



*Good News of Great Joy*  
**FOR ALL THE PEOPLE**

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2025 LCMC ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

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<sup>8</sup> In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup> Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup> to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

<sup>13</sup> And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup> “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

<sup>15</sup> When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.”

– Luke 2:8-15

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**A**s the angel told the shepherds about the arrival of Jesus in the world, they weren’t issuing a warning or making a demand. They were announcing good news. A savior, the Savior, had been born that day. God was intervening in the world in a new way and rather than being a cause for alarm, this would be the source of our deepest joy.

Sometimes we struggle with the task of sharing this good news of great joy. We attach demands and fears and obligations to it, forgetting all about promise and freedom and rest.

During this Advent season, we will spend some time in passages that remind us of this good news for all the people. Feel free to pass these along to someone in your life who needs some good news.

**Julie Smith**  
Service Coordinator, LCMC



# December 1

## Genesis 12:1-3

*In you all the families of the earth will be blessed.*

### FOR REFLECTION:

- \* What surprises you about Abram's response to the Lord's call?
- \* What do you think he imagined when he heard "in you all the families of the earth will be blessed?"

### PRAYER:

God of Abraham and Sarah, it's not easy for us to embrace the unknown. You call us to trust in you, but our instinct is to verify. Pull us out of those places where our comfort leaves us indifferent to the needs of others. Fill us with the faith that moves us toward our neighbors, sharing the gift you have given us, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

### DEVOTION:

Most of the time, I cannot really imagine what it was like to be Abram and Sarai, leaving behind everything I know and striking out for an unknown destination. The kind of faith, or maybe just a sense of adventure, that would take is rather awe-inspiring and more than a little shaming. It makes me realize how much I hope against hope that I will never be called to such a thing. I enjoy the familiar. I like having a sense of home.

On the other hand, I have developed a rather alarming level of faith in Google Maps. As I'm roaming around the country, I put my destination into the phone, which is plugged into the car, and I hardly give another thought to where in the world I am or where I am going. Sometimes I don't even know what direction I am headed. The map on the screen just points forward and I go where it tells me to.

I trust Google Maps, at least in part, because, in general, Google seems to know everything about me. It knows when I have booked a plane ticket or rented a car. It seems to know what I'm thinking about and can send me ads for products I could buy that will solve whatever is on my mind. It's easy to just go along with where Google points.

What makes it so easy to trust Google and so difficult to trust God? Google has, in fact, led me astray. It has sent me down the wrong road. It has radically miscalculated how long it will take me to get somewhere. It is compiling all sorts of information about me, not to serve *me* better, but to serve its advertisers better. But something in me is comfortable with that. Accepts that. And something in me can't accept the call to trust the Lord.

Abram and Sarai got up and went because the Lord called them to go. The Lord made a covenant, promising to be their God, promising to bless them, lead them, protect them. And right from the start, something even more was embedded in that covenant. The blessing was not only for Abram and Sarai and their descendants. It would be for all the families of the earth. The Lord of the universe focused his blessings upon one family, for the sake of all families. And in a few weeks we will celebrate, once again, the miraculous fulfillment of that promise.

# December 2

## Genesis 22:1-19

*By your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessings for themselves.*

### FOR REFLECTION:

- \* What do you find most troubling about this story?
- \* Where do you find comfort in this story?

### PRAYER:

Almighty God, it can be terrifying to realize what it means to trust in you alone. Our sin-sick hearts are never fully convinced that you don't need some input from us. Open our hands to let go of anything we would cling to more tightly than you. Open our hearts to trust that you are accomplishing your purposes, even when we can't see it. Amen.

### DEVOTION:

I have found this story terrifying since I was a child. The artwork in the Sunday School books did not help. There was something so wild about the look on Abraham's face that I couldn't really get it out of my head. I'm not sure that I worried God might ask me to do something like that, but I did wonder about my parents, who faithfully brought me to worship and Sunday School every week. If God asked them to do something like that, they would have to do it, right? I definitely understood from the story that if you have to choose between God and people, you choose God, every time, no matter the cost.

I did not find that to be a word of comfort. And the fact that God stopped everything at the last second did not really help. I could not have said it then, but the wild look on Abraham's face reflected something wild, something unpredictable about God. The horrifying thought of sacrificing a child overwhelmed anything else that might be drawn from the story. Abraham's trust, Isaac's obedience, God's provision, none of that is what comes first to mind for me. It's Abraham, standing over a bound Isaac, with knife raised, ready to take his life.

This story is often described as a test of Abraham's faith or obedience. But a good rule of thumb when reading the Bible is to pay attention to what God is up to. Abraham tells a curious Isaac that God will provide the offering. As he says it, perhaps he thinks that God has already provided it in the form of this long-awaited son. But then, the Lord provides a different offering and makes another promise.

While we instinctively focus on the faith of Abraham, the Lord's faithfulness is on display in this story as well. The Lord proves to Abraham, once again, that he can be trusted. He proves to Abraham that he will provide what is needed. He proves to Abraham that his will is to bless and not curse. He promises, once again, that through another of Abraham's offspring, all the nations of the earth will gain blessings. And as we know, the accomplishing of that blessing also comes by the Lord's own provision.

# December 3

## Psalm 9:7-12

*He judges the world with righteousness; he judges the peoples with equity.*

### FOR REFLECTION:

- \* What do you think it means to be oppressed?
- \* Where do you see oppression in our world?
- \* When have you felt oppressed? When have you been the oppressor?

### PRAYER:

God of the universe, we easily assume that our ways are your ways and our judgments are your judgments. Keep us mindful that all peoples belong to you, are beloved by you. Send us out to our neighbors, not with condemnation, but with the mercy that is found in Christ alone. Amen.

### DEVOTION:

One of my core convictions is that all nations, all governments, all political parties are made up entirely, and exclusively, of sinners. Part of what that means is that we cannot ever forget that the very best work we do is still the work of sinners. When we start to imagine anything else about ourselves, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

This conviction makes me nervous about any rhetoric I hear claiming that “my side” is on the side of the Lord and anyone who disagrees with me hates God or hates God’s beloved people. There is a pridefulness in that that is one of the many sins that the Lord has to remove from us.

In all the universe, there is one who is truly righteous, one whose judgment is not tainted by sin. And scripture introduces us over and over and over again to this one who rules with mercy, who is a stronghold for the oppressed, who hears the cries of the afflicted. This is one of the truly remarkable things about Scripture, and especially the Old Testament. God’s people *want* to call down his judgment upon their enemies. They *want* to point to their successes as signs of God’s favor. They *want* to believe that God despises everyone they despise. But even in the midst of a psalm like this one, they must acknowledge that the Lord rules all peoples with equity. They must acknowledge that he hears the cries of the downtrodden. There is no escape from this fundamental truth about who our God is, no matter how much we might prefer the notion of God executing vengeance exclusively on our behalf.

The Lord’s steadfast love and compassion for the lowly is not a favorite theme in a world that has an insatiable thirst for power. It derails our hopes for dominance. It calls us to account when we would use God’s name in pursuit of our own agenda. But the Lord’s steadfast love and compassion for the lowly is also our salvation. Our only salvation. Our only hope. Without his mercy, our sin removes us so far from him that we are irredeemable. This is the truth about us no matter how righteous we are in the eyes of the world. But more importantly, this is the truth about God. His mercy endures forever. Even to the likes of you and me.

# December 4

## Psalm 33:1-22

*Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage.*

### FOR REFLECTION:

- \* When are you most aware of your rebellion against God?
- \* When do you have the deepest sense of belonging to God?
- \* Who do you know that may need to hear the promise that they belong to God?

### PRAYER:

Merciful Father, despite your steadfast love, we are driven constantly into rebellion against you. We embrace injustice. We hatch plans that do harm to others. Bring us back to you. Take from us all other gods that would stand in your place. Amen.

### DEVOTION:

I do not like it when my plans are frustrated. I'm not particularly good at making plans, so when I do get around to making one, I like it to come off without a hitch. Whatever outcome I had in mind, whatever schedule I had in mind, whatever cost I had in mind, whatever participation I had in mind, that's how things should go. No hiccups. No surprises. No problems.

So when I read a line like, "he frustrates the plans of the peoples" . . . it does not warm my heart. I want to shout, "Why would you do that? Why would you frustrate these careful plans? Why would you bring the counsel of the nations to nothing? Why not just put your hand of blessing on whatever I come up with? Would that be so difficult?"

It's hard for us to imagine that my plans might not line up very well with the Lord's plans. It's hard to imagine that the Lord might not *need* my plans in order to accomplish his purposes in the world. Surely a little input from me on how this universe unfolds is in order! When we put it that crassly it becomes clear how out of line we are. But when we are in the midst of frustrated plans, it's all too easy to forget that there is one Lord and it's not me.

When we are in the midst of frustrated plans, a statement like, "happy is the nation whose God is the Lord" might make no sense to us at all. When we are in the midst of frustrated plans, it becomes just a little bit too clear that we are out of step with the Lord's ways, the Lord's will. We've set our own course, our own agenda, and because we're sinners, those agendas are filled to the brim with rebellion against the Lord. We don't just have *other* plans. We have *opposing* plans, plans that are at odds with the Lord.

But the Lord does not frustrate our plans just to show his power. He frustrates our plans in order to bring us into conformity with him. He frustrates our plans in order to save us from a false and deadly confidence in ourselves. Our very best plans can never get the job done – not the big job of redeeming the world, of bringing rebels back to the heart of God. That work, that plan, is the Lord's alone. And when our vain trust in ourselves is taken from us, then we begin to know the deep joy and peace of being chosen as his heritage.

# December 5

## Psalm 46:1-11

*Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.*

### FOR REFLECTION:

- \* When have you been impatient with God?
- \* What makes you doubt God's presence in our world or in your life?

### PRAYER:

Lord of the nations, in times of trouble it is difficult to be still and wait for you. We have our own plans and timelines, our solutions to the problems we face, and we become impatient. Open our hearts to know you as you want to be known – our refuge and strength, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

### DEVOTION:

It's a rather jarring word to be told to "be still" in a world that values perpetual motion. Open spots on the calendar must be filled. Quiet days must have some activity brought to them. Every moment must be lived to the fullest. Stillness sounds an awful lot like wasted time. There is work to do, experiences to have, time to fill. So when the psalmist calls us to be still, there is something about it that just does not compute. How can we be still when there is so much to do?

And there is even more to this call than just "be still." The call is to be still . . . and know that I am God. Perhaps this is about a contemplative lifestyle, one that is quiet and listening for the Word of the Lord. Perhaps this is an echo of Elijah's experience of the "still small voice." But I think there is something else, something more, in this call to be still.

Psalm 46 speaks to those times in life when things are going wrong. It speaks to times of trouble. In those times, our instinct is often to take action. We busy ourselves with our checklists and plans in order to get ahead of whatever has us in fear. Psalm 46 reflects a time when God's people were under physical attack by an enemy. Every instinct would tell them to fortify their defenses, get ready to fight, get ready to give everything they had to defeat their attacker.

But the Lord tells them to be still, and he promises that in their stillness they will see his power at work. They will see the Lord's capacity and will to preserve and protect his people. They will see his power to save. By entrusting their salvation to the Lord, not only will Israel know that he is God. Their faith and his salvation will be a witness to the nations. Their confidence in his work on their behalf and his unfailing faithfulness to his promises will cause him to be exalted, not only in Israel, but in the nations, in the whole earth.

Can we imagine such a thing? Can we imagine stillness as faith? Stillness as witness? Can we imagine bearing witness to our Lord, first and foremost, through our confidence in his salvation, when our every instinct screams that we need to save ourselves? Can we imagine the Lord desiring to be known above all else as one who saves his beloved? Only such a God as this is worthy of being exalted among the nations!

# December 6

## Psalm 67

*Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.*

### FOR REFLECTION:

- \* What do you want others to know about God? Why?
- \* How is that a reflection of how God has made himself known to you?

### PRAYER:

Lord God, your gracious saving power is a gift we barely comprehend. It is so much easier for us to understand judgment rather than mercy. But you have come into the world not to condemn but to save. Grant that we would be among those who praise your bountiful grace. Amen.

### DEVOTION:

In our tradition we understand all sin to flow out of our breaking of the first commandment. Over and over and over again, we find ourselves fashioning gods for ourselves. Most of the time, those false gods are, in one way or another, in our image. Whether they actually look like us, or look the way we imagine ourselves, or look how we aspire to be, they are reflections of what we value, what we think is important, what we think is powerful.

Political leaders know how to tap into that idolatry that lives within us. They know how to reflect back to us whatever we think is powerful or important. And when they tap into that idolatry, they can manipulate us in ways we would not have thought possible because they are tapping into our faith. Misplaced faith. Idolatrous faith. But faith nonetheless. Once they have hold of our faith, they can put us to work toward their ends, their vision of power and importance.

The Triune God, the Creator of all that is, the Redeemer of the universe, could easily do the same. He could rightfully put his power to work to bring about our subservience. In doing so he would, simultaneously, fit right in with the gods of our own making *and* show his sovereignty over those powerless gods. While other gods can demand subservience, the *real* God can do so even more powerfully! So what are we to do with our God who chooses not to be known this way?

In many of the psalms we see the wrestling God's people do with who they want God to be and who he has shown himself to be. They want to shout the praises of one who lays waste to every obstacle that stands in their way. But when they are called to speak faithfully of who their God is and what he is doing in the world, they have no choice but to speak of his blessings, his salvation, his mercy. They have no choice but to speak of the equity with which he looks upon all the peoples of the earth, not just his covenant people. In spite of themselves, they must speak of a God who is *not* in our image. A God who is conforming us to his image – an image of forgiveness, life, salvation.

When all the false gods have been revealed as false, when their power is proven powerless, our true God, the Living God remains. He alone is worthy of the praises of all the peoples.



# December 8

## Psalm 86:8-13

*All the nations you have made shall come and bow down before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name.*

### FOR REFLECTION:

- \* What are some of the things that seek to take God's place in your life as what you fear, love, and trust above all else?
- \* How have they changed at different stages in your life?
- \* What do you wish you could tell your younger self? What do you hope you are never too old to remember?

### PRAYER:

Lord, give me an undivided heart. Turn me to trust in you alone. Replace my doubt with faith and take from my hands anything that would turn me from you. Deliver me, once again, from the powers of darkness as only you can. Amen.

### DEVOTION:

Based on the headlines I see every day, it is almost impossible to even imagine what an undivided world might look like. "All the nations" agreeing on anything at all does not appear to be imminent. The evidence of history shows that we are quite a bit better at division than unity. Try as we might, we have rarely found it possible to put aside our differences for more than a brief period of time.

That is why it's helpful to recall that the scene described in Psalm 86 is not our project but God's promise. If "all the nations" are going to bow before the Lord, it will only be through the Lord's work in the world. And that work is found in the healing, the raising up, of each divided heart – yours and mine. We are divided against one another because we are divided against ourselves and against God as that which is not God seeks to be our god.

All along the journey of life, gods pop up, demanding our worship, luring us away from the one who has shown us nothing but steadfast love and mercy. Our divided hearts chase after these gods, seeking status, reputation, comfort, wealth, ease, safety, power, popularity, love, affirmation, belonging, and all kinds of other things. But these false gods cannot deliver. They cannot make us whole because they are exploiting the division in our hearts, exploiting the divisions between us and our neighbors.

But the Living God is bringing about a new day in which all the nations will glorify his name. He is bringing about a new day when false gods will be put aside once and for all, and we will finally know the depths of the Lord's steadfast love and mercy for us. We will finally see his hand in the great and wondrous things he is doing every day. We will finally walk in his truth. And we will finally see him face to face, with an undivided heart that is not looking anywhere else for wholeness.

# December 9

## Psalm 96:1-9

*Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples.*

### FOR REFLECTION:

- \* What types of things do you think of as signs of God's glory? What types of things do you think of as humanity's ingenuity?
- \* How do you react when someone else gets credit for your work?

### PRAYER:

Lord of all, we do not always recognize your work in and for us. We are quick to give others the glory that belongs to you alone. Make us faithful witnesses of the glory that is Christ alone. Amen.

### DEVOTION:

I do not go out of my way to take credit for my work. In fact, I am more likely to deflect credit than receive it in any kind of public setting. But when I see someone else get credit for my work, there is a kind of quiet rage that sets in that is not one of my finer qualities. Only those who know me well enough to pay attention to the shifting color of my face would notice this. I try to hide this trait as much as possible. It seems I kind of want some credit, without appearing to want credit, and definitely not wanting someone else to get credit that is rightfully mine. And in a sign of just how firmly in the grip of sinful delusion we are, much of the time I can even convince myself that I'm not looking for credit.

Among the truly appalling aspects of this is the reality that I can be worried about getting credit for whatever little thing I might be doing while floating along oblivious to the wondrous things God is doing in our midst all the time. I can want my name to show up somewhere while failing to mention the name of the one in whom we all live and move and have our being.

Imagine if we were as dedicated to crediting the Lord for his work as we are to lauding our own work. What would it look like if we spent our days, or even just a moment or two each day, declaring his glory among the nations? What would it look like if we ascribed to the Lord the glory due his name? Can we even imagine it?

Every moment of every day, the Lord is holding the whole of creation in his hands. Every moment of every day he is breathing life into his creatures. Every moment of every day he causes the earth to produce all that we need for life, and an abundance beyond that. Every day he is providing us with food and clothing, home and family, daily work. Every morning he wakes up the sun and every evening he wakes up the moon and stars. Every day this creation bursts forth with life that comes from his hands. Every day he is filling our hearts to overflowing with love for those he has placed in our paths. Every day he is washing away our sins in the waters of baptism. Every day he is filling us with hope for what's to come.

Can we even begin to ascribe to the Lord the glory that is due his name? Probably not. But we can certainly declare his marvelous works when we get the chance.

# December 10

## Psalm 97

*The Lord is king! Let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad!*

### FOR REFLECTION:

- \* What causes you to doubt that the Lord is king?
- \* How do you understand the relationship between God's kingdom and political power for Christians?

### PRAYER:

Ruler of the universe, we too easily forget that in Christ Jesus you have already been victorious over all the powers of darkness. Renew our faith and inspire our witness so that the whole earth may rejoice in your salvation. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

### DEVOTION:

Sometimes when I listen to Christians talk about the state of the world, I hear an overwhelming sense of despair. It sounds as if the darkness that is loose in the world is overtaking the light, extinguishing it. Our chief calling is to account for the hope that is in us, but sometimes it's a struggle to hear anything hopeful in our witness. Fear and judgment are quick to take center stage.

It not at all unreasonable to look at the world and find cause for despair. Whether it's declining involvement in our churches, or a decline in any concern for what we might call a moral life, or a decline in the role our nation is playing in the world, we do not have to search very hard for reasons to be concerned about the state of our world. And we very easily imagine that there was a time when things were better. There was a time when people were better, and God's reign was more evident.

Of course, to find that time we must get back to the other side of Genesis 3. There is not some golden era in history when the world stopped being populated entirely by sinners and faith flourished in every corner. We have been in rebellion against God for a long, long time and we have been living with the fruit of that rebellion for just as long.

But there is a moment in history when everything changed. It wasn't Election Day or Reformation Day or the conversion of Constantine or the day of some major Supreme Court ruling or Armistice Day. In his cross and resurrection, Christ Jesus defeated sin and death once and for all and established himself as king, ruler of the universe. There is no longer any power that is a threat to his reign. In fact, there never has been.

Nations come and go. That is a constant in the history of humanity. The work of our hands does not endure forever. But no matter what happens to the kingdoms we build, Christ's kingdom remains. There is no lingering question of who will carry the day. The foe is vanquished and will never hold power over us again. The Lord is king and has consumed every adversary that would stand against him. This is cause for true rejoicing for all the earth.

# December 11

## Psalm 117

*Praise the Lord, all you nations! Extol him all you peoples!*

### FOR REFLECTION:

- \* Why would the king of the universe reveal himself through steadfast love and faithfulness?
- \* What does it say about God that this is how he wants to be known?

### PRAYER:

Faithful One, we are drawn to power and might as our source of security. But you are known by your steadfast love and faithfulness. Give us faith to see your power made perfect in weakness. Amen.

### DEVOTION:

The Bible, particularly the Old Testament, is filled with images of God that are marked by displays of power. These are some of the most beloved and well-known stories of scripture. God visits his vengeance upon Egypt for the mistreatment of his people. God parts the waters of the Red Sea. God works through little David to slay the mighty giant Goliath. God consumes the prophets of Baal along with their statue. These kinds of stories conform to our ideas of what God should be like because chief among the attributes we expect in God is “powerful.”

Mixed in with these displays of raw power, we find something else in Scripture, something that doesn’t make quite as much sense to us. Over and over and over again, when God chooses to reveal himself to his people, it is through his steadfast love and faithfulness. What a strange choice for the ruler of the universe!

We see the power that courses through this creation, the power of wind, of water, of heat, of cold, of gravity. We unlocked some of the hidden powers of atoms, of electrons. All of that power, along with powers we know nothing about, are God’s creation. This power is available to him to use in any way he sees fit. He could command our obedience and we would have no choice but to submit or be obliterated.

Instead, he wants to be known as the faithful one. He wants to be known as one who steadfastly loves what he has made. That’s what he wants his people to tell the world about him. It would be so much easier if our calling were to carry the sword and demand “submission or else.” It would make us feel so much more important, more powerful, if we were sent out into the world with God’s power to consume our adversaries as we heard in yesterday’s psalm.

And it a way, we are. We are sent out with the power to consume hatred with love. The power to consume doubt with faith. The power to consume despair with hope. The one who has all power in his hands chooses to wield it in this way. He chooses to wield it to rescue his beloved from the pits we have thrown ourselves into. That’s what true power looks like.

# December 12

## Psalm 145:8-21

*The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.*

### FOR REFLECTION:

- \* How do you understand the relationship between God's faithfulness and your faith?
- \* How does that understanding shape how you share the Good News?

### PRAYER:

Creator of the Universe, you pour out your gifts on those who know you and those who do not. You satisfy the needs of every creature, whether they call upon you or not. Send us into the world eager to share your name and the hope you have given us. Amen.

### DEVOTION:

Many offices and classrooms and families go into the Christmas season by having "Secret Santas." Gifts from anonymous givers start showing up on desks or in cubicles or at the dinner table. The gifts may be sentimental and sincere, or they may be a joke, but the one non-negotiable is that they be anonymous. Part of the experience is trying to figure out who is giving you these gifts. Knowing who they are from helps to interpret what they mean. It's one thing to get your favorite perfume from your best friend in the office. It is something else to get it from a man you barely know. It is one thing to get a joke gift from a colleague. It is something else to get it from the boss. It is one thing to get an unidentifiable drawing from your 6-year-old nephew. It is something else to get that from your adult sibling when you all agreed on a \$50 limit. The meaning of a gift, even the value of a gift, is closely tied to your relationship with the giver of that gift.

In the Small Catechism, when Luther talks about daily bread, he notes that God gives daily bread to all people. It is not reserved for those who know the Lord and recognize him as the giver of all good gifts. When we pray for God to give us our daily bread, we are actually asking that we would know him as the giver and receive his gifts with thanks.

In today's psalm, we hear a similar word from David. He recognizes that the Lord is good to all. He satisfies the desire of every living thing. God's people, in turn, are called to bear witness to that goodness and compassion because there are all kinds of people for whom these gifts seem to be from an anonymous giver. The Lord does not want to be anonymous. He wants to be known by his beloved children.

It is fifteen days until Christmas. Go ahead and spoil the surprise. Tell someone who might not know that the Lord is pouring himself out for their salvation. Tell someone that our God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Tell someone that the blessings of daily bread are the Lord's gifts to them. This is no time for anonymity. Share the glad tidings of great joy for all the people. Share Christ's name as the giver of all good gifts.



# December 13

## Isaiah 2:2-4

*In the days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.*

### FOR REFLECTION:

- \* What prevents us from beating our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks?
- \* Is there someone you need to make peace with? What is stopping you?

### PRAYER:

Lord of the nations, turn our hearts toward you and away from the ways of violence and destruction. Open our eyes to see our neighbors as the beloved ones they are to you. And grant that they would see the same in us when we are, at last, gathered on your holy mountain. Amen.

### DEVOTION:

I have never been to Jerusalem, and I must admit that I have never had a deep desire to go. I do not go looking for danger, and Jerusalem seems pretty dangerous to me. This vision of swords being turned to plowshares and spears to pruning hooks sounds like a cruel irony when compared to the reality of the need today for a constant military presence in the Holy City. I am perfectly content to postpone my visit to Jerusalem until the day Isaiah describes, when all the nations will stream to it in peace, seeking to know the Lord.

This vision of a city at peace, a world at peace, is stunning both for the simple beauty of it and for how far it is from our experience. Swords and spears, the ways of war, the ways of violence are with us constantly. We look to them for security even as they are the tools of the gravest of threats. We look to them to keep the peace even as they make us a bit too casual about disturbing the peace.

Isaiah's vision may move us to work for peace in our world. Perhaps it moves you to reconcile with a lost friend or call a truce with the neighbor and their barking dog or forgive a family member who has done you grave harm or pay a visit to someone whose political signs make you crazy or refuse to be provoked by someone determined to provoke you. There is no shortage of swords we could turn into plowshares. There is no shortage of ways that we could work for deeper peace in our homes, our communities, our world. Dedicating ourselves to the cause of peace would be a life well-spent. Unfortunately, the history of humanity is marked deeply by the near constant rejection of peace, preferring violence instead.

But the day is coming when the Lord's peace will be established once and for all. It will be established in the Holy City. It will be established in our homes. It will be established in our hearts. Because the day is coming when we will be fully reconciled to God and to one another and there will be no more cause, either just or unjust, to lift up swords against one another. There will be no more cause for war, and we can all stream to the Lord's house without fear.

# December 15

## Isaiah 9:2-7

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great land; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.*

### FOR REFLECTION:

- \* What frightens you about darkness? When do you prefer darkness?
- \* Is it easier to see the darkness in others or in yourself? Why?

### PRAYER:

Gracious God, you shine your light into our darkness day after day. Break through our desire to cling to the darkness as tightly as it clings to us. Bring us at last into the fullness of your light, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

### DEVOTION:

We're in the midst of the darkest time of the year here in the northern part of the northern hemisphere. The sun has bid farewell long before supper is on the table and tomorrow's breakfast will also be eaten in the dark. Every year at this time, I do a little scientific Google research on the practices that our friends in Scandinavia have adopted to make the dark winters more enjoyable. Rather than fight nature, they have found ways to embrace it.

I suspect that this would be much more difficult to do if this dark season wasn't a season but was our permanent state. From mid-November to mid-January, I find myself slipping into a kind of hibernation mode. The brief snippets of sunshine are not enough to keep me awake and on task. To live in a land of deep darkness all the time seems like it would quite significantly diminish our lives. The ratio of sleep to waking would get all off kilter.

Of course, the reality is that we do live in a land of deep darkness. We live in the long shadow that sin and death have cast over the world. And the tricky power of darkness is that we get used to it. We get used to stumbling around. We get used to being half-awake. We get used to a diminished existence. We might even convince ourselves that with enough hot chocolate and scented candles it's not so bad in this dark valley.

And then the light of Christ breaks into our darkness and what had been lost to us in that darkness is restored, renewed. Sin and death give way to life and salvation. Into our deep darkness, a light like we've never known has broken forth. God himself has entered into our world with his light and life, sending the darkness to flight.

That darkness, both in us and surrounding us, is not in a hurry to leave. And in our sin, we seek out the dark corners to hide from the light that enlightens, exposes, everything. But Christ's light cannot be contained and at the last it will fill the entirety of his kingdom. Darkness will be banished forever, and we will dwell in the warmth of his light.

# December 16

## Isaiah 19:18-25

*Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage.*

### FOR REFLECTION:

- \* Why is it significant that Egypt and Assyria are included in Isaiah's prophecy in this way? How do you think that sounded to the people of Israel?
- \* Is there any group of people you can imagine God not wanting to save? What makes them further from God than you are?

### PRAYER:

Lord God, it is not easy for us to imagine that your will to save extends even to those we think are worthy of your wrath. Only your Spirit can unite your creation. Send your Spirit upon us to hold us fast among those you gather to yourself. Amen.

### DEVOTION:

In my more grace-filled moments I love to consider the immense capacity of God's mercy. As the passages we've been considering remind us, it extends well beyond the borders we create. It extends to the ends of the earth. The goodness of our God is far beyond the scope of our imagination.

And then I remember what seems like a deeply flawed decision the Lord has made. His mercy is extending to the ends of the earth through the witness of his people. You and I, who have received his mercy, are sent into the world to share it with others. We are called to bear his light to those who live in darkness. And that's when the borders we have created come back into play. We are not quite as inclined to be merciful as the Lord is.

Can you even imagine what it would have sounded like to Israel to hear this prophecy that Egypt and Assyria would be called God's people? It's one thing to believe God will pour out his mercy upon us and those we love. But enemies? And not just passive enemies. Egypt and Assyria had and would continue to do harm quite actively to God's people. Did the Lord really expect Israel to rejoice at this news? And worse yet, did the Lord expect Israel to introduce the Egyptians and Assyrians to him? To tell of his mercy so that they would come to trust in him?

The sinner in us has mixed feelings about God's mercy. We want it for ourselves. We need it for ourselves. But we would like there to be some limits. Belonging to the same family, belonging to the same Lord, as those who have hated us, those we hate, isn't exactly what we had in mind.

The great good news, not only for our enemies, but for sinners like you and me, is that it's not about what we have in mind. This is about what the Lord has in mind. And what he has in mind is to be known by those he has made, those he has sustained, those he loves. We are witnesses to that will, but we are also undeserving recipients of the Lord's immense mercy. When we recall what a tremendous gift we have received, it is not so hard to imagine passing it along to others.

# December 17

## Isaiah 25:1-9

*It will be said on that day, "Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation."*

### FOR REFLECTION:

- \* When do you grow impatient with God? What do you do?
- \* What are some things you could be doing while you wait?

### PRAYER:

Lord God, sometimes we grow impatient waiting for you. Other times we forget we're waiting at all. We have our own schedules to keep, and we get frustrated by or are indifferent to yours. Sometimes our waiting turns to doubt or rebellion. Bring us at last to that day when we will join the whole company of heaven and our waiting will be over. Amen.

### DEVOTION:

All over the world right now there are children waiting, perhaps not patiently, for Christmas to finally get here. They've been trying to be on their best behavior for weeks, concerned that Santa and the Elf on the Shelf are keeping track, and their haul of Christmas gifts might be adversely affected by the temper tantrum in Target or the refusal to sing during the Christmas program or biting their friend at day care. Parents have been resorting to the threat and promise of Santa to cope with the endless build up this season. And there are ten more days to get through!

When what we see on the horizon is good news, it can be difficult to wait patiently for its arrival. On the other hand, we are quite content with delays when we dread, or don't care about, what is coming. The problem with a life as sinner-saints is that we aren't sure if what's on the horizon is good news or if it is something we dread. On which list are we going to end up? Is the day of the Lord going to be a good day for us or will it be the day of our condemnation? Will it be the day when all we have hoped for will come to pass or will it be the day when everything we have built for ourselves will pass away?

Today's words from Isaiah are powerful in their simplicity and faith. The promise is clear. The day of the Lord will be a day of rejoicing. We will say, "At last, you're here. At last, we see you face to face. At last, salvation is at hand." There is nothing we can do to hasten that day or to delay its arrival. The schedule is in the Lord's hands alone. But we do not have to wonder if that day is good news or bad news for us. The old in us will at last give way to the new. There is no better news than this!

In the meantime, we have a calling and an opportunity to share God's word of promise so that that day is good news for all people. What a great and glorious day that will be, when God finally destroys the shroud that is cast over all peoples, and death is swallowed up forever. We wait for that day with his word on our lips and his love in our hearts.

# December 18

## Isaiah 42:1-9

*He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.*

### FOR REFLECTION:

- \* What do you think it means to call Israel a covenant to the nations?
- \* How is God's covenant fulfilled in Christ Jesus?

### PRAYER:

Holy One of Israel, in Christ Jesus your mercies are extended to all peoples. Open our eyes and ears to know you as you wish to be known. Open our hearts and mouths to be witnesses of your righteousness. Amen.

### DEVOTION:

The image of the suffering servant in Isaiah sounds more than a little strange to us. Despite two millennia of Christianity and the theology of the cross, we remain profoundly drawn to force and violence as signs of true strength. We do all that we can to avoid suffering, insulating ourselves as much as possible from what we see as threats. And when we imagine who we want to follow in this world, we do not really mind if they are willing to break a bruised reed or quench a dimly burning wick. This world belongs to those with the strength to hold it.

What then are we to make of the salvation Isaiah describes? It is a salvation that raises up the lowly, opens the eyes of the blind, releases the prisoner. It is a salvation that reaches out to those most desperately in need of saving.

Isaiah heard of this salvation coming through God's suffering servant, and we know that suffering servant to be Christ Jesus, God himself, in the flesh, in our midst. While we might understand it if God came into the world to gather up his faithful ones, it is hard for us to imagine why the ruler of the universe would come into the world and suffer on behalf of rebellious sins. But that is precisely who our God is – the Savior of sinners.

While Isaiah speaks of God's justice being established in the whole world, this *is* something exclusive about the salvation God is bringing. It is exclusively for sinners. It is exclusively for those who cannot save themselves. It is exclusively for those lost in darkness. It is not for those who have no need of it, those who are righteous in themselves, those who can take care of themselves.

The great good news for us is that the Holy One of Israel has extended his mercy even to the likes of you and me. Despite our tendency to imagine that we might not need it, Christ Jesus has seen how bruised and dim we are and has become our salvation. The new thing Isaiah prophesied is God's justice, his power, being found, at last, in Christ's mercy.



# December 19

## Isaiah 55:1-13

*See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.*

### FOR REFLECTION:

- \* What Bible stories confuse you about God's ways and thoughts?
- \* When do you find yourself wanting God to conform to you rather than the other way around? Why is that a problem?

### PRAYER:

Merciful Father, conform our ways to your ways and our thoughts to your thoughts. Give us the living water that truly quenches our thirst. When we go astray, bring us back to you. Make us among those who run to you in joy. Amen.

### DEVOTION:

Over and over and over again, from almost the very beginning, the Bible shows us that there is a great gap between God's ways and our ways. In the New Testament, Jesus even refers to it as a fixed chasm that cannot be crossed. Since Genesis 3 we have been entirely out of alignment with God's will. Part of that misalignment has us constantly trying to twist God's word to make it seem like our ways and his ways, our desires and his desires, our will and his will, are the same.

The reality is that the distance between God and us is entirely beyond our ability to cross. God is out of our reach, and his ways are entirely incomprehensible to us. Our sin drives us to chase after that which leaves us unsatisfied, our thirst unquenched. And we turn our backs on the one who has all that we need and more.

But God is not satisfied with this situation. He is not satisfied to love us lost and in darkness. He sends his Word out to bring us back to him. And because his ways are not our ways, his Word, never fails to accomplish its purpose. He can cross the chasm that we can never cross. He can bring back those who are far off because his Word does what it says. And not only *can* God do this. He does it! He is doing it!

In the face of our never quenched thirst, God is pouring out life-giving water. He is bringing us back to him, not by force or compulsion, not, finally, through the threat of punishment. He is bringing us back to him by pouring himself out for his beloved, giving his life for us. He is announcing his love, his mercy, his forgiveness, to those who do not yet know him. There is nothing left of us to do but run to the one who is our salvation. Why would we run anywhere else?

# December 20

## Isaiah 56:6-8

*For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.*

### FOR REFLECTION:

- \* What obstacles do we create for people who are not like us to hear the Good News of Christ Jesus?
- \* Who might not feel welcome in your church? Why?

### PRAYER:

Lord Jesus, you came into the world so that all peoples would be brought into your house. Thank you for bringing us into your presence. Inspire the work of your church until all peoples have finally come to know you as Lord. Amen.

### DEVOTION:

When we stumble upon something that exceeds our expectations, we are sometimes faced with the temptation to keep it to ourselves. We don't want everyone to know about the restaurant with the great food and great prices because we want to be sure we can still get a table on Saturday night. We don't want everyone to know about the store that always has the lowest prices on our favorite products. What if they run out? A pastor friend of mine once corrected my breach of etiquette when I asked where he had been fishing. You would never *tell* someone where the fish are biting. Those fish are yours! And I should have known not to ask.

When we read a passage like this little snippet from Isaiah, we are a bit torn. It's great to know that God's saving work is for the whole world, but do we really want "all peoples" to be sitting next to us in the Lord's house? Do we really want people we are not especially fond of to be recipients of the same great good news we have received? What if the new kingdom runs out of room before everyone *I* would choose has found their way in? That doesn't seem right or fair.

Our concern about this can cause us to be a little stingy with the gospel. We make it difficult for people to hear by wrapping the good news in our traditions or our preferences. We place conditions on it that are our own inventions. Or maybe we just treat those who are not like us as if they maybe don't really belong the way we do. They might *technically* be members of the church, but their standing is a little bit different than ours. Their contributions are not quite as significant, at least in our eyes.

God has no such concerns. Isaiah declares that his house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples. He will not distinguish between the early and late arrivals. He will not distinguish between those born into the family of faith and those who met him later in life. In God's new kingdom, the kingdom of Christ Jesus, you will be gathered in and loved, despite your questionable credentials. And since there are plenty of seats in God's kingdom, nothing is stopping you from inviting some along.

# December 22

**Jonah 4:9-11**

*Should I not be concerned about Nineveh?*

## FOR REFLECTION:

- \* How do you react when someone doesn't experience consequences for their actions?
- \* Are you more likely to favor strict punishments or lenience? What factors influence your preference?

## PRAYER:

Gracious God, your love for your creation is beyond what we can imagine. It is all too easy for us to imagine that we are more deserving of your blessings than others. Open our hearts to see others as you do, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## DEVOTION:

Jonah is one of those people we meet in scripture who brings us up short because he is so thoroughly human in his reaction to God. In our reading today there he is, sitting out by the edge of the city, watching and hoping that God will change his mind again and bring the destruction that Nineveh so richly deserves. It's kind of hot out there, but God gives Jonah a bit of relief by providing a shade tree that grows up in the night. The next day, God takes the tree away again, and Jonah becomes angry enough to die. I think we can all agree that is a bit of an overreaction. And that's when God brings the message home to Jonah. How could Jonah be so upset about the destruction of one little shade tree that he had no part in growing? At the same time, how could Jonah imagine that God would take lightly the destruction of an entire city and all its inhabitants.

We are not merciful people by nature. We can't seem to help ourselves. We become indignant at the prospect of someone getting away with something. And sometimes we aren't even satisfied with punishment that fits the crime. We want the punishment to be absolute, the judgment to last indefinitely. And, like Jonah, we kind of like to drag God into that with us. We invoke the name of the Living God in support of our outrage, our anger, our indignation. But it is only if we think we have not been recipients of God's mercy ourselves that we could possibly hope for God to be less merciful than he has shown himself to be.

But in case you've forgotten, you are a recipient of God's mercy. The mercy that God showed to the people of Nineveh has been poured out upon you and then some, because the mercy God has given you is an everlasting mercy, an eternal mercy, a mercy without end. The slate has been wiped clean. You will not have to do the time for the crimes you have committed against God. It is entirely unjust. It is entirely unfair. It is entirely unreasonable. And yet, it is precisely what God has done for you. You have been given a tremendous gift, the gift of forgiveness, the gift of life in God's presence forever.

Can you think of anyone else who might need such a gift?

# December 23

**Micah 5:2-5a**

*And he shall be the one of peace.*

## FOR REFLECTION:

- \* How is the one of peace a source of strife?
- \* In the midst of religious conflict, why is it so much easier to see other's faults than our own?

## PRAYER:

Lord Jesus, you are the one of peace, but your presence among sinners causes strife. Pour into us the peace you have come to bring, especially when we are entrenched in our sin and rebellion. Amen.

## DEVOTION:

Peace is in short supply. Not only are our best efforts not up to the task of creating peace, but we can hardly ever even be bothered to put forth our best efforts. We're just not really that interested in creating peace. It's so much easier to shout, to complain, to be offended, to react in anger, to see enemies all around. It's so much easier to defend our turf than to seek peace. After all, some people are simply in the wrong. Why would we ever seek peace with those who are wrong? They first have to recognize the error of their ways, don't they? Peace is only possible when our enemies have yielded. Apart from that, we must continue the battle, and if we acknowledge any problems in our own positions, that is just a sign of weakness.

And it's into this world that Christ Jesus came to be the one of peace. Amidst all the violence and strife, amidst all our indignation and anger, amidst all of our ambition and striving, God's anointed has come into the world for a different purpose. He has come to be our peace. He has come to heal the divisions between you and your neighbor. He has come to repair the strife in your household. He has come to create good will between the nations. He has come to do what we cannot, what we will not do. He has come to be our peace. But our sin torn hearts manage to make this one of peace a source of further conflict.

The most significant peace Christ brings is not the peace between you and me. It is not the peace between warring nations or opposing religions. The most important peace he brings is peace between you and God. God and his people are no longer at war with one another. God no longer holds your sin against you because Christ Jesus has become the peace between you and your heavenly Father. And he has done this through the forgiveness of your sins.

Where we are constantly declaring war, he has simply declared peace. He has declared that it is finished. There is no more battle between you and your Savior. Not because he defeated you, but because he forgives you. This is how Christ is your peace. This is the peace that passes all understanding. It defies the expectations of our world. It overturns our habits and our sinful wills. It changes us from enemies of God to beloved children. And it is that peace that will rule God's new kingdom when it finally comes.

# December 24

**Luke 2:28-32**

*For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples.*

## FOR REFLECTION:

- \* When is it easy to sing along with Simeon? When is it difficult?
- \* What difference does it make if you bear witness to Jesus or not?

## PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, Simeon saw in the infant Jesus the salvation of the world. At times we are timid in our own songs of praise. Make us bold to sing along with the song of the Gospel. Amen.

## DEVOTION:

There was no reason for Simeon to have recognized Jesus when Mary and Joseph brought him to the temple. There was nothing about this family that stood out. They were just another young couple doing what the law required. Another young couple seeking the Lord's blessing as they began their life together. Seeking the Lord's blessing upon their son. Unlike all the artwork that depicts them, they did not have halos or glowing bulbs around their heads. They looked like every other family Simeon had seen in his years and years of waiting.

But the Holy Spirit revealed to him what the eye could not see. The Holy Spirit showed him that this child was different. This was the one he had been waiting for. This child would indeed be the one to save his people. Simeon would not have been able to explain to anyone else how he knew. He would not have been able to point out the identifying marks that revealed Jesus to be God in the flesh. He only knew what had been revealed to him. He only knew what God had made known to him about this child.

And in response, all he could do was burst forth in psalms of praise. He had been given the great gift of seeing the salvation of his people with his own eyes. He had encountered the one who had come to bring light into our darkness. A song of praise was the only possible response to that.

That child presented in Jerusalem, the child recognized by Simeon, the child whose parents marveled at all that was said about him, that child has done exactly what Simeon knew he would do. He has brought life and light into the world. That child has brought the forgiveness of sins into the world. That child has brought salvation to you and to all God's chosen ones.

Today the Holy Spirit is giving to you the same peace he gave to Simeon so long ago. Not a shallow peace. Not a peace that glosses over conflict. But the deep and abiding peace that is only possible through the Holy Spirit. The deep and abiding peace that comes from the sure and certain hope that your life is in God's hands. You have a part of God's family, and you have a place in his arms. A place that is certain. A place that is yours forever.

This is good news of great joy for all the people. How can you keep from singing?