have no fear of Judgment Day, because I see no sin to condemn you."

And long before Judgment Day, the Lord declares this verdict to you again and again in the Absolution: "I forgive you all of your sins."

How tragic that the world sees this righteous Judge as unfair and cruel. After all, in order *not* to sentence you to death for your sin, He has already sentenced Himself to death and suffered the punishment already. The only way one can still be condemned is to refuse the pardon and say, "I don't want you r forgiveness. I want to die for my sins myself!" Otherwise, the Judge declares you innocent. Unfair? Absolutely—unfairly merciful. What sort of a judge punishes himself for the crimes of the guilty?

Only the Judge who is born in Bethlehem, who brings peace on earth and goodwill toward men. He judges righteously, but first giving His righteousness to all who will receive it. He judges with equity, because He has died for all. And He judges personally: *you* are forgiven for all of your sins.

*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)*

Advent 4: Tuesday**Read: Psalm 98**

He has remembered His mercy and His faithfulness to the house of Israel; All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God. (Ps. 98:3)

In preparing for Christmas through the weeks of Advent, Luke 1 comes to mind. If you have a moment, read verses 5-25. There, the Lord prepares us for Jesus' birth by beginning with the story of Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist. The priest taking his turn in the temple has an important name: Zacharias, Zachar-Yah—"Yahweh remembers." Zacharias goes about his temple duties in the hope that God will remember His promises and send the Savior.

The Lord has sung the new song and promised the Savior throughout the Old Testament. He's declared that the Seed of the woman will crush Satan's head (Gen. 3:15). He's declared that the Virgin will conceive and bear a Son (Is. 7:14). He's promised that He will send His messenger just before the Savior, to prepare the way (Mal. 3:1). Promises, again and again.

God has made those promises throughout history; and apart from faith, history would seem to contradict the promises. Zacharias can look back and see the sorrow of Israel, as Egyptians and Philistines and Assyrians and Babylonians and Seleucids and Romans each have taken their turn at the brutal reign over God's people. If you look at the people, they don't look particularly blessed.

But the promises of God are far more sure. That day in the temple, Gabriel will tell Zacharias that God has remembered His promises. The Savior is about to arrive...and the son of Zacharias is the messenger who will prepare the way.

It's ironic that Zacharias doubts the angel's message that day: the one named "Yahweh remembers" doesn't remember himself. No matter: the Lord will give Zacharias nine months of silence to meditate upon these things. And whether or not Zacharias believes, the Lord remembers His mercy and keeps His promises.

The Lord remembers His promises to you. At your Baptism, He washed away your sin, and promised you, personally, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Mt. 28:20). He continues to sing His new song of Holy Absolution to you, even as He feeds you His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. By these means of grace, He is with you—faithfully and mercifully—to the end of the age.

Will you doubt at times? Certainly. Will you be tempted to despair when held in captivity by illness or grief? Yes. You'll waver as long as you live in this sinful world. But the Lord is faithful to His promises.

In other words, here is your unfailing hope: Yahweh remembers you.

*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)*

Advent 4: Wednesday**Read: 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16**

"And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever." (2 Sam. 7:16)

Ever discuss church architecture? Some insist that a church building must be only the best, in order to show fitting respect for the Lord. Others insist that the building should be as plain and inexpensive as possible, in order to free up more money to give to missions, charities, etc. Indeed, some who read this may attend Divine Service in a sanctuary bathed in colors from stained glass, while others may gather in the bare cement room of an old, rented Grange hall, or before an altar in the desert made of a cloth thrown over ammo crates.

So what's the answer? Well, what does the Lord say?

King David was concerned, feeling guilty in 2 Samuel 7. As ruler of Israel, he lived in an ornate palace, luxurious to the last detail. He was king because God had made him king and continually delivered him from his enemies. And yet...while he lived in a beautiful palace, the Lord's home was still a tent. He still dwelled in the Holy of Holies of the tabernacle. It just wasn't right. David decided to build the Lord a temple fit for God Most High.

God said no. He didn't want David to focus on a temple made of stone. (It wasn't that He was against a temple: He permitted Solomon to build one after David died.) But to David, He said, "Don't build me a house—I'll build you a house instead." He wasn't speaking of a building, but a living and established family that would last forever. Forever! Why? Because a descendant of David would be king forever. Jesus would reign for eternity. And wherever Jesus would be present, in the flesh or in His means of grace, He'd be forgiving sins and adding people to His household.

What makes a temple to be God's temple? God is present there. When Jesus became incarnate, He spoke of His very ordinary body (Is. 53:2) as a temple (Jn. 2:21), because He was present there in the flesh. That manger in which He was laid became a far more Holy Place than any temple raised up to a false God! Today, He remains present wherever His Word is preached in its truth and purity, and wherever the Sacraments are administered according to His Word. Where the church building's spires reach up to the heavens and mosaics display Bible stories, He is present—if His means of grace are present. Where a few set up metal folding chairs in a borrowed school room, He is present—if His means of grace are present. Both buildings are scheduled for demolition, on the Last Day if not before.

But the Lord's house? It lasts forever. By His Word and Sacrament, He's made you part of that household. He has gone to prepare a place for you, a mansion in His Father's house. Until then, He promises to you: "For where two or three are gathered together *in My name* [regardless of architecture], *I am there in the midst of them*" (Mt. 18:20).

*We are God's house of living stones, Buildd for His habitation;
He through baptismal grace us owns Heirs of His wondrous salvation.
Were we but two His name to tell, yet He would deign with us to dwell
With all His grace and His favor. (TLH 467:3)*

Advent 4: Thursday**Read: Romans 16:25-27**

...according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began but now has been made manifest... (Ro. 16:25-26)

From Genesis 3 until the angel appeared to Mary, the identity of the Savior was a mystery. Oh, the Lord kept promising the advent of the Christ, and He kept on giving clues. The first was in Genesis 3:15, as He told Satan of his defeat: "I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel." The Seed of the woman would defeat the devil. Strange language, for those paying attention: women have eggs. Men have seed. It was as if the woman would bear a son without a man involved...a virgin birth.

No identity, though. I believe it's Luther who noted that this was particularly unkind for the devil. He knew that one born of a woman would destroy him, but he could never know which one of which woman. Every time a son was born, he'd have to wonder if this was it. Too bad for the devil. No sympathy here.

The Savior's identity was a mystery, though the Lord kept speaking of Him. He would be born of the line of Abraham (Gen. 22:18) and David (2 Sam 7:16). He would be from Nazareth (Mt. 2:23), though born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). He'd look like nothing special (Is. 53:2), but the one born to a Virgin would be called Immanuel, "God with us" (Is. 7:14). The people of God heard His promises and prophecies. They had the Passover and sacrifices to remind them that the Lord would save by sacrifice. Hearing His Word, they believed in the Savior who was to come. But His identity remained a mystery.

But in Bethlehem, the mystery's solved. The Savior is born. You can look in His eyes and let His tiny fist grip your pinkie. Kept secret since the world began, He's here! That's why, when shepherds hear the angel, they have to run to Bethlehem. That's why the wise men from the East have to follow the star.

As the epistle to the Romans ends, St. Paul rejoices that the mystery has been revealed. Rather than look forward to the Savior-to-come, he can declare the Gospel of Jesus Christ and speak specifically of His saving work. That, really, is what Romans is about: Christ has saved you by grace, and Paul delights to tell you about the Savior revealed.

How is this mystery unveiled? Through the Gospel, says Paul, through the preaching of Jesus. By that Word, you hear of Jesus; but there's more to it than that. By His prophetic Scriptures, the Lord is at work: He establishes you by His Word, giving you faith so that you might be His forever. Likewise, He gives you grace by His Sacraments (a Latin word, believe it or not, for "mystery"). As you prepare for the birthday celebration of the Word made flesh, rejoice! The Word in the manger is not far from you. He is as near to you as His Word, so that you might know Him...and know you're known by He who saves you forever.

*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)*

Advent 4: Friday**Read: Luke 1:26-38**

And having come in, the angel said to her, "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!" (Lk. 1:29)

It gets me every time I read this text. An angel appears before Mary, fresh from the presence of the Lord. When Balaam saw an angel, he fell flat on his face (Num 22:32). So did the guards who stood watch Easter morning (Mt. 28:4). Zacharias was troubled just a few verses before by the sight (Lk. 1:12). But it's not the sight that troubles the girl in Nazareth: it's what the angel says, and what sort of greeting it might be—the greeting of Luke 1:29. So what's so disturbing about what the angel says?

"Highly favored one:" the original word declares that Mary is highly favored because God has freely bestowed something upon her. Because He has given her something special, she is highly favored. And what might that gift be?

"The Lord is with you." There it is, right there. Admittedly, I'm making a bit of a guess here, but I'm guessing that this is what troubles Mary. She's in podunk Nazareth. God lives in Jerusalem, in the Holy of Holies in the temple. How can it be true that the Lord is with her?

The angel tells her: "Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest..." (Lk. 1:31-32). How is the Lord with Mary? Simple: as of that day, she's carrying the Son of God. The eternal Son of God is now a zygote in the temple of her womb. The King of kings and Lord of lords is a single cell, dividing into two, then four, then eight... Simple. Simply amazing.

The angel isn't kidding when he says, "The Lord is with you." It's a statement of material presence: the Lord isn't looking down from heaven, but dwells physically within Mary. This is why she is blessed among women.

Indeed, all generations will call Mary blessed for being the Mother of God. But remember, too: the world doesn't understand the blessings of God. Apart from Word and God-given faith, the world will see an unwed teenage mom. It will see a poverty-stricken baby in Bethlehem. It will see a homeless teacher and a ragtag band of twelve. And it will see a scourged man dying on the cross, a colossal waste. Because Mary is blessed with Jesus' presence but living in this world, Simeon is absolutely right when he says a sword will pierce her soul, too (Lk. 2:35). But the Lord blesses her—"The Lord is with you"—with Jesus' presence so that the Savior will be born: Immanuel—God with us.

You will face the pain, too. Rejoicing in the Savior, you'll mourn the friends and loved ones who don't believe in Him. You'll face, at times, the scorn of those who believe your faith makes you incapable of sound reason. You'll hurt to see society run away from grace. But the only reason you're in pain is that the Lord is with you; had He abandoned you, you would only be numb and hopeless. No, blessed are you indeed, because the Lord is with you. He'll deliver you from this exile of sin, fully restored to life everlasting.

*Thy light and grace Our guilt efface, Thy heaven'ly riches all our loss retrieving.
Immanuel, Thy birth doth quell The pow'r of hell and Satan's bold deceiving.*

(TLH 81:3)

The Eve of the Nativity of Our Lord**Read: Luke 1:26-38**

Then Mary said, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word. (Lk. 1:38)

A lot of the Church's liturgy comes out of Luke 1 and 2, including the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) and Benedictus (Lk. 1:68-79) used in Matins. For the Divine Service of Holy Communion, we find the Gloria in Excelsis (Lk. 2:14) and the Nunc Dimittis (Lk. 2:29-32). There's a reason for this: all four of these texts declare God's presence to save. In the context of Luke, each one proclaimed that God had faithfully remembered His promises, that Jesus was taking on flesh in order to dwell among His people and save them from their sin. Throughout the liturgy, the Church sings the new song of the Gospel. This was also summed up in the angel's words to Mary: "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you." Remember the name Immanuel, "God with us."

What was true for Mary is true for you.

God calls you "highly favored" because He has freely bestowed a great gift upon you: for Jesus' sake, He has given you forgiveness. If you're forgiven, then you also have faith, salvation, eternal life and the confidence that you are the Lord's beloved child. Come what may—no matter your circumstances, uncertainties, pains and griefs, the Lord calls you highly favored for Jesus' sake, and He will never leave you nor forsake you.

Now, in the liturgy of the Church, the pastor—God's called messenger—turns to you and declares the same message as the angelic messenger did to Mary: "The Lord be with you." For Mary, it meant the presence of the Christ-child in her womb. For you, it means no less of His presence. By His live-giving Word, Jesus Christ—the Word-made-flesh—is with you to forgive and enliven you: "But the righteousness of faith speaks in this way, 'Do not say in your heart, "Who will ascend into heaven?"' (that is, to bring Christ down from above) or, "'Who will descend into the abyss?' " (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? 'The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart.'" (Ro. 10:6-8).

By His Sacrament of Holy Communion, He gives you His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins—the same body and blood that was present in Mary as it grew prenatally. And why is the Lord present with you? To save you, that you might be present with Him in heaven forever.

As you celebrate the Lord's nativity this eve and tomorrow, rejoice, highly favored one. You do not simply celebrate a past historical event; but as you give thanks for the Lord's birth, you rejoice that He remains with you by His means of grace—just as present now as ever. Hearing the Good News of this new song, Mary said, "Let it be to me according to your word." With great thanks, we also sing our amens: Yea, yea. Let it be so.

A blessed Christmas to you, for Christ is born for you. Amen.

*Thou Christian heart, Whoe'er thou art,
Be of good cheer and let no sorrow move thee!
For God's own child, In mercy mild,*

Joins thee to Him; how greatly God must love thee! (TLH 81:4)