

# Home for the Holidays

In *Home for the Holidays*, Pastor Wayne Palmer takes the reader on a nostalgic ride back to the days of Christmases past. Along the way he mines his own holiday memories, blends in contemporary scenarios, and adds a generous portion of Scripture. Palmer knows Christmas isn't just "fun and games" for everybody. Health and relationship issues, money worries, and a whole lot more rob people everywhere of the true joy of the holiday season. Yet, amid these strains, God makes our Christmas celebration complete through the "home" we have with our Christian brothers and sisters at church. It is there we can come together in Word and Sacrament to renew our faith and recall again the magnificence of God's Good News in Jesus Christ. And it is there—surrounded by those who share our faith—that we remember we have a heavenly home, prepared for us beforehand by Jesus Himself and secured for all believers through His work on the cross.

As a theological editor/writer at Lutheran Hour Ministries, Palmer informs his writing through both his pastoral ministry and his doctoral ambitions at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis.



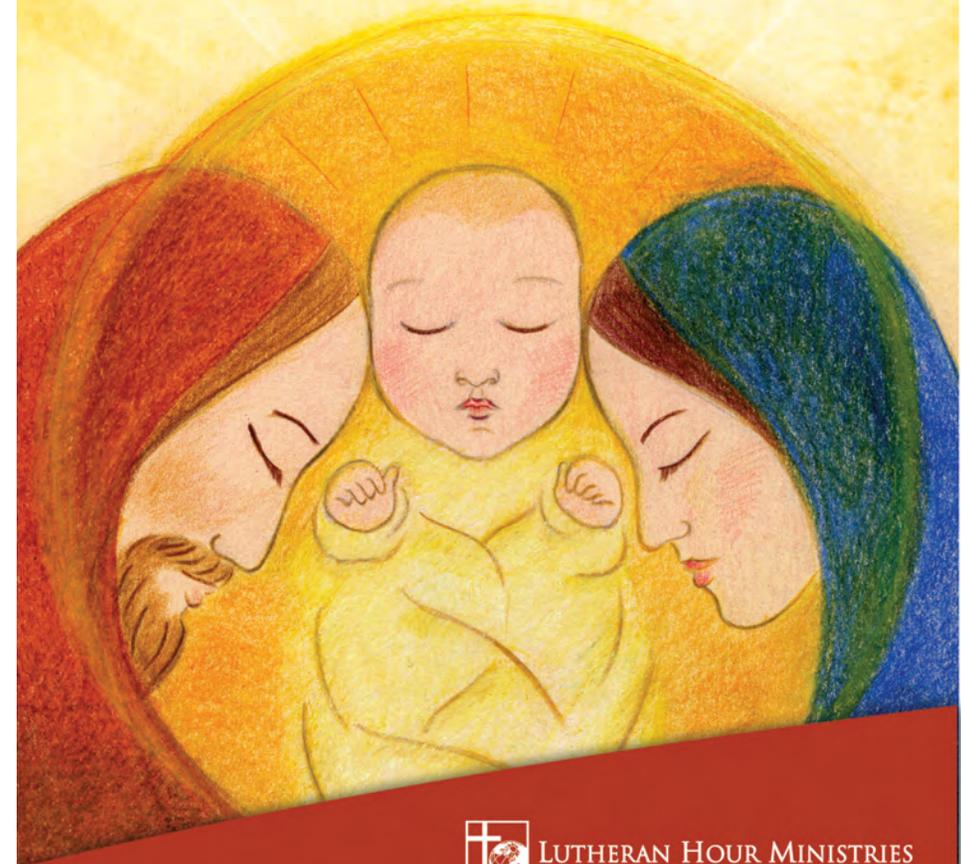
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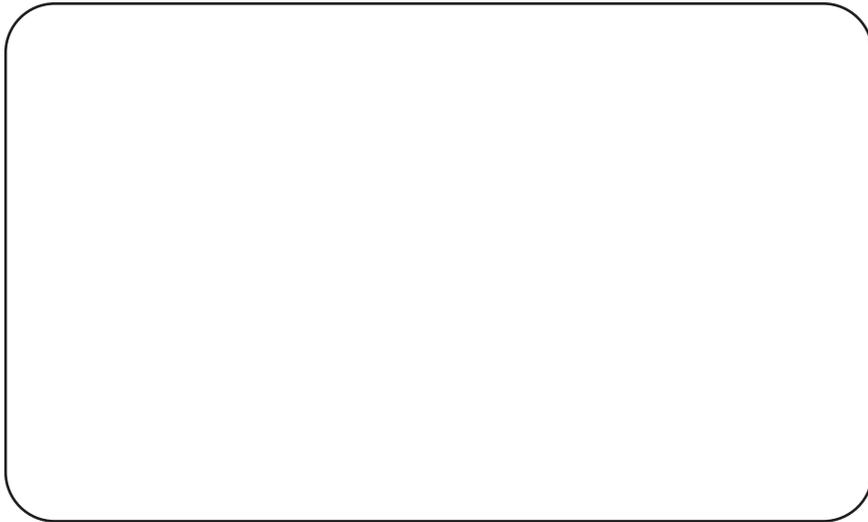
Advent Devotions 2010



**LUTHERAN HOUR MINISTRIES**  
*People Of Christ With The Message Of Hope*

## HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS

As a traditional Advent devotion, Lutheran Hour Ministries is offering the recollected return to Christmases gone by. In *Home for the Holidays*, Pastor Wayne Palmer reminds us God has provided many “homes” for His children in this world. Drawing on warm and familial observations of the Christmas season (tree choice, decorating, his home’s Nativity display), Palmer balances his treasured reminiscence of the holidays with the reality that not everyone feels at home with the holidays. Though life hassles, relationship fatigue, and financial stress may leave us “out in the cold,” there is solace and warmth when we visit the “home” we have at church. There, our brothers and sisters in Christ join us in celebrating through Word and Sacrament God’s grace and that home that awaits all believers—our heavenly home.



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## “HOME AT LAST!”

Epiphany, Thursday, January 6

Read Matthew 2:9-11.

**TEXT:** And going into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother, and they fell down and worshiped Him. ... (Matthew 2:11a).

The end has come. It's the end of our long Advent and Christmas journey. The Nativity set is finally complete as the wise men enter the scene and taken their place bowing down before Jesus in worship.

It was a long journey for the wise men. After having traveled a great distance from their land and after having met with King Herod in Jerusalem, they set out for the final leg of their journey. And that's when they saw the star that they had seen in the East. It led them south to Bethlehem and stopped over the place where the King of the Jews was to be found. Matthew captured their great joy at seeing the star again when he wrote, "And when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy" (Matthew 2:10).

Their gifts are precious reminders of the greatness of this Child before whom they bow in worship. This Child who became one of us is God's Anointed One. He took our place under the Law to clothe us in His righteousness so that we might be worthy to stand in heaven before our perfect Father. It is Jesus the Messiah who took our guilt upon Himself and suffered and died for our sins. This He did that we might be saved from damnation and inherit eternal life with God in heaven.

That is where you and I stand this Epiphany. Our long journey through life continues, but each day, like the wise men, we draw nearer to our Father's heavenly home. There we will enter, bow down, and worship our Savior and the King of kings.

One day our long journey through this life will end. And when we see the light of heaven our hearts will be overjoyed just like the wise men as they saw the star again. Then we will enter paradise to remain forever. There we will join Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, the angels, and along with the wise men, we too will fall down in worship and praise before Jesus Christ our Savior, God our Father, and the Holy Spirit our Comforter.

**THE PRAYER:** Heavenly Father, thank You for the completion of this Advent and Christmas journey. Continue to guide me in my life's journey by Your Word and Sacraments, in company with my brothers and sisters in faith, until I enter Your home for Your eternal gathering. I ask this in the Name of Jesus Christ my Savior. Amen.

## HOMeward BOUND

The First Sunday in Advent, November 28, 2010

Read Psalm 122.

**TEXT:** I was glad when they said, "Let us go up to the house of the LORD" (Psalm 122:1).

"Come on up for Thanksgiving!" Did you receive a Thanksgiving invitation this year? I guess all of us who regularly have the chance to gather with family and friends for the holidays take it for granted. The wonderful smells of holiday meals, the laughter filling the house, and everybody catching up with events in each other's lives are what make the day so special.

But today Thanksgiving weekend comes to an end and all those happy get-togethers must break up. Roads are packed with travelers scattering their separate ways. Of course in a few short weeks, we'll hear a new invitation: "Come on up for Christmas!"

Your church is sending out its own invitation this Advent. In the next few weeks many volunteers will be decorating the church, learning their parts for the Christmas program, and practicing their anthems for the choir. Your brothers and sisters in Christ are going to all this effort because they want to invite you to *come on up for Christmas* as together we go to worship and celebrate our Savior's coming.

But there is another come-on-up-for-Christmas invitation unlike any other. When you reach this home you won't find yourself sitting at the little kid's table or crammed into a crowded pew. And the festival won't end too soon like Thanksgiving and Christmas always do. The Lord Jesus Himself is inviting you to come up to His heavenly home and stay there with Him—forever.

That's what Advent is all about, and that's what these Advent devotions are all about. We will recall why the Lord Jesus came down from heaven so long ago. We will recall that the only way we can call heaven our home was because Jesus took our guilt and sin upon Himself and suffered and died in our place. Then, putting our faith in Christ, we will join our brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ in joyful expectation as we journey on together.

So light the first Advent candle, and accept our thrilling invitation: "Let us go up to the house of the Lord!"

**THE PRAYER:** Heavenly Father, thank You for calling us home to share Your eternal celebration through Your Son Jesus Christ. Help us to truly value Your forgiveness in Jesus and our eternal future, which He won for us by His life, death, and resurrection. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

## “ARE YOU GOING?”

Monday, November 29

Read Isaiah 2:1-3a.

**TEXT:** Many peoples shall come and say: “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob” ... (Isaiah 2:3a).

Holidays are great fun, especially when brothers and sisters who are scattered across the country gather together for Christmas. Imagine getting a message from a family member in Michigan: “I can’t wait to spend Christmas with you at Mom’s!” Then you get an e-mail from a brother in California: “Looking forward to catching up when we get in for Christmas!” And then there’s a text from a third in North Carolina: “3 1/2 wks & counting—can’t wait ...” Our excitement builds when we realize we will be together again.

In this week’s Old Testament Lesson our brothers and sisters in Christ are excited to share a similar message with us: “Let’s go up to the house of God!” But it isn’t a once-a-year invitation just for Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. They need us this weekend and every weekend. Their joy won’t be quite as full unless you are there with them!

But if you take a closer look at the verse above you’ll notice it says “many peoples” will come and call you. The members of your congregation aren’t the only ones calling. All your Christian brothers and sisters around the world are calling you to come on up with them to God’s holy mountain.

One of the best examples of this is the National Youth Gathering that was held in New Orleans this past summer. In the days, weeks, and months before the event you can bet texts and e-mails were flying across the country among friends who were looking forward to spending the week together. And in the weeks after the get-together many more e-mails, texts, tweets, and posts crisscrossed the nation and the world: “That was so great! Wish we could do it again!” Now imagine a *worldwide gathering* that won’t end after a few days but will last forever! That’s heaven.

It took a lot of hard work and planning by dozens of dedicated people to put the National Youth Gathering together. But to put our heavenly reunion together it took Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. He suffered and died to take away our sins so we would be fit to come, and He is now preparing a place for us to stay eternally. No wonder your brothers and sisters around the world and in heaven are excited about the journey and are calling you to join them. “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of our God!”

**THE PRAYER:** Lord, open my ears to hear my brothers and sisters calling me to join them, and let me join my voice with theirs. Especially lead me to call those who have not yet heard Your invitation. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

## THE TYRANT’S FURY

Wednesday, January 5

Read Matthew 2:7-8; 13-16.

**TEXT:** ... he became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under (Matthew 2:16b).

Simeon had warned Mary that Jesus would be a sign spoken against. Here is the first proof. King Herod is so fearful of this new King, and so enraged when the wise men do not report back His location, that he orders the deaths of all male children two years old and under. He is confident the new King will be caught up and swept away in the process. Of course, God warned Joseph in a dream, and Joseph fled in the middle of the night with Mary and Jesus to find safety in Egypt.

It is hard to read this passage without wondering why God would permit King Herod to have heard the prophecy of Micah, especially knowing what Herod would do. But in grace and mercy God was reaching out with the saving Gospel to Herod just as He was reaching out to the wise men. It is not God’s fault. Rather, it is Herod’s fault alone that he chose to abuse his God-given authority and murder those innocent boys in and around Bethlehem.

Of course, Herod failed to kill the Christ child, and ended up killing those innocent boys instead. As his soldiers completed their bloody mission in Bethlehem and its vicinity, Jesus was safely on His way to Egypt. Jesus survived Herod’s murderous attempt because He did not come into this world to die as a baby. Nor did He come to become a political ruler or king over the region of Israel. He came to offer His life as a God-pleasing sacrifice to save the world from its sin.

God is merciful to you and me too. If you have read each of these devotions through the Advent and Christmas seasons, then you have heard the marvelous story of God’s love and salvation offered to you freely through Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. God calls you to faith, trust, and eternal life through His Word. Yet He won’t force you to believe anymore than He forced Herod.

Too often, like Herod, we set our minds on our earthly kingdom and reject the peace God offers us. But thankfully God continues to stretch out His hand as He calls us, His own sons and daughters, to be citizens of His Kingdom. He gives us church homes in which He gathers us to hear His Word and celebrate the Sacraments. Both of these He has provided to create and nurture faith within us throughout our lives. And in the end, He will gather us into His eternal home.

God grant that we may respond to the news as the wise men did, rejoicing to find our Savior and offer Him our praise and thanksgiving eternally.

**THE PRAYER:** Heavenly Father, You have been so merciful to all of us. Cleanse me from my sins for Jesus’ sake, and make me strong to walk before You and share my Savior’s Name with all people. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

## THE PROPHET'S WORD

Tuesday, January 4

Read Matthew 2:4-6.

**TEXT:** Assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born (Matthew 2:4).

Apparently, Herod was aware of the prophecy of a Messiah—a King to be born to the Jews. Since he was not Jewish himself, but rather a descendant of Jacob's brother Esau, he consulted the Jewish scholars who would know the prophecy. The chief priests and scribes quickly revealed the birthplace to the king and the wise men, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet, 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd My people Israel'" (Matthew 2: 5-6).

Up to now, the wise men had simply been following a silent star. But now they heard the living Word of God. It told them this King of the Jews was a ruler who would lead God's people as a Shepherd. Instead, He would be a Shepherd who would be concerned with His people first and foremost. He would gently lead His people, protect them from their enemies, and guide them to safe pasture. Here was God's invitation for Herod and the wise men to follow Him as well.

Had Herod not closed his heart but responded with Spirit-given faith as the wise men did, he would have known the peace and rest His great King Jesus came to bring. He would know his kingdom was secure, and he would be part of Christ's greater, eternal Kingdom. But Herod was blinded by his own hunger for power and prestige. The news of Christ's birth only amplified his insecurity and doubt. No wonder all of Jerusalem was stirred up and fearful when they knew Herod was upset by the news.

In reality, King Herod was a model of this world's ruler, Satan. In desperation and rage Satan uses his forces to try to keep his tight grasp on his earthly kingdom, but his end is coming rapidly. On the cross Jesus Christ already delivered a fatal blow, undoing Satan's devious work in the Garden of Eden. Now the devil awaits the end of his reign and the beginning of his eternal torment in hell when Christ comes again on the Last Day.

In the meantime, God sets these two rulers before us—His own dear Son Jesus Christ and His bitter enemy the devil. You and I will serve either Jesus or Satan. So would you rather serve a King who is your loving Shepherd who laid down His life on the cross to defeat the devil and save you from your enemies? Or would you prefer submission to Satan the tyrant who engineered your destruction and seeks your doom?

**THE PRAYER:** Lord God, thank You for Your Word, which reveals all I need to know about Jesus my Savior. Keep me faithfully trusting Your Word. Defend me against Satan's devious plans and bring me safely to Your eternal Kingdom. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

## OUR GUIDE

Tuesday, November 30

Read Isaiah 2:3-5.

**TEXT:** "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that He may teach us His ways and that we may walk in His paths" ... (Isaiah 2:3b).

A year ago I was scheduled to preach at a church in central Illinois. I had planned out my path along I-70 and left early enough to arrive a half-hour early. But after about two hours I discovered I had missed the I-70 exit 60 miles back and was driving north toward Chicago on I-55! By the time I realized my mistake and got turned around I ended up arriving at the church 30 minutes after the service was supposed to have started! Thankfully, my Christian brothers and sisters had a sense of humor!

Whenever you are driving, especially on a long and unfamiliar trip, you want to be sure you are on the right path! When I was a kid we relied on maps, but again, you could end up on the wrong road for hours without realizing you were on the wrong path. But today one of the best ways to travel is to have a GPS, a Global Positioning System.

The guiding voice from this little box gives you turn-by-turn instructions and tracks your progress. If you get off the right path, it patiently tells you the best way to get back on the right path again. But that's not all a GPS can do for you. If you get tired and need a rest area or a motel along the way, a GPS can find one for you. If you get hungry, a GPS will give you a choice of restaurants and guide you to the one you want.

If we want to complete our Advent journey and reach the heavenly "house of the Lord," we need a sort of spiritual GPS. At our Baptism God washed away our sins, made us His own children, filled us with His Spirit, and set us on the right path for Jesus' sake. To keep us on that path He gave us His Word and Sacraments. Through the Law the Holy Spirit alerts us when we have wandered off the path into sin, and through the Gospel He guides us back to the right road by turning us in repentance and faith to Jesus Christ who saved us from our sins through His death on the cross.

That is why it is so important to read, hear, and study the Word of God in our home devotions and to gather together at church. For as Jesus speaks to us through His Word, and feeds us with His body and blood, He keeps us on our heavenward path. This provides us spiritual rest and nourishment along our way as we journey up to the house of the Lord!

**THE PRAYER:** Heavenly Father, thank You for giving us Your holy Word to guide us along our path. Open our ears to hear our Savior's voice and follow His ways. In Jesus' Name, we pray. Amen.

## ENJOYING THE RIDE TOGETHER

Wednesday, December 1

Read Romans 13:8-10.

**TEXT:** ... “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the Law (Romans 13:9b-10).

I’m sure my parents would have loved a video or DVD player in our station wagon when I was a kid. Instead, they had five boys sitting in the middle and back benches as we headed down the road to Grandma’s. Sometimes we’d sing songs to pass the time or play little games along the road, but usually we played the *stop-touching-me* or *stay-on-your-side-of-the-seat* game. Of course, that was about the time Dad threatened to turn the car around and head back home.

In our church family, we often act like brothers and sisters squeezed together in a car. We bicker and fight with each other; we complain about the most insignificant things; we insist on our way and pout when we don’t get it. Meanwhile, our unchurched family, friends, and neighbors wonder why anyone would ever want to be a part of family like that. How many times do we make our heavenward journey miserable for everyone, wondering if it would be better to go it alone?

That’s where Jesus shows the way. When His disciples argued about which of them would be the greatest or tried to get the best seats in heaven, Jesus showed them His humility and restored their unity. Even when the religious establishment—the Jewish leaders—misjudged Him, plotted His death, and stood by His cross heaping their scorn on Him, Jesus was quick to pray, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34b). And through His suffering and death at their hands, Jesus won our full pardon from His Father in heaven.

In this week’s Epistle reading, Paul shows us another way to travel together. He calls us to remember Christ’s sufferings and death for us, and to strive to live as our Savior did—loving our neighbor as ourselves.

As we make our journey toward the house of the Lord, we are not traveling alone. We are part of a caravan, a multitude of wonderful believers traveling along together, each guided by Christ up to God’s house. God has chosen every one of us. He has gathered us together to use our unique skills and talents as one body. If we travel together in joy and peace, learning to appreciate one another, our journey will be so much more thrilling, and we’ll be the kind of caravan other people will want to join. God grant us this peace and harmony for Jesus’ sake.

**THE PRAYER:** Father in heaven, open our hearts to truly love and forgive each other. Grant us a deep appreciation for each other that, combining our gifts and talents, we may bring glory to Your Name, and bring many to join us in heaven. Through Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

## THE PARANOID RULER

Monday, January 3

Read Matthew 2:3.

**TEXT:** When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him (Matthew 2:3).

The wise men have reached Jerusalem. That puts them about five miles from Jesus. But they might as well be back home since they have no idea where to find the young King. With excitement they consult with King Herod in an attempt to learn the location of the King of the Jews whose star they have been following.

King Herod’s reaction is nothing like theirs. Where they were overjoyed to be so close to seeing the young King, he is troubled, stirred up, aggravated. And when King Herod is stirred up, all Jerusalem is stirred up with him. The city dreaded his rage.

You see, King Herod is a paranoid ruler. He is deathly afraid of losing his throne. He fears his children’s ambition. His ten women and their numerous children shared his ruthless drive and schemed to succeed him. Herod feared they were plotting to assassinate him, and so he responded.

His sister Salome, who was jealous of his wives, was happy to feed his paranoia. At her prompting, Herod killed his favorite wife along with her grandfather, her mother, and his brother-in-law. He killed three of his sons, along with numerous subjects, and including the high priest. So it shouldn’t be surprising that King Herod was stirred up to learn from the wise men that another King of the Jews had been born.

Do you see Jesus as a threat to your freedom and independence? Do you see a heavenly King who would step in to take over your life and take away your freedoms? That is not why Christ came. He came to save us from our sins, to free us from our fears, and to enable us to fulfill God’s good purpose for our lives. Jesus Christ comes to us to set us free. He comes to remove our guilt, fear, and shame. He comes to empower us to live our lives for Him, and for our family, friends, and neighbors in freedom, peace, and great joy. To do that Jesus had to take our place and fall under the fiery wrath of God. But through His suffering, death, and resurrection, Jesus won our forgiveness, peace, and salvation.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord God, many people feel threatened and fearful like Herod. Please break through and show Your love and concern for us and for our salvation. Empower us to submit ourselves to Your will so that our lives may be fulfilling and worthwhile as we continue on our journey to Your glorious home. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

## THE MYSTERIOUS VISITORS FROM THE EAST

Second Sunday after Christmas, January 2

Read Matthew 2:1-2.

**TEXT:** ... Behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him" (Matthew 2:1b-2).

Today is the ninth day of Christmas, and it's finally time to turn our attention toward those wise men who are rounding the bend and heading for home. One of my favorite Christmas carols as a kid was "We Three Kings of Orient Are." It always puzzled me that we never sang it in church until I later realized the first line has three errors. First, they weren't kings; they were scholars and astrologers who *advised* kings. Second, they weren't from the Orient; they probably came from Persia, Babylon, or Arabia. And third, Matthew doesn't tell us there were three. He says there were three gifts, but the number of wise men is unknown. So that's a problem with the figures for my Nativity set. There are three of them and they are all wearing crowns. Oh, well ...

The intriguing thing about the wise men is that they followed a star, and somehow they knew that star was indicating the birth of a great King of the Jews. Perhaps God left them a hint through the great Jewish civil leader Daniel, and his friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who made a huge impact on the Babylonian and Persian empires (see the book of Daniel in the Old Testament). Perhaps it had something to do with a record Daniel left in the official government records of Babylon and Persia (see Daniel 2:44-45).

But, however the wise men came to know a King had been born of the Jews, the wise men doggedly followed that star as God slowly guided them to His perfect Light.

God guides us today too. Having revealed our Savior through His Word, Holy Baptism, and the Sacrament of the Altar, God continues to use His means of grace to guide us through our life's journey. That is one of the reasons weekly worship is so vitally important for us. God guides us and protects us from the distractions of this world, and keeps us in the true faith until we fall down and worship before Him in heaven.

In the meantime, as we continue on our journey, may God shine through us and lead many people through the long night of this sinful world to our heavenly home.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord, let the light of Your Word and Sacraments continue to guide, strengthen, and sustain us in our faith. And enable all of us, Your children, to shine the light of Jesus our Savior to the ends of the world. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

## LIGHTS IN THE DARKNESS

Thursday, December 2

Read Romans 13:11-14.

**TEXT:** The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light (Romans 13:12).

During this time of year the nights grow longer. That makes being a kid riding in a car pretty tough. Though it certainly helps when video and DVD players and iPods light up the night. I remember as a kid when the only thing we had to brighten those long, dark night trips were the Christmas lights we'd see every once in a while. (Of course, we always had to argue about who saw them first!)

From time to time as we make our way along God's path through this Advent season we catch glimpses of the light of our heavenly home. These hints come to us as a favorite hymn or song in worship. They also come as a renewed awareness of the forgiveness, acceptance, and peace God offers through the pastor. They especially come as that wonderful taste of the heavenly feast when we celebrate the Sacrament of Christ's body and blood.

These glimpses thrill our hearts and remind us of the wonderful place waiting for us. The lit candle on the Advent wreath—and the three that remain to be lit in the coming weeks—remind us how little time is left to prepare for the day that is rapidly approaching. Paul reminds us of this same fact in our Epistle Lesson for this first week in Advent.

Like a beautifully lit house at Christmas time, Jesus shatters the darkness and fills us with the warmth of His glorious light. He is the Light of the world who came into the darkness and vanquished it through His suffering, death, and resurrection. And each of us who were reborn in His image in Baptism shine like stars in this dark night of sin, giving those who do not yet know Jesus Christ a brief glimpse of God's love through our words, attitudes, and actions. How brightly are you shining in the crowded store aisles, in the long checkout lines, in the jammed parking lots, and on the busy roads?

**THE PRAYER:** Heavenly Father, we would be Your lights, shining brightly in this dark and selfish world. Fill us with Your Holy Spirit that we may live as You choose, bringing the light of Christ's love to this dark world. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

## TRAVELING WITH OUR SPECIAL GUEST

Friday, December 3

Read Matthew 21:1-7.

**TEXT:** ... Behold, your King is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden (Matthew 21:5b).

Our Advent journey continues and, no, we're not there yet! (Wondering when we would arrive was always my favorite question during our long family trips.) Today a special guest joins us. He doesn't claim the best seat—either in the front of the car or in the first-class section of the plane. He's content to sit in coach, or if it were our old station wagon, He'd be sitting in the middle seat in the middle bench. Even more likely, He'd be in the rear-facing backbench that only my youngest brother and I could handle riding in.

Thousands of years ago this One also travelled with crowds making their way up to the house of the Lord in Jerusalem. Even though He was by far the greatest to ever walk those roads, year after year He walked as one among many. But in the Gospel for this first week in Advent, Jesus took His rightful place at the center of the throng. He rode with praises into Jerusalem for the final festival where He would go to battle for us, laying down His life that we might have eternal life.

At Jesus' command two of the disciples borrowed an animal on which He would ride into Jerusalem as our conquering King. But He did not choose a towering, powerful, warhorse. No, He rode on a young donkey, a lowly beast of burden.

That is the mark of our King. At Christmas He comes as a tiny baby, humble and lowly, born in a manger. In meekness He came to lay down His life as a sacrifice to save us from our sins, from death, from Satan, and from hell.

Today He also comes among us in humility. He chooses lowly water and joins His Word to it to transform lost sinners into children of God. He gives us His body and blood in humble bread and wine to forgive us by that same sacrifice that took away the sins of the world.

Today Jesus invites us, "Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). Even as we continue our journey toward Jerusalem, our King comes right alongside us in great gentleness and humility. Since He is humble, we too are moved to meekness toward each other, knowing He has made our future certain in our eternal home.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord Jesus, our Savior, thank You for coming to us in such humility. You have saved us and now You ride with us to keep us and protect us. Reassure us by Your presence and guide us safely to our home. Amen.

## THE FIRST SHED BLOOD

New Year's Day, Monday, January 1, 2011

Read Luke 2:21.

**TEXT:** And at the end of eight days ... He was circumcised (Luke 2:21a).

Today is the eighth day of Christmas. It's the day a Jewish boy was circumcised. This marked him as a child of the covenant God gave Abraham. As Jesus undertook circumcision, He assumed His place as a child of Abraham. Being placed under the Law He would live His life fulfilling the Law perfectly for us.

That's all fine and good, but what does Jesus' circumcision have to do with our New Year's Day celebration today?

Well, one of our New Year's Day customs is to make resolutions: these are bad habits we will attempt to break, or good habits we will attempt to put into place in the coming year. Perhaps resolution-making is one of your New Year's Day traditions.

Broken New Year's resolutions are pretty common for us. They are a symbol of our brokenness as sinful creatures. They also remind us how impossible it is to save ourselves from our sins. That is why Jesus' circumcision resolution meant everything. If He had broken this resolution the way we break New Year's resolutions, we would all be doomed to God's terrible and eternal wrath. The good news is that Jesus did not break this resolution. Rather, He kept it perfectly all through His life, obeying God in our place.

Jesus even kept His resolution when it hurt. He resolved to go up to Jerusalem when He knew the Jewish leaders were seeking His life. He showed that resolve in the Garden of Gethsemane when He prayed, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless not as I will, but as You will" (Matthew 26:39b). And He showed this same resolve again when He stepped forward in the garden to meet those who had come to arrest Him (see John 18:4-11).

Because of Jesus' resolution and His perfect fulfillment of that resolution through His suffering, death, and resurrection, our 2011 is truly new. We live under God's forgiveness and blessing and will inherit eternal life when our earthly journey is finished. This is true whether our Lord returns in the coming year or in another sometime in the future.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord God, give me the resolve to honor Your Name, to study Your Word, to gather in Your Church, and to share with others Your amazing grace. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

## NAME ABOVE ALL NAMES

New Year's Eve, Friday, December 31

Read Matthew 1:18-25.

**TEXT:** She will bear a Son, and you shall call His Name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins (Matthew 1:21).

Today we jump back a few weeks before Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple for His presentation. We look at Jesus' eighth day when He was circumcised and named. We will speak of the significance of His circumcision in tomorrow's devotion, but today we speak of the importance of His Name.

Does a name mean much to you? To the people of Israel and to God a name was extremely important. Each name carried its own meaning and became an integral part of that child's life, often describing the character of that child. An Israelite boy's name was very significant, and it was usually given on the eighth day when he was circumcised.

So on the eighth day when the Christ Child was circumcised, He was given the Name Jesus, just as the angel had instructed Joseph and Mary.

What a deep and profound Name! Jesus means "The LORD saves." It describes the purpose for which He descended from heaven and became human. As the angel told Joseph, Jesus would save His people from their sins. His Name perfectly fits who He was and that which He had come to do for us all.

As we close out the year 2010, it is fitting to look back on the last 365 days and take account of our lives. What great things has God done for you or through you in this year? Give Him praise.

On the other hand, what regrets do you have? What problems in your life are the still strong echoes of sinful and foolish choices you have made?

At the beginning of this coming New Year we all want to wipe the slate clean and start 2011 with a fresh start. But neither regret nor resolution can wipe our slate clean. Only Jesus can do that.

This is why many churches open their doors this night to hold New Year's Eve services—often with Holy Communion. As we receive the very same body and blood which Jesus took on Himself at His conception, the same body which was laid in the manger at His birth, the same blood which was poured out for us on the cross, our sins are taken away, our slate is washed clean, and we are at peace with God our Father. That peace is not only for *day one* of 2011, but for every day that remains in this life and for all eternity.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord God, thank You for a clean slate, washed clean by the blood of Jesus Christ. Renew us this New Year's Eve so that we may dedicate the coming year to living for Your glory and sharing the Name of Jesus throughout the world. We pray in His holy Name. Amen.

## THOSE REST STOPS ALONG THE WAY

Saturday, December 4

Read Matthew 21:8-11.

**TEXT:** The crowds that went before Him and that followed Him were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord" (Matthew 21:9a).

Rest Areas: they must have seemed like paradise to my parents; they certainly were for us. They were a welcome opportunity to get out of the crowded car, stretch our legs, run around a little bit, and go to the bathroom.

But on second thought I have to take that back. I'm a grown man now. I'll admit at certain times on long trips rest areas are very welcome. But most times they are unwanted interruptions that do nothing but draw out a trip that's too long already! I find myself thinking of the progress we've lost—the distance we could have covered if we had just stayed on the road.

That's how stopping for church services can seem, especially at this busy time of the year. We have so much to accomplish every weekend and so little time to do it. Can we really afford to stop and take the time to get ready and go to church?

Jesus thought so. The works He was doing were far more important than the things that occupy our time. Yet He did not neglect worship in the house of God. He knew life's journey can consume us if we don't take time to rest, let God restore us, and be reminded of the final destination at the end of life's road.

He also wants to remind us we aren't travelling alone. Rest areas remind us of that fact too. The road is filled with people just like us, each trying to reach his or her destination. Your church is your rest area. It's an important place for you to stop and get a little rest, get your mind off the difficulties of the journey, and refocus on the end of the journey. The end of the journey is an eternity of peace, joy, and wonder awaiting you. Weekly worship is a place and time for you to gather with your fellow travelers—your brothers and sisters in Christ—and encourage one another as you blend your praises for the Savior who has won your home for you.

Churches, like rest areas, are interesting places. Some travelers are weary when they enter; others are fresh and excited. Some are eager to get back on the road again; others don't mind taking some time away from it. Some dread the idea of piling back into the car and hitting the road. It's important to remember a rest area isn't home and neither is church. It's simply a place to pause and refresh on the way to our true home.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord Jesus, You know I need times of rest just like all people. Thank You for providing Your Church as a true rest area. Refresh my heart and mind this weekend, so I may be restored and renewed for the journey that lies ahead. Amen.

## PICKING THE RIGHT TREE

The Second Sunday in Advent, December 5

Read Psalm 72:1-7.

**TEXT:** May He defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the children of the needy, and crush the oppressor! (Psalm 72:4).

When I was growing up, our Christmas tree was always a freshly cut tree. We used to buy them from our neighbor's produce stand. I remember one year Dad picked a tree he thought was perfect, but our neighbor shook his head and said, "Did you notice the bottom of the trunk?" My Dad hadn't seen that it was club-footed. He would have had to cut a foot off the bottom of the tree to make it fit the stand. Another choice looked good, until our neighbor pointed out how twisted and curved the trunk was; it would never stand up straight. We quickly learned we could trust our neighbor to be a good, reliable judge of Christmas trees.

The same is true of our Savior and our Judge. To be a good judge of people He must be absolutely perfect and true. He can't judge out of false motives, twisted reasons, or partiality, which is a good thing when someone else has wronged us. But we also know we have wronged plenty of people ourselves. So what happens when our Judge turns His perfect, discerning eyes on us?

In this beginning of the second week of Advent we remember that God our Father has called us to come up to His heavenly home. But we are unworthy. Like unfit trees in a Christmas tree lot, we can do nothing to cure our twisted hearts and corrupt minds. Nor can we hide them from our all-knowing Judge. Despite our best efforts and intentions we cannot make ourselves worthy of taking our place in God's house.

But that is why we celebrate Jesus' first coming in Bethlehem so many years ago. He did not come as our mighty Judge. He came as our humble Savior. He lived the perfect life we could never live so that receiving His perfection as our own, we might be acceptable before our Heavenly Father. And on the cross He took our punishment upon Himself so that He might satisfy the just wrath of God in our place. Because of His life, death, and resurrection—and the faith He has given us in Word and Sacraments—we are ready to stand before Him when He comes as Judge. Then He will declare us fit to come into the house of the Lord and remain there forever.

**THE PRAYER:** Jesus Christ, thank You for being our Savior from sin and death. When we stand before Your judgment seat we know we will be found worthy to inherit eternal life in Your Father's Kingdom because of Your life, death, and resurrection. Receive our heartfelt praise and thanks. Amen.

## THE WIDOW OF CHRISTMAS

Thursday, December 30

Read Luke 3:36-38.

**TEXT:** Coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of Him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem (Luke 2:38).

We have reached the sixth day of Christmas, and my wise men are half way there. Today we will take one last look at Jesus' presentation at the temple. Now that Simeon has completed his words Anna steps forward. Luke tells us she is an extremely old woman. She has lived 84 years, but it is unclear whether Luke means she's 84 years old, or if she's lived 84 years since she became a widow. (If that's the case, she is well over 100 years old!) Either way, she spends all her time in the courtyards of the temple, fasting and praying.

At the very hour Simeon is speaking, Anna comes up to Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, thanks God for His Son, and begins to speak of Jesus to all those who have been waiting for the Christ. And undoubtedly she will keep speaking about Him until the Lord brings her home.

The Lord's choice to include Anna among those who saw the young child Jesus is fascinating. Here is an elderly woman who is widowed. Like many elderly widowed men and women of faith, she could easily have asked, "Why am I still here? What is left for me to do?" Anna shows us. We are never too old to share the news about Jesus, never too old to make a lasting impact in our world.

In the later years of our life we can make a difference, even if we are weak, sick, or confined to a bed in a nursing home. And as is true all through your life, your attitude and your behavior will make all the difference. If you are kind and grateful to those who help you, then your words will carry great weight with those who attend and care for you. But if you are bitter, short-tempered, impatient, and crabby, your words—and your faith—will mean very little to them.

God has chosen each of us. He has washed away our sins in Jesus' blood through Baptism, made us part of His family of faith, and gathered us together to celebrate His great salvation. Each of us finds ourselves at different points along our journey to our heavenly home, surrounded with a unique circle of friends and acquaintances. Like Anna, may God guide us to joyfully share the story of Jesus with everyone we meet along the way.

**THE PRAYER:** Heavenly Father, thank You for choosing me among the multitudes who have heard of Your Son and put their faith in Him. Strengthen me to continue sharing His Name that many more may come to a saving faith by Your Holy Spirit. I pray this in Jesus' Name. Amen.

## BRACE YOURSELF

Wednesday, December 29

Read Luke 2:33-35.

**TEXT:** ... A sword will pierce through your own soul also (Luke 2:35b).

Today is the fifth day of Christmas. Let's continue to look at the first of two Israelites who saw the Christ Child at the temple long before the wise men arrived.

Simeon has seen the Christ, and sung his song of praise to God. Now he turns to give Mary a private message all her own. His prophecy is not for Joseph. By the time it reaches its fulfillment Joseph will no longer be on earth. His work will be complete. But Mary will still be here.

It is amazing to me how much God revealed to her through a total stranger. Up to this point Mary had heard the wonderful outcome of her Son's life and the great things He would accomplish. But for the first time on this 40th day, she saw the difficulty of His mission and His ministry. Simeon warned her of the opposition her Son would face and the price He would pay to save the world from sin, death, and hell.

Simeon said, "This Child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed" (Luke 2:34b). Many Israelites will reject Jesus, and fall under God's judgment for refusing to believe. On the other hand, many others will believe in Jesus Christ and rise to live with God in paradise for His sake.

"He will be a sign that is spoken against" (Luke 2:34b). Simeon predicted the rejection Jesus faced from the religious establishment in Jerusalem that eventually charged Him with blasphemy and vehemently sought His death.

"And a sword will pierce your own soul also" said Simeon warning Mary to brace herself because she will suffer a piercing grief when she stands by the cross and watches her Son die for the sins of the world.

God hasn't promised that we who trust in Jesus Christ would never suffer troubles, illness, rejection, or death in this life. If it happened to His dear Son and Mary the mother of Jesus our Lord, it will happen to us as well. But He also reminds us of the great future that is ours if we endure in faith. For Jesus Christ conquered sin and death. He rose again on the third day and will return to judge the living and the dead and give eternal life to all those who put their hope, faith, and confidence in Him.

**THE PRAYER:** Heavenly Father, Your love is so amazing. You gave Your own Son to the agony of the cross to save us from our sins. Yet in Your mercy, You didn't overlook the sorrow Mary would feel at that moment. Prepare us for the moments when we must suffer, and help us look beyond to the glory we will share with You eternally in our heavenly home. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

## A DEAD STUMP

Monday, December 6

Read Isaiah 11:1-5.

**TEXT:** There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit (Isaiah 11:1).

We were so excited when we brought the Christmas tree home, but it never went into the house until the next day. My Dad knew the tree would never last unless it soaked up plenty of sugar water. So he cut a few inches off the bottom and soaked it in sugar water until the next night. I still recall holding in my hands that piece of dead stump he had cut off. It was only an inch or two thick, but it was definitely dead.

Today's Old Testament Lesson in church spoke about a dead tree stump, "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse."

Jesse was the father of King David and all his descendants who ruled over Judah—the Southern Kingdom. When those kings turned away from God to lead their people in the worship of false idols, the Lord cut off their kingship and sent His people into exile. The strong family tree was cut off and only a dead stump remained. For centuries not a single king rose from that stump to rule on their throne. All that could be seen was the dead stump of the line of David.

But in the fullness of time a shoot began to grow out of that stump. That shoot was Jesus Christ. He was born a baby and laid to sleep in Bethlehem's manger. He didn't come to claim any earthly kingdom as His own. Instead, He came as our King to battle our enemies: Satan, sin, death, and hell.

Though He Himself was cut down on the cross, and His lifeless body was laid in the tomb, Christ rose again from the grave with power and great glory. Through Baptism He makes us alive to God though we were dead in our sins. Through His Word He makes us wise in the ways of His salvation, and in Holy Communion He gives us His body and blood by which He paid for our sins and won our redemption. Now He lives to guide us on our journey to our heavenly home.

**THE PRAYER:** Heavenly Father, thank You for sending Your Son as a tender shoot out of a dead tree stump. He has saved us from our sins and opened the Kingdom of heaven to us. Help us tell the whole world of His wonderful salvation. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

## SHARP NEEDLES

Tuesday, December 7

Read Isaiah 11:6-10.

**TEXT:** They shall not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:9).

I love the smell of fresh cut Christmas trees, but I'm not crazy about their sting. I was never a fan of those sharp needles. You reach in to string some lights or attach an ornament and *ouch!*

That's one of the reasons my wife and I decided to go with an artificial tree when we started our own family Christmas traditions. You can reach in there all you want and know nothing will prick you.

Wouldn't it be nice if the world was like that, especially this time of year? How wonderful it would be to go shopping and know people would be patient and polite. How refreshing it would be if you knew people wouldn't cut you off to have that parking space or wrestle you over those "must-have" presents this Christmas?

I imagine most of us would like our homes to be oases of respect, safety, and peace. But here too the pressures of the season can cause tempers to be short, words to be sharp, and patience to wear thin.

Even in your church congregation there is undoubtedly stress and strife. Sights and insults are exchanged like Christmas cards; pessimism and doubt leads to discouragement and apathy; selfish pride leads to deep divisions that splinter us.

But that is why Jesus Christ—our brother and King—is here with us. He guides us in humility and meekness and teaches us to treat one another in the same way. He who came to this world as a little baby shared our humanity, our sorrows, and our disappointments. He suffered from the cruelty and murderous hatred of His own people. He wore a crown of thorns and died on the cross for all the sins we committed against our God and against one another. But now, risen from the dead, He works to bring healing, peace, and harmony to us and each one of our broken relationships.

Showing us the depth of His love in His holy Word He fosters love within our hearts toward one another. Forgiving our sins in our Baptism, He empowers us to forgive those who sin against us. Reminding us of the price He gladly paid for our salvation, He softens our hearts as He gives us His own body and blood to eat and to drink so that we gladly sacrifice ourselves for each other.

In Jesus Christ, God's Word through Isaiah is fulfilled: "The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD," and nothing will hurt or destroy us on His holy mountain.

**THE PRAYER:** Holy Lord, tame our wild impulses, forgive our sins, and change our rebel hearts so that we may no longer cause any hurt or harm in Your holy house. We pray this in Jesus' Name. Amen.

## SEEING IT WITH MY OWN EYES

Tuesday, December 28

Read Luke 2:29-32.

**TEXT:** My eyes have seen Your salvation (Luke 2:30).

Today is the fourth day of Christmas and my wise men are making solid progress on their way to the manger scene. But today we are looking at Simeon, who held little Jesus in his arms at the same time the wise men were traveling toward the land of Israel.

Mary must have been amazed at the things God revealed to her about Jesus through friends and total strangers. First, her cousin Elizabeth told her she was pregnant with God's Son before Mary had the chance to say a word about it. Then, Joseph told her about the angel in his dream who said he should not be afraid to take her as his wife because the child was God's Son. And, of course, there were the shepherds who rushed in that first Christmas night to tell of the angel's message.

And here through another total stranger God reveals to Mary the scope of her Son's work. Simeon said, "My eyes have seen Your salvation that You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to Your people Israel" (Luke 2:30-32). Mary knew Jesus would reign over the throne of His father David and save Israel. But now she learned Jesus would save not only Israel, He would be the Savior for *all* nations.

Jesus came as a light for those who live in the darkness of sin, unbelief, and ignorance. He came for those who do not know that God the Creator is perfect, and He demands perfection of His creatures. He came for those who do not know God is merciful. He came for those—Jew and Gentile alike—because He is love. In fact, He loved this fallen world so much that He gave His one and only Son to take all mankind's sins upon Himself and win eternal salvation for all of us by His suffering, death, and resurrection.

Like Simeon, our eyes have seen God's salvation. That is why Simeon's song has been sung for centuries in the Church after receiving Holy Communion. When we receive the bread and wine we are holding Christ's very body and blood, which was nailed to the cross and poured out for our forgiveness. We have seen it with our own eyes and felt it with our hands and on our tongues. No less than Simeon we can say, "My eyes have seen Your salvation." Having been saved, we glorify God and depart in peace to share Christ's salvation throughout the world.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord God, I praise You for revealing Your salvation to me—Your Son Jesus Christ. As He has brought light to my darkened mind, let me share His Name to all those You bring into my life, that they may see His light and praise You. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

## IN MY LIFETIME

Monday, December 27

Read Luke 2:25-28.

**TEXT:** It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ (Luke 2:26).

My wise men are making progress along their way. Since yesterday, they have moved a little closer to the manger scene. But there are two other people who really should be included in our Nativity scene. In fact they saw the infant Jesus before the wise men did. These faithful Jews were in the temple on the 40th day after Jesus' birth when Mary and Joseph brought Him up to the temple to present Him to the Lord.

The first is a man named Simeon. Luke describes Simeon as "righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him" (Luke 2:25b). It's not that Simeon was perfect, he was a sinner like all of us and needed the Son of God to save him. But since he trusted God's promise to send a Savior, the consolation of Israel, and since the Holy Spirit was upon him, we know Simeon was a believer. His faith in Jesus made him righteous and devout.

And Simeon had received a special promise from the Holy Spirit. For generation after generation God's faithful people had been waiting for the coming of the Savior. This was a promise given clear back in the Garden of Eden to Adam and Eve. Each generation wondered if He would come during its lifetime, but countless generations had come and gone without seeing the promised Savior. But Simeon knows how close that coming finally is. In fact, during his lifetime, before he departs from this earth to rest with God in heaven, he will see the promised One—the Lord's Christ. And this is the day, the 40th day of Jesus' life, when God kept His promise.

You and I have that special honor too, like Simeon. Today we look at Jesus through the eyes of faith. We know that He has come and has saved all of us from sin, death, and the devil by His perfect life, and His innocent suffering, death, and resurrection. We also know He will return again, but we don't know if that will happen in our lifetime or not. But one thing is certain, whether we depart from this world or Christ Jesus returns first, we will see Jesus with our own eyes, face to face—just as Simeon did. In the meantime, filled with the Holy Spirit, let us go up to the house of the Lord to worship every week, and joyously look forward to the day when we too will see Christ Jesus with our own eyes.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord God, thank You for Your promise that I will see Jesus when I depart from this world. Strengthen my faith through Your holy Word, Baptism, and Holy Communion that I may live in peace and share the Good News of Jesus' salvation with everyone You bring into my life. Grant me the courage to do this until that great day when You let me depart in peace. In Jesus' Name, I pray. Amen.

## THE LIGHTS TIE IT TOGETHER

Wednesday, December 8

Read Romans 15:4-7.

**TEXT:** May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another ... that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 15:5a, 6).

Now the tree is on its stand in the living room. It's time to string the lights. I remember the first time I put on the lights while trying to dodge those sharp needles. I learned quickly how difficult it is to evenly space the lights over the tree. At first I had too many on the top, then I had too many on the bottom. But when I finally got them pretty well balanced it was magical to me.

There is something very special about a well-lit Christmas tree. None of the lights is very bright by itself, but when they all shine together in harmony they create a warm, soft, beautiful glow.

In the Epistle reading for this Second Week in Advent St. Paul seeks this same harmony, this same beautiful light to shine out from the family of believers. But this peace and unity cannot come from sinful creatures darkened by their own degenerate natures. It must come from the Light of the world.

That peace did not come cheap for Jesus. It cost Him His life, bitter sufferings, and death as He took our place under God's wrath and paid the full price for our sin. But when we know the peace of God's forgiveness, we can't help but want to spread that same forgiveness to our brothers and sisters in faith. In that way God's peace spreads throughout the Church and brings Him glory. Wouldn't it be nice in our church families to share this Christmas holiday in true peace, joy, and harmony?

As Paul's prayer to the Romans shows *by ourselves* we can't do that. It is a gift that must be granted to us by God. It comes to us through the Gospel—the Good News of God's forgiveness through Jesus Christ. It is given us in our Baptism and strengthened by Holy Communion. It is only in gathering together before Jesus as a family of God, receiving God's Word and Sacraments, that we can live in harmony as we raise our voices to praise and glorify our God.

If your church is holding midweek Advent services tonight, then this is a good night to start. Come to Jesus Christ. Let Him change your heart and bring you into harmony with your brothers and sisters in Christ as He unites us all in our journey toward our heavenly home.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord God, unite our hearts in Christ Jesus our Savior, that we may have genuine love for our Christian brothers and sisters. Work through us to show the world Your love and glory that many may come to faith in Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

## ORNAMENTS

Thursday, December 9

Read Romans 15:8-13.

**TEXT:** ... Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles may glorify God for His mercy ... (Romans 15:8b-9a).

I have to admit, once the lights were on the tree, I was satisfied. I didn't really care whether any ornaments went on or not. But that wasn't the case with Mom. I never could understand why she took each ornament in hand, carefully inspected it, and smiled as she chose its precise place on the tree. To me she was wasting time—just get them up there so we can put the icicles on!

Now that I have a few years behind me, I understand Mom a whole lot more. Now I find myself looking carefully at our ornament collection. "This was the ornament we got when we were first dating!" "We were newlyweds when we bought this." "This was Jacob's first Christmas!" "This was our first house." And, like Mom, a smile spreads across my face as I recite each ornament's history.

The promises God made about Jesus in the Old Testament are like those ornaments. Consider one from Isaiah: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel (which means 'God with us')" (Isaiah 7:14b). Or Micah's famous, "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for Me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days" (Micah 5:2). My favorite is another from Isaiah, "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder, and His Name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6).

Each prophecy is like a dearly loved ornament. We get it out, examine it carefully, place it into the timeline of Christ's life, and rejoice in what it shows us about our Savior.

He went around serving people through His words and mighty deeds.

He took our sin and guilt upon Himself and suffered and died in our place.

He perfectly satisfied God's wrath for our sins.

He rose in glory on the third day.

He ascended into heaven and took His place at the Father's right hand.

On the Last Day He will return to judge both the living and the dead.

Like precious ornaments these prophecies hang on the tree of our faith.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord Jesus Christ, thank You for fulfilling all the promises given to Your Old Testament people, our ancient brothers and sisters in the faith. Give Your children great joy, hope, and confidence in Your life so that we may glorify Your Name and share Your salvation with all people. Amen.

## JESUS GOES UP TO GOD'S HOUSE

First Sunday after Christmas, December 26

Read Luke 2:21-24.

**TEXT:** ... They brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (Luke 2:22b).

Our Nativity scene has the baby Jesus, Mary, and Joseph and the angel and shepherds. The only figures left in my collection are the wise men. But they weren't part of the first Christmas gathering. In fact, at the moment the shepherds were hurrying to find the baby, the wise men were just first seeing the star in their own countries. They still had to gather their provisions and set out on their long journey to meet the King of the Jews.

So on Christmas morning I like to put my wise men on the opposite side of the room from the Nativity scene, and slowly move them closer and closer each day through the twelve days of Christmas until they arrive at Jesus' feet on Epiphany Day, January 6. Since today is the second day of Christmas, they still have a long way to go.

In the meantime, during these twelve days of Christmas, we will be looking at two events that occurred in the life of the infant Jesus before the wise men arrived. On New Year's Eve and New Year's Day we will speak about His circumcision and naming, which occurred when Jesus was eight days old. But in the meantime we will jump ahead to a special event that occurred when Jesus was 40 days old.

Forty days after an Israelite woman gave birth to a son, she was to be purified and her firstborn male child was to be presented to the Lord. This set Jesus apart for a life of service to God—a service that would include living a perfect life and require His suffering and death to take the curse of sin, death, and hell away from us forever.

In our Baptism God joined us together with Jesus and set each of us apart for lives of service to Him. He forgives our sins for Jesus' sake. He gives us Jesus' own righteousness, makes us His own children, and fills us with His Holy Spirit. Like Jesus, we dedicate our lives to serving others and telling them the joyful news of the eternal Kingdom Jesus won for us all through His life, death, and resurrection. When our earthly lives reach their end, Jesus Himself will present us to our Heavenly Father, and welcome us into our eternal home.

**THE PRAYER:** Jesus, by Your presentation, When they blessed You, weak and poor, Make us see Your great salvation, Seal us with Your promise sure; And present us in Your glory To Your Father, cleansed and pure. Amen.

## THE FIRST VISITORS

Christmas Day, Saturday, December 25

Read Luke 2:8-20.

**TEXT:** ... The shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us" (Luke 2:15b).

Do you enjoy a large gathering on Christmas Day? Or are you isolated this year by work, finances, weather, or for some other reason? You are not alone. It is certainly possible that Mary and Joseph came into the first Christmas feeling the same way, huddled together and all alone with their newborn baby.

God didn't leave them alone for long. He sent His angel to poor shepherds watching over their flock at night. The angel told them the exceedingly good news that God had kept His promise—a Savior had been born! Because Jesus would take their sins and pay the full price we all owe God, they could leave their flocks and hurry into the presence of their God and King.

Suddenly the sky was filled with a multitude of angels praising God. The overjoyed shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they hurried and found Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. And so began the first Christmas gathering.

Can you imagine the joy Mary and Joseph felt when this unexpected company arrived? We continue this wonderful tradition by hurrying from our homes to "go over to Bethlehem" and gathering together with our Christian brothers and sisters in church to "see this thing that has happened."

On this day as you gather with family, friends, and your Christian brothers and sisters at church, don't forget your eternal home where Jesus sits on His royal throne at the Father's right hand. Mary and Joseph no longer wear their poor clothing but shine in the glorious righteousness of Jesus with which they are robed in paradise. The shepherds are before the throne of God, worshipping the Son of God who saved them from their sins.

And if there is an empty spot at your Christmas gathering because a loved one has left this world in faith, then take heart. Like the shepherds, they have gone to see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord had told them about. One day you and I will gather with them because God's Son became human, took our sins upon Himself, and died in our place on the cross. Through His glorious resurrection He has guaranteed we will rise again and live with Him forever in paradise.

**THE PRAYER:** Almighty God, thank You for this wonderful day in which our Savior was born. As we gather at church and in our homes, fill us with joy. And like the shepherds may we return, glorifying and praising You as we share with our family, friends, and neighbors all that we have heard and seen, just as You told us. Then, in Your perfect timing, bring us to Your eternal gathering in our heavenly home. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

## OUT OF PLACE

Friday, December 10

Read Matthew 3:1-6.

**TEXT:** John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey (Matthew 3:4).

I grew up thinking our living room was the natural place for a Christmas tree. But after I had grown up it finally dawned on me—a tree is not supposed to be sitting right in the middle of your living room! It's totally out of place there! Trees belong outside in the yard! In fact, in recent years we decorated one evergreen tree in our front yard with lights, ornaments, and bows. The tree belongs outside—where it can live and grow year round. Cutting a tree down and setting it up inside a house is an out of place location for a tree.

That phrase "out of place" fit John the Baptist perfectly. John wore different clothing from everyone else, and he ate very different food from everyone else, and he lived in a very different place than everyone else. Why? Because John was the prophet God sent to prepare the way for His Son. His message was repent! In other words, reverse the direction of your life because the Kingdom of God is at hand.

We too must recognize how often we are going the wrong way in life because of our sinful nature. We often see it pretty clearly in our broken family relationships, our strained friendships, and our divided congregations. Just like an evergreen tree that is cut down and then propped up in a living room and decorated, we are all dying.

John came to show us why we need a Savior. So John dressed differently, and he preached out in the wilderness. And if you wanted to hear what God had to say to you through John, you had to go *out of place* too. You had to join him in the wilderness. His location teaches us to leave our old way of thinking and our old way of life to meet and travel together with our humble King.

Just as John the Baptist left his home in the hill country of Judea to live in the wilderness, Jesus left His heavenly throne and lived among us. The glorious Son of God, Creator of all, became a human baby and lived out His earthly life among us in poverty and want. He was rejected, suffered, and died that we might find peace and forgiveness. Jesus was *out of place* on earth so that you and I would be made right for heaven, His home.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord Jesus, thank You for going out of place for us when You left Your home in heaven to live with us here on earth. Through Your sacrifice and death in our place, we are forgiven all our sins and inherit eternal life. Move us to leave our sinful lives and walk with You on the road to heaven. We pray this in Your Name. Amen.

## CHRISTMAS TREES DON'T LAST FOREVER

Saturday, December 11

Read Matthew 3:7-12.

**TEXT:** Even now the axe is laid at the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire (Matthew 3:10).

The cut Christmas trees we got when I was a kid sure didn't last long. Mom always tried to stretch them until Epiphany, January 6, but the tree didn't always make it that long. And each day it became more of a fire hazard. We'd watch our cut tree dry up, drop its needles, turn brown and die—all because it had been cut off from its roots.

Each of us is like a cut Christmas tree. From the moment we're born we begin the gradual process of dying. But that is not the way God created us. God made our first parents Adam and Eve sinless and pure and placed them in the Garden of Eden. When they listened to the words of the serpent and ate the forbidden fruit, God cut them off from the Garden and barred their way to the tree of life. Like a tree cut off from its roots, we—along with all of Adam and Eve's other children—creep steadily closer each day to the day of our death.

But God did not leave us alone in our sin. While Adam and Eve were still in the Garden, even before God drove them out, He promised them a Savior, who would be the Seed of the woman. He would crush the serpent's head on the cross, and through His resurrection would swallow up the death that came to us all in the Garden.

That Seed was Jesus Christ, God's own Son who became one of us when He was conceived of the Virgin Mary. Though He was without sin, Jesus fully paid the price for *all* our sins. He was cut off. He was crucified and died on that cross. He washed us free of our sin in Baptism, and He has restored eternal life to us. Through His Word and His body and blood in Holy Communion He empowers us to do good works—just the same way a tree bears good fruit when it is firmly attached to its roots.

John warned us against being overly confident in ourselves. It is humility and sincerity that make us approachable to others. As we share the love of God with others this Christmas season, remember to offer more than a "Merry Christmas!" Offer to give yourself as you follow the example of Christ's sacrifice for us.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord Jesus, You became one of us, that through Your suffering and death, You might crush the Serpent's head. Receive our praise and thanks and enable us to bear fruits that reflect Your love. We pray this in Your Name. Amen.

## "AN EMPTY MANGER?"

Christmas Eve, Friday, December 24

Read Luke 2:1-7.

**TEXT:** And she gave birth to 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 (Luke 2:7).

Now that Joseph and Mary were together as husband and wife only one detail of prophecy remained to be fulfilled. Do you remember our shelter and manger waiting patiently for Mary, Joseph, and Jesus down in Bethlehem? Mary and Joseph are 70 miles away and have no plans for a trip south! The shelter and manger will remain empty and Micah's prophecy unfulfilled—unless God steps into human history once again.

So God steps in through the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus. Augustus issued a decree commanding a worldwide census. He has no idea that he is an instrument in God's hand to fulfill the words of the prophet, "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for Me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days" (Micah 5:2). Because of this census Joseph sets out with his wife Mary to the little town of Bethlehem.

While they were there the time came for Mary to give birth. And since there was no room in the inn in the crowded city, she laid her baby in our manger inside that lowly shelter.

So many people come out to church on this night. Often they're people who have not been here since last Christmas Eve. And sometimes they're people who will not set foot in church again until next Christmas Eve. Like the crowds of Bethlehem, they turn Jesus away from their hearts and make Him remain outside in the cold. He faced that kind of rejection all through His earthly life—all the way to His death. But He suffered it all to save us. No matter who we are or what we have done, Jesus has won our place in paradise by His perfect life and innocent suffering and death as our Substitute.

Are you home for the holidays this Christmas Eve? As you prepare to gather together with family and friends, don't forget to gather with your Christian family. Don't leave Jesus in that manger as though He never grew up to save you. Join us in your church home as we follow Him through His childhood. Join us as He takes on His life's work and goes to the cross to save us all through His suffering, death, and glorious resurrection.

God grant you a joyous Christmas gathering together with your family and friends at home, in your church home, and in eternity in His heavenly home.

**THE PRAYER:** Heavenly Father, thank You for moving Augustus to issue a decree so that Your Son would be born in the place You chose. Prepare me to celebrate our Savior's birth this night, that He might be born in my heart again, and that forgiven of all my sins for His sake, I may rejoice in Your presence now and always. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

## THE MAN WHO ALMOST MISSED CHRISTMAS

Thursday, December 23

Read Matthew 1:18-25.

**TEXT:** ... Before they came together she was found to be with Child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly (Matthew 1:18b-19).

In my Nativity set it is hard to tell Joseph from the shepherds. More than once I have set up the scene and noticed that Mary was alone with the baby and Joseph was off to the side with the shepherds. Actually, the first Christmas could have ended up looking a lot like that—a woman alone with her baby.

After Mary returned from her three-month stay with Elizabeth and Zechariah, Joseph found she was pregnant. Joseph handled himself in an amazing way. Joseph did not act rashly out of pride or hurt. He acted deliberately, guided by justice and mercy. As a just man it was important to Joseph to do what was right in God's eyes no matter what the cost. Mary had become pregnant with a child that was not his own, and he would not bring God's Name into disgrace by marrying her.

But Joseph was also merciful. He had every right to publicly divorce her to clear his name. He even could have demanded she be stoned to death. But instead he resolved to protect her by divorcing her quietly. Joseph made up his mind and had chosen to divorce her—until God stepped in through an angel and told him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife. And in that dream Joseph learned Mary had not been unfaithful to him; he learned the true identity of Mary's Son.

As Jesus' legal guardian, Joseph would protect our Savior from King Herod's wrath, and he would provide for Mary and Jesus. When Jesus suffered and died upon the cross it satisfied God's wrath and saved us all from our sins—and that includes Joseph.

In this Christmas season, fathers are reminded of the important role they play in the life of their children and families. In fact, Joseph reminds me a lot of my own father. He was a man who took pains to do what was right in God's eyes. He stepped up to raise his sons to be men of God until his life's work was done and he was called to his eternal rest. Dad was a central and integral part of our Christmases and our lives. God grant all fathers to be the same for their families.

**THE PRAYER:** Heavenly Father, thank You for choosing Joseph to be the foster father of Your Son. Thank You for sending the angel to assure Joseph of Your will. Bless all men to follow Jesus Christ our Lord in true faith that they may act in justice and mercy. Empower all fathers to step up to their responsibilities to the children You have entrusted to them. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

(The **Men's NetWork** helps men fulfill the roles God has planned for them. You can visit us at [www.lhmmen.com](http://www.lhmmen.com).)

## YOU HAVE TO KNOW WHO TO TRUST

The Third Sunday in Advent, December 12

Read Psalm 146.

**TEXT:** Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God, who made heaven and earth. ... The LORD watches over the sojourners (Psalm 146:5, 9a).

Putting up Christmas lights by yourself isn't very easy, and often it's not very smart either. In the first week of December 2006 three men in northern Texas fell off ladders while decorating their houses. Two were paralyzed and the third died. They broke one of the first rules of using a ladder: always have someone there to help steady the ladder. They forgot the second rule too: if you must climb the ladder yourself, make sure it is secured to the roof.

We tend to trust in our skills, our abilities, and our knowledge—even our balance—more than we should. But asking someone to help who has no idea how to hold a ladder would be no better.

This week in church we light the third candle in the Advent wreath. Traditionally, and still in many churches today, that candle is a different color from the others. It is a reminder to turn our attention to Christ Jesus who is different from all other people. He is absolutely trustworthy and able to handle every single problem that could possibly come our way.

Are you hoping for a "perfect Christmas" this year? What are you counting on to make it perfect? Is it getting all the presents bought and wrapped? Is it getting every string of lights onto your house and then keeping them lit all through the holiday season? Will it be the perfect Christmas if you are able to get each member of your family to join you? Will it be perfect if everyone is healthy?

How often do our hopes and aspirations for Christmas—and for life itself—depend on our accomplishments or someone else coming through for us? How many times have you been disappointed at Christmas because you or somebody else has failed?

There is only one safe place to set our hope, and that is in the God who made the heavens and the earth. He alone has the power to do all we need. He is the God who became human and lived among us. He is the God who laid down His life on the cross and rose again in glory for us. He is the God who walks along with us and guides us to our heavenly home. Our hope is in Jesus Christ our only Savior, for whose sake our Heavenly Father stands at the end of life's road with His arms widespread, waiting to welcome us into His heavenly Kingdom.

**THE PRAYER:** Heavenly Father, thank You for sending Your Son to be our Lord and Savior. Forgive us for placing so much trust in ourselves or in others. Teach us to rely on Jesus Christ alone for He can never fail us. In Jesus' Name, we pray. Amen.

(If you wrestle with having a perfect Christmas, please read our booklet *What Is Christmas?* You can order it by calling us at 800-876-9880.)

## DREAMING OF A WHITE CHRISTMAS

Monday, December 13

Read Isaiah 35:1-7.

**TEXT:** Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, “Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you” (Isaiah 35:3-4).

Ordinarily I love a white Christmas, but that was the last thing my wife and I wanted for Christmas 2002. Mom was dying of cancer, and we hoped desperately to be able to drive back the 550 miles for Christmas. The weather forecast in the days leading up to the holidays wasn’t good and, sure enough, on December 24 there were eight inches of snow on the ground and more expected to fall through the day. We were forced to cancel Christmas Eve and Christmas Day services at church, and soon it became painfully clear we would miss gathering for Mom’s last Christmas here on earth.

There are times in our lives and, sadly, at our Christmases, when we face problems that make us anxious, troubled, and fearful. Maybe you face great struggles this Christmas. Maybe you are hanging at the end of your rope. Maybe, instead of getting better, things are getting worse. It might seem God doesn’t care at all.

Our Lord Jesus understands that feeling better than we can imagine. As He hung from the cross enduring the fiery wrath of God for our sins He cried out, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Matthew 27:46b). God the Father did not forsake His only begotten Son because of anything Jesus Himself had done. He forsook His Son because Jesus took upon Himself the punishment that should have fallen on each of us.

*That* is God’s love for all fallen men, women, and children. He demonstrated that love when He sent His Son at Christmas, the baby in Bethlehem’s manger, to be our sacrifice, the pure Lamb who would take away the sins of the world.

Jesus died and rose again to be our Good Shepherd. Having defeated death He is with us forever. When we are at the end of our wits, Jesus is there to hear our prayers and comfort us. “Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).

Come to Bethlehem’s manger. Come see Your Lord and Savior who was born to rescue you and bring you to eternal life in heaven.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord Jesus, there are so many times when I’m at a loss and when I don’t know where to turn. Remind me to come to You humbly and completely. You are my Lord and my risen Savior who has conquered death, hell, and given me eternal life. Amen.

## CLOSE, BUT NOT THERE YET

Wednesday, December 22

Read Luke 1:39-56.

**TEXT:** In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-40).

Before we can place Mary in our Nativity scene in Bethlehem, we have to follow her on her visit to her cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth is much older than Mary, much too old to have a child. Yet by God’s miraculous power she is six months pregnant with John the Baptist — Jesus’ great forerunner.

Mary barely gets out a greeting before her excited cousin responds. With John leaping in her womb, Elizabeth loudly exclaims, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” (Luke 1:42b-43).

Elizabeth is humbled to be in the presence of God’s Son. Like Elizabeth, when we come into our church where God meets with us in His Word, in baptismal water, and in the bread and wine, we should ask who are *we* that the Lord has come to us? We are undeserving sinners, but in His love and compassion Christ comes to us to wash us and make us clean.

Mary shares Elizabeth’s humility, and bursts out in her own song of joy at God’s grace: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (Luke 1:46b). Mary is amazed that God has chosen to exalt someone so humble and lowly like her. Seeing her God more clearly, Mary cannot help but rejoice.

Mary ended up spending three months with Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah. They shared a special Christmas visit as they spoke of their sons and the gracious work God would accomplish through them. And all the time, Jesus was present there with them — growing in Mary’s womb.

Sometimes our Christmas gatherings with family and friends aren’t as close and open as we would like. Perhaps some of your family and friends don’t share your faith, priorities, and values. That’s why God has provided us another family: a Christian family at church. When we are gathered together with them we can share the true meaning of this glorious season and the special Savior whose birth we celebrate. May you treasure the time spent with Christ’s family just as Mary and Elizabeth did.

**THE PRAYER:** Heavenly Father, though we are totally unworthy, we thank You for gathering us into a family of Your sons and daughters through Jesus Christ, Your Son. Help us truly rejoice together as we share the glad tidings of Your wondrous salvation — just as Mary and Elizabeth did. In Jesus’ Name, we pray. Amen.

## “THE VIRGIN WHO?”

Tuesday, December 21

Read Luke 1:26-38.

**TEXT:** In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. ... (Luke 1:26-27a).

Our Nativity scene has a shelter and a manger. Now it's time to start adding the figures. My Nativity figures have a special meaning for me because my Dad hand painted each of them a few years before he left us to go to his eternal home. He took great care painting the faces of baby Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, the shepherds, the wise men and the angel. Now, because of his faith in Jesus Christ his Savior, Dad has spent 18 years looking at those same glorious faces in his heavenly home.

As we begin placing the figures into the Nativity scene let's take some time to examine each one. It is interesting that a shelter and manger stand ready in Bethlehem for that special night. But look as hard as you want, you can't find the virgin mother in that little town just south of Jerusalem. You have to travel 70 miles north to the region of Galilee and to a town called Nazareth. That's where a young virgin lives. That's where God sends His angel Gabriel.

Look closely at the virgin and the clothes she wears. Her family is not wealthy, powerful, or influential. Her betrothed husband is a poor carpenter who has no claim to fame either except, perhaps, that both he and his virgin wife are descendants of King David. God could have selected any virgin girl to be the mother of His Son, but He specifically chose this young woman.

You and I are also unlikely people God has chosen. So often we are self-absorbed and concerned about all the wrong things—problems that in the end don't pile up to a hill of beans. These days before Christmas we often focus on the *least* significant things, and we display our irritation and impatience to our families, co-workers, and everyone we encounter who is standing in our way. Now is the time to slow down and follow the story of our Savior's birth.

The angel explains to Mary that she will be the mother of God's Son through the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit. He will be a holy Child, whose Father is God. Being human He will be able to suffer and die in our place. And being God's Son, He will be able to win salvation for all people by His suffering and death on the cross.

This Christmas we would do well to learn from Mary's humility and simple trust. "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to Your Word. ..." (Luke 1:38a). When we approach Christmas with that same trusting response, we will enjoy a more profound and joyous celebration of our Savior's birth.

**THE PRAYER:** Heavenly Father, thank You for choosing an unknown virgin to be the mother of Your Son. Give me true humility that I may live as Your child and live with You in Your heavenly home forever. I pray this in Jesus' Name. Amen.

## IF ONE GOES OUT THEY ALL GO OUT

Tuesday, December 14

Isaiah 35:8-10.

**TEXT:** And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away (Isaiah 35:10).

I have a love-hate relationship with my Christmas lights. I love them when they work. I hate them when they don't. Sometimes a single bulb goes dark; sometimes it's a section; sometimes it's the whole string. Often they are all working when you put them up. But then, usually on a dark night when snow is falling, the temperature is dropping, and a cold wind is blowing, you look up to admire them and you see some of them are unlit.

When I was a kid miniature bulbs had one huge drawback—the electric current had to run all the way through each and every bulb or it wouldn't run through any of them. So if one bulb went out, they all went out. Sometimes our joy at Christ's birth seems like that. We get the idea we will only have a great Christmas if everything goes perfectly. But if one part of life goes badly, it steals the joy and leaves us in darkness.

But vast improvements in miniature bulb strings have been made since I was a kid. Now, when a bulb burns out, current still runs through the base of that bulb to the next. As a result, you may have lights burned out, but the rest will keep shining.

Odds are this Christmas won't find everything perfect in your life. You may have good health and a good job, but are struggling with relationship problems. Your family may get along fine, but you're having troubles paying your bills. It might be everything else is good, but this is the first Christmas since a loved one died and it just doesn't feel like Christmas without him or her.

It's hard to keep from letting one problem crowd out our joy and thankfulness. It's hard, that is, until you stop and think about the first Christmas. Joseph and Mary were not wealthy people. And since there was no room to lodge, they had to wrap Jesus in swaddling cloths and lay Him in a manger—a rough feeding trough. But the lack of a crib did not diminish the joy of that first Christmas. The joy still shone through because the Son of God, the Savior of the world, was here.

On that first Christmas, Jesus Christ began sharing our sorrows, our problems, our pains, and our sufferings. Eventually He shared our death and God's wrath. But through His perfect life and innocent suffering and death, He conquered our death and won for us eternal life. Until His glorious return to this earth, our lives will not be perfect and neither will our Christmases. But He will change all of that upon His return. Never again will there be sorrow, loss, grief, suffering, or pain. All of that will flee in His glorious presence, and we will be crowned with eternal joy and gladness.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord Jesus, because of Your great sacrifice, I have reason to rejoice and be glad all the days of my life. Comfort me in my sorrows this Christmas. Please open my eyes to see those who suffer around me so I can offer them that same comfort. In Jesus' Name I pray. Amen.

## REFRIGERATE OVERNIGHT

Wednesday, December 15

Read James 5:7-9.

**TEXT:** Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. ... Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand (James 5:7a, 8).

My favorite Christmas cookies growing up were made of molasses and sugar. We called them “animal cookies” because we shaped them with animal-shaped cookie cutters. The worst part of making animal cookies is that once you mixed up the dough, it had to sit in the refrigerator overnight. Talk about a test of patience!

As a child, impatience seemed to go hand in hand with Christmas. It seemed like that great, wonderful, magical day would never, *ever* come.

There is a far greater day coming, however. It’s that ultimate Christmas when Jesus Christ will return to this world with all His angels. He will raise all the dead and judge between those who believed during their earthly lives, and those who did not. For us who believe, Jesus will remove every source of evil, pain, and suffering as He renews His creation and makes it perfect. Then we will enjoy perfect health, perfect relationships, and a perfect life forever.

How can we wait for that wonderful day? In this week’s Epistle Lesson James tells us to establish our hearts. He means for us to strengthen our hearts with the certainty of Jesus coming just as He promised. When our hearts are established the problems of this life simply don’t loom as large because we can clearly see our God is bigger and stronger than anything we face.

How do you establish your heart? Gather for worship with your church family. There you will be reminded of Christ’s promises. There your Baptism will be renewed as you confess your sins and as the Holy Spirit reassures you through the pastor that those sins are forgiven. There you will receive the very body and blood that Jesus sacrificed for us on the cross. And there the Spirit of God will establish your faith and keep you until that final day. Then you will know a peace and confidence as all your problems shrink back to their true size, easily managed by our God and Savior.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord Jesus, You have promised to return to this world to make all things right and perfect forever. Establish my heart in Your promise so that none of the problems I face will shake my trust and confidence in You. Amen.

## “DO YOU CALL THAT A CRIB?”

Monday, December 20

Read Isaiah 7:10-17.

**TEXT:** ... Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His Name Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14b).

All right, we have some kind of shelter for our Nativity scene. Now let’s turn to the one object inside that shelter that is mentioned specifically in the Christmas account: the manger. A manger is a feeding trough for animals. Don’t you think that’s a pretty shabby crib? I wonder if Joseph and Mary ever thought about that. The best they could do for God’s one and only Son was to lay Him in a feeding trough inside a pitiable shelter? If it was me, I think I’d be trembling in fear at the thought.

Actually, that’s what a lot of people do at Christmas time. They tremble in fear over problems in their lives: serious health problems, bills they can’t pay, jobs they’ve lost, marriages that have crumbled, or loved ones who are no longer here. Sadly, many Christians add the fear that these are punishments from a displeased God.

Actually, one of the great prophecies of Jesus’ coming was given to a king quaking in fear. King Ahaz was a descendant of King David and ancestor of Jesus. Seven hundred years before Jesus’ birth, Ahaz feared two kingdoms that were threatening his little kingdom of Judah. The Northern Kingdom, Israel, and its neighbor Aram (Syria) had allied together to conquer Judah and replace Ahaz.

God wasn’t about to let that happen. Instead He sent the prophet Isaiah to reassure him. God offered to perform any miracle Ahaz asked, but Ahaz didn’t trust God and refused to ask for one. So Isaiah rebuked the king, then said, “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His Name Immanuel. ... For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted” (Isaiah 7:14, 16). Within the time a baby could be conceived, delivered, and grow old enough to know the difference between good and bad, those two kingdoms would cease to exist.

The virgin’s Son is a sign for us as well. He is holy and pure, and He gives us His holy and perfect life as though it were our own. He took our sin upon Himself and suffered the punishment we deserve. Because of His great exchange we can stand pure and holy before God the Father by faith, clothed in Christ’s holiness and righteousness.

Isaiah tells us the virgin “shall call His Name Immanuel.” That name means “God with us.” This reassures us that no matter what our problems may be this Christmas, God is right here with us just as He was with Mary and Joseph. He has promised never to leave us or forsake us. He will deliver us from all our problems too.

**THE PRAYER:** Almighty God, thank You for noticing our fear and anxiety. Thank You for comforting and reassuring us. Remind us that You are Immanuel and that we may know You are an ever-present help in trouble, until the day You bring us to Your eternal rest. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

## “ANY SHELTER?”

The Fourth Sunday in Advent, December 19

Read Psalm 24.

**TEXT:** Lift up your heads O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle! (Psalm 24:7-8).

This week the fourth candle of the Advent wreath is lit, and it is obvious Christmas is fast approaching. And judging by the appointed lessons for this Fourth Sunday in Advent, it's time to put up the Nativity scene. Did you notice that all the readings spoke of Christ's coming?

When I moved away from home for the first time I brought along a box with figures from the Nativity: Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus lying in a manger, the shepherds, the wise men, an angel, and a few animals. I just had the figures but nothing to put them in. So as we prepare to assemble our Nativity scene let's start with the place—the shelter that will house Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. When you look closely at the Christmas accounts (Luke 2:1-7, Matthew 2:1), you find they never describe the kind of shelter Joseph borrowed for his wife and her Child.

The truth is we're not sure what that shelter looked like. It could have been a stable; it could have been a cave. It could have even been something like a first-century garage, a back room in the house where a family kept its donkeys and other animals. No matter what it was, it was a pretty pathetic excuse of a shelter for the Son of God, wasn't it? Yet, He gladly—*willingly*—came down to be born in a rough shelter, and laid in a humble manger.

Today He comes into our lowly hearts and minds and promises to dwell there with us. Which of us is a worthy dwelling place for God? We are self-centered when we should be God-centered. We are far more unworthy of Christ's presence than any stable, cave, or garage.

But that is why Christ Jesus came into this world. He took our sin and guilt upon Himself and paid the price for our sinful rebellion by suffering God's wrath on the cross. In His death and resurrection Christ Jesus has satisfied God's righteous demands. Even when our sinful nature drives us to sin He forgives us, quietly knocking at the door of our hearts and making His dwelling place within us.

There is much still to be done in this final week before Christmas. But don't let all the details crowd Jesus out of your heart. Remember, it's all for Him. Don't forget to set time aside to pray, to meditate, and to let Jesus come inside and prepare you for Christmas.

**THE PRAYER:** O holy Child of Bethlehem, Descend to us, we pray;

Cast out our sin, and enter in, Be born in us today.

We hear the Christmas angels The great glad tidings tell;

O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Immanuel!

## “BE PATIENT!”

Thursday, December 16

Read James 5:10-11.

**TEXT:** As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the Name of the Lord (James 5:10).

It was always about this point in December when I just knew I was going to crack under all the pressure. Christmas is still nine days away. Nine more days I have to be kind and courteous. Nine more days of not hitting my brothers even though they are really annoying me. And, of course, nine more days of trying to concentrate enough to finish school while remembering every line from the Christmas program! And if I crack and do something bad there's a good chance I'll find a lump of coal in my stocking and no presents under the tree. It's a terrible strain to be a kid nine days before Christmas!

Growing up doesn't remove the impatience from life, especially when we are suffering. And many people find the Christmas season actually seems to increase their suffering. These issues include sickness, depression, grief, and being misunderstood by the people we care about.

That's what happened to the prophets who spoke in God's Name before Christ came into this world. They warned the people of their sins, and they called them to turn and repent. But the people of Israel didn't want to hear what they had to say. They rejected God's messengers, mistreating them, beating them, imprisoning them, and even putting some of them to death.

Still the prophets faithfully warned the people about God's coming wrath and punishment. But Israel continued its stubborn rebellion. The prophets were ridiculed because their message didn't seem to be coming true.

But the prophets learned patience. Though they suffered they knew God was true. When His time was right, all their prophecies would come true—both the warnings God had given in patience and the promises of a Savior God had made in love for His people.

We can learn from their patience. Through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, God has given us many great promises. These include a final victory over sin, death, and hell and an eternal life with Him in the new heavens and the new earth. Christmas is a great reminder of God's faithfulness. He keeps every promise He makes.

God grant you patience through your sufferings, especially this Christmas.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord God, Your Word stands sure and certain forever. Let me never be discouraged but give me faith, confidence, and perseverance to always stand secure and certain in Your promises through Jesus Christ my Savior. In His Name I pray. Amen.

## STOLEN JOY

Friday, December 17

Read Matthew 11:2-6.

**TEXT:** Jesus replied, “Tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised and good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is he who is not offended by Me” (Matthew 11:4-5).

One of my Dad’s worst Christmases was in 1976. On the 21<sup>st</sup> of December he was on a step-ladder at church, trying to close a window that was stuck open. As he tugged on the window the ladder gave way; he smashed into the wall fracturing his shoulder in three places and cutting a deep gash into his shin. He spent that Christmas in agony sitting day and night in a chair in the living room, waiting for his shoulder to heal.

Do circumstances in your life ever steal away the joy of your Christmas? Do they raise doubts in your mind about the Child of Christmas—if He is really God’s Son? Do you ever wonder why there is still so much suffering in our lives and in our world if Jesus came to save the world? This Christmas many of you will find or still find yourself unemployed. Others have lost loved ones whose absence is keenly felt this time of year. Some have lost marriages. Some may even be facing the prospect that this will be their last Christmas on earth.

Similar thoughts darkened John the Baptist’s mind. He was locked in a dungeon because he had done exactly what the Lord commanded him to do: he had warned the wicked ruler Herod Antipas to repent. Like the prophets before him, he preached of judgment, but now John was the only one facing the judgment! There in the dark, gloomy dungeon John couldn’t see Jesus very clearly. He sent word to ask if Jesus was the One or should the people of Israel be looking for another.

Jesus reminded John of the very things He came into this world to do: giving sight to the blind, restoring the lame and the paralyzed, cleansing those with leprosy, restoring hearing to the deaf, raising the dead, and preaching good news to the poor. All of these were signs to prove Jesus was God’s Son. And at the same time they pointed ahead to the future when Jesus Christ will raise all the dead and change every living believer to enjoy perfect health in a perfect creation in God’s wonderful presence forever.

The Child of Christmas is here to comfort and help you through all your struggles, your doubts, your darkness, and your pain. He knows how hard it is when you are misunderstood, judged, and condemned. He was nailed to the cross because of the jealous rage of His enemies. But He rose again on the third day to remind us that God is the Victor, and through faith in Jesus Christ, God will share that great victory with each of us.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord Jesus, in those times when my spirit is in the darkness of despair lift me up. Forgive my sins, restore my joy, and strengthen my faith and trust in You. Give me patience until You bring relief. Amen.

## CHILDREN’S GAMES

Saturday, December 18

Read Matthew 11:7-15.

**TEXT:** From the days of John the Baptist until now the Kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force (Matthew 11:12).

Kids can be cruel—so can reindeer. It always bothered me as a kid when we got to that part about “all of the other reindeer used to laugh and call him names. They never let poor Rudolph join in any reindeer games.”

Children love to play games, especially when they can make up the rules. That’s the kind of world Jesus Christ lived in and the kind of world we live in. The Jewish leaders were like children. They didn’t like the way John the Baptist was so strong and fiery. When he ate locusts and wild honey and abstained from drinking wine it made them look bad. But they didn’t like what Jesus was doing either. That was because He was preaching the Good News. He was also feasting, drinking, and celebrating with sinners who came to repentance—sinners they had pushed away.

But Jesus wasn’t going to play their game. He played by God’s rules the same way John did. John’s deeds were from God. They showed us that we must turn from our sins and put our trust in Jesus Christ alone. And Jesus’ deeds were from God too. They showed us God’s mercy and love for all those devastated by sin and death.

The things Jesus did, especially in His suffering, death, and glorious resurrection, proved He was the mighty Son of God. When we live according to God’s design—repenting of our sins, trusting in His forgiveness through Jesus Christ, and sharing His love with the world—we will be misjudged, mocked, and ridiculed by the *children* around us. But God knows, and in the end He will prove us right through Jesus Christ our Lord.

God has helped us see this world as adults, so just like the prophets and John and Jesus we can remain calm and strong even when we are falsely accused and viciously attacked. We know in His good time God will vindicate us from all false accusations.

**THE PRAYER:** Lord God, comfort and uphold us when those around us play their children’s games. Help us be strong and mature in Jesus Christ our Savior so that we may keep showing the world Your love and grace. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.