

ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

2017

# Connections

*An Advent Devotional Collaboration between  
Ascension Lutheran Church, Grace Lutheran  
Church, Prince of Peace Lutheran Church and  
Christ the King Lutheran Church  
ELCA*

## ASCENSION LUTHERAN CHURCH

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*A Community of Grace, Called to Serve*

The following Advent devotional is a collaborative effort between four ELCA congregations in Co. Springs, including; Ascension Lutheran Church, Grace Lutheran Church, Prince of Peace Lutheran Church and Christ the King Lutheran Church. We are grateful to be brothers and sisters in Christ and able to connect in efforts such as this Advent Devotional. May God bless us in this season of Advent as we wait together in hopeful anticipation of our Savior's birth!

*Sincerely,*  
Deacon Mary Stoneback  
Ascension Lutheran Church

### **ADVENT & CHRISTMAS WORSHIP SCHEDULE @ ALC**

December 10 – 8:00 and 10:30 am  
Advent 2 – Children's Christmas Program  
December 17 – 8:00 and 10:30 am  
Advent 3 – Cantata  
December 24 – 8:00 and 10:30 am  
Advent 4 – Lessons and Carols  
December 24 – 4:00, 6:00, and 8:00 pm  
Christmas Eve Candlelight Worship

### **JOIN US @ GRACE**

Wednesday Mid-Week Gatherings through Dec. 20th  
5:30 pm – Soup  
6:15 pm – Worship Service  
Longest Night Service – Thursday Dec. 21, 7:00 pm  
December 24 – 9:00 am & Christmas Eve Service, 5:00 pm

### **JOIN US @ CHRIST THE KING**

Tuesday Gatherings starting Dec. 5 - Dec. 19th  
6:00 pm – Soup  
6:30 pm – Bible Study (ELCA World Hunger Advent Bible Study)  
December 24 - 9:30 am worship & Christmas Eve Service, 5:00 pm

### **JOIN US @ PRINCE OF PEACE**

December 24 - 9:30 am & Christmas Eve Candlelight Worship, 7:00 pm

## First Sunday of Advent – December 3

*Isaiah 64:1-9*

*<sup>4</sup> From ages past no one has heard,  
no ear has perceived,  
no eye has seen any God besides you,  
who works for those who wait for him.  
<sup>5</sup> You meet those who gladly do right,  
those who remember you in your ways.  
But you were angry, and we sinned;  
because you hid yourself we transgressed.<sup>[b]</sup>  
<sup>6</sup> We have all become like one who is unclean,  
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.  
We all fade like a leaf,  
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.  
<sup>7</sup> There is no one who calls on your name,  
or attempts to take hold of you;  
for you have hidden your face from us,  
and have delivered<sup>[c]</sup> us into the hand of our iniquity.  
<sup>8</sup> Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;  
we are the clay, and you are our potter;  
we are all the work of your hand.  
<sup>9</sup> Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,  
and do not remember iniquity forever.  
Now consider, we are all your people.*

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Isaiah 64:1-9 speaks to me about requests, lamentations, and patience. This message and its tone aligns with what many of us experience during the Advent Season. It is indeed a time of reflection, introspection, and strengthening of our faith; both individually and collectively. We begin by acknowledging God's supreme power in all things and ask that He makes his presence known to all. In our lamentation, we ask that God also continue to

care for all of us. We extend praise for His work in us and recognize that we must wait for Him.

Certainly, God will take care of the righteous; but what about the guilty? The deeds of the righteous are drawn from divine goodness. Those that are among the guilty are absent from God and will commit sins. In our absence from God, all of us must confess our culpability. It is not that God has hidden his face; but rather that we have failed to seek God. We are then compelled to make a final request of God; that His memory of our guilt not last forever.

As we approach Advent, it is time for us to all admit our shortcomings in seeking God. Only He will bring the healing that is so commonly sought after in the Advent Season.

~Jerry V. Dollar  
Ascension Lutheran Church

## Monday, First Week of Advent – December 4

*Psalm 80:1-7*

*<sup>3</sup> Restore us, O God;*

*let your face shine, that we may be saved.*

*<sup>4</sup> O LORD God of hosts,*

*how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?*

*<sup>5</sup> You have fed them with the bread of tears,  
and given them tears to drink in full measure.*

*<sup>6</sup> You make us the scorn<sup>[a]</sup> of our neighbors;  
our enemies laugh among themselves.*

*<sup>7</sup> Restore us, O God of hosts;  
let your face shine, that we may be saved.*

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I remember a star-studded night this past summer in the San Luis Valley near The Great Sand Dunes. In the middle of the night, it was completely dark except for the light of millions of

stars overhead. No city lights. No cars. Just stars shining, galaxies of them!

Once, long ago, God took Abram out under the stars and asked him to try counting them. “So shall your descendants be.” It can be hard to wait for promises to be fulfilled. When life seems to fall apart, our enemies taunt us, “where is your God now?” And we wonder how long God’s anger will burn. Are these tears all that our prayers will produce? “Give us life and we shall call upon your name.” I see and hear Christ’s name desecrated every day. Our neighbors look elsewhere for hope. We struggle to carry his word of life to our children- the babes we have marked with his cross to be counted as God’s children forever. And we wonder, “When will the Shepherd appear in the heavens and save us?”

*Lord, draw us out under your stars again and fill our ears with echoes of your promise as our faces reflect the light of your glory, as we call upon your name with those depleted of hope. Amen.*

~Pastor Paula Stecker  
Christ the King Lutheran Church

## **Tuesday, First Week of Advent – December 5**

*1 Corinthians 1:3-9*

<sup>3</sup> *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

<sup>4</sup> *I give thanks to my<sup>[a]</sup> God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, <sup>5</sup> for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— <sup>6</sup> just as the testimony of<sup>[b]</sup> Christ has been strengthened among you— <sup>7</sup> so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>8</sup> He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day*

*of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup> God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

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Paul writes in his verse 3: *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.* This sentiment is what makes me a Lutheran: to know that I am saved by grace and that I am in a fellowship with Christ. Fellowship is sharing. We share our time, our resources and the gifts that God has given us. I am the daughter of an immigrant from Austria (my father). We were not wealthy, by any means, and my parents worked very hard to support three children. They showed me that hard work is rewarding, and I had my first job at 14 working in a laundry where people dropped off their dirty clothes and we washed and folded them. I had hoped to go to nursing school after graduation from High School, but my parents had saved enough money for me to go to business school instead.

Fortunately, God has blessed me throughout my life with many mentors: men and women who took the time to share *their* knowledge and education with me and I took advantage of all the free education I could find. My husband and I were blessed with three wonderful and talented children and my faith in God and the love and support of my family and friends helped me through the loss of my husband and oldest son. I now await the birth of a third great-grandchild. God is faithful, caring and I am thankful!

*Thank you, Lord for your faithfulness and your blessings. Thank you for my family and friends and the fellowship we share with one another. Thank you for the strength, resources and spiritual gifts you have given me to enable me to share your goodness with others. Amen.*

~Karleen Cotton  
Grace Lutheran Church



*By Megan Johnson, Ascension Lutheran Church*

## **Wednesday, First Week of Advent – December 6**

*Mark 13:24-37*

*<sup>26</sup> Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. <sup>27</sup> Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven....<sup>32</sup> “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>33</sup> Beware, keep alert;<sup>[b]</sup> for you do not know when the time will come. <sup>34</sup> It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. <sup>35</sup> Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, <sup>36</sup> or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. <sup>37</sup> And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”*

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We are an impatient society. Evidence abounds: red-light runners, road rage, long holiday shopping check-out lines that make us weary. Our impatience runs yet deeper too. We hunger for solutions to social problems like the pervasive, seemingly hopeless evil of gun violence in our country. At times, it seems our society has never improved from Biblical times when Mark noted even “the powers in the heavens will be shaken.” Our souls yearn for ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. We wish to believe the glorious promise of God loving us enough to come back and rescue us and our world, yet as human beings we really are not very good at waiting.

The Good News here, lies in the fact that Mark invites us to change our point of view, to focus always on life as noted in the fig tree lesson. He asks us to go beyond waiting and impatience into an attitude of watchfulness. Mark asks us to be awake and aware, to enter into a working relationship with God in which we as followers of Jesus are miraculously trusted to help bring about His abundant redemptive grace.

What is meant by watchfulness? My wife Jan and I know that when we are called upon to come “watch” the grandkids, far more than passive observation is required. We are called into active presence, bringing with us the face, the voice, the attitude of Christlike love at times these precious ones are entrusted to us. There are always surprises, lessons, rewards for such interaction. Bonding occurs. Love abounds. Christ is present.

In our everyday lives, as followers of Jesus, we are invited, entrusted to become watchful. He calls us to be actively aware of other's needs, discerning ways we may become instruments of His love and peace. Watchfulness leads to Christ-like responsiveness as we become engaged in active service and witness to Him who is coming, who is already here, who died for our sins and promises to return.

As a good grandparent who eagerly, joyfully anticipates that call to come “watch the kids,” we must remain awake and ready, willing to serve at a moment’s notice, trusting that Christ will use us, strengthen us, enrich us and those whom we serve with His abundant love.

*Come, Lord Jesus! Make us instruments of your peace and love.  
Keep us ever watchful and wakeful as we observe the needs of  
others, responsive with the joy and the healing power of your love.  
Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.*

~Dan Joslin

Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, Colorado Springs, CO



*By Timothy Coltrin, Ascension Lutheran Church*

**Thursday, First Week of Advent – December 7**

*Psalm 85:8-13*

*<sup>8</sup> Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,  
for he will speak peace to his people,  
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.<sup>[a]</sup>  
<sup>9</sup> Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,  
that his glory may dwell in our land.*

- <sup>10</sup> Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;  
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.  
<sup>11</sup> Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,  
and righteousness will look down from the sky.  
<sup>12</sup> The LORD will give what is good,  
and our land will yield its increase.  
<sup>13</sup> Righteousness will go before him,  
and will make a path for his steps.*

## **Friday, First Week of Advent – December 8**

*Jeremiah 1:4-10*

- <sup>4</sup> Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,  
<sup>5</sup> “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,  
and before you were born I consecrated you;  
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”  
<sup>6</sup> Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak,  
for I am only a boy.” <sup>7</sup> But the LORD said to me,  
“Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’;  
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,  
and you shall speak whatever I command you.  
<sup>8</sup> Do not be afraid of them,  
for I am with you to deliver you,  
says the LORD.”  
<sup>9</sup> Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and  
the LORD said to me,  
“Now I have put my words in your mouth.  
<sup>10</sup> See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,  
to pluck up and to pull down,  
to destroy and to overthrow,  
to build and to plant.”*
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Nearly two years ago, at age 60, I was anxiously looking for a new job. Two excellent opportunities soon presented. Although I was the preferred candidate and finalist for one of the positions, I was still without work three months later. At month five, I was asked to direct a project to serve 35,000 orphans and vulnerable children because of HIV, in Cameroon.

After 16 months, I had decided to return to the US with no assurance of a next job. However, I returned with two convictions: 1) God knows me—"before I formed you in the womb, I knew you..." And, 2) I have always believed that I am sent by God, and therefore, "do not be afraid."

God knows I am not ready to retire. He knows my skills, strengths, weaknesses, and desire to serve as a witness to his goodness. I also cling to another promise he made to Jeremiah: "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" (*Jer. 29:11*). God knows me, and has plans for me! I await fulfillment of these promises.

*Lord, be with us in our seasons of anxiousness, knowing that you know us, send us, and have plans for us. Help us as wait the fulfilment of your wonderful promises! Amen.*

~Carl C. Stecker, Yaoundé, Cameroon  
Christ the King Lutheran Church, Colorado Springs

## **Saturday, First Week of Advent – December 9**

*Ezekiel 36:24-28*

*<sup>24</sup> I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. <sup>25</sup> I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. <sup>26</sup> A new*

*heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. <sup>28</sup> Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.*

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In the Army walking is a way of life, I would take a fifty-pound rucksack put it on my back and walk until someone charge told me to stop. I always used these walks to reflect on life, trying to understand my purpose and making every effort to ignore the fact we still had hours of walking ahead of us. When we would finally be finished, my body would ache from head to toe, I'd be drenched in sweat and, my feet would be covered in blisters. Even though with my physical body was in despair, my heart and mind felt renewed. This was because during my time walking I'd pray and talk with God. God's promise of cleansing and renewal is not of the physical body but, of the spirit and sometimes it just talks a long walk to realize it.

*Dear Lord, renew our spirits as we walk with you. Cleanse our hearts and minds to see beyond our own wants. Continue to lead us down your path, until one day we may be clean enough to dwell with you in the Kingdom of Heaven. Amen.*

~Joseph Schmidt  
Grace Lutheran Church.

## **Second Sunday of Advent – December 10**

*Mark 1:1-8*

*I The beginning of the good news<sup>[a]</sup> of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.<sup>[b]</sup>*

*<sup>2</sup> As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,<sup>[c]</sup>*

*“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,<sup>[d]</sup>  
who will prepare your way;*

*<sup>3</sup> the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight,’”*

*<sup>4</sup> John the baptizer appeared<sup>[e]</sup> in the wilderness, proclaiming a  
baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> And people  
from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem  
were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river  
Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup> Now John was clothed with camel’s  
hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and  
wild honey. <sup>7</sup> He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than  
I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the  
thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup> I have baptized you with<sup>[f]</sup> water; but he will  
baptize you with<sup>[g]</sup> the Holy Spirit.”*

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Since most of us were baptized as infants, we do not remember the experience. Our knowledge of that special occasion comes from pictures and stories told to us by family and friends about those in attendance, the cute outfit worn, and our reaction to drops of water on our head. As adults we have the privilege of reliving this event through the baptism of infants and children in our congregation.

One heartwarming baptism in my church family was that of a baby girl who started her life in the NICU and began attending church connected to oxygen. As her parents, sisters, brother, and grandparents gathered around the baptismal font, all the children present that day got up slowly, quietly moved closer. These little ones literally heard, felt and acted on the invitation, “Let the children come unto me.” They wanted to share in the joy of welcoming this baby girl into the Kingdom of God. Now, this once fragile little child of God is first one to rise and boldly approach the communion table with her family. Baptism, both literally and spiritually, MOVES US to God.

Each baptism reminds us that God loves us no matter what!  
– No matter what we do; no matter what we don't do; no matter  
what we say or don't say.

*Heavenly Father, thank you for loving us and caring for us always.  
Help us remember your forgiveness of our sins, even when we do  
not ask. We are blessed to be part of your Kingdom, now and  
always.*

~Janice Schultz  
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church

## **Monday, Second Week of Advent – December 11**

*Isaiah 40:1-11 (The Voice Version)*

*<sup>9</sup> Ascend a high mountain,  
you herald of good tidings, O Zion;  
With a clear, strong voice make known to everyone  
the joy that belongs to God's chosen place,  
O, Jerusalem, You herald of good tidings!  
Make the news ring out! Don't be afraid!  
Say to these cities, this Judah: "Behold your God!"  
<sup>10</sup> The Lord, the Eternal, comes with power,  
with unstoppable might;  
He will take control without question or delay.  
He will see to it that wages are paid,  
repairs are made, and all is set right again.  
<sup>11</sup> He will feed His fold like a shepherd;  
He will gather together His lambs—the weak and the wobbly  
ones—into His arms.  
He will carry them close to His bosom,  
and tenderly lead like a shepherd the mother of her lambs.*

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When I read through this Scripture passage, I was drawn to verses 9-11. The world *herald* stirred up the well-known hymn, “Hark the Herald Angels Sing”. As I continued to hum the tune and read through the passage I considered the ways we *herald* God’s birth in our own lives. Granted I work in the Church so talking about God is a regular occurrence, yet, regardless of one’s vocation *heralding* the Good News is very much a call to each and every one of us. In this season of waiting, may you be encouraged to live out your faith. Don’t let the word *herald* catch you up. It’s not about taking a megaphone to the streets, or maybe it is, especially if it’s in sharing words of love and gentle kindness with others. It’s an invitation to give voice, whether in the words we speak to others or our actions each day, to what God is up to in our lives. It is as simple as taking the time to listen to someone or share in a meal with a friend or give of your bounty to those in need. So...*O, [people of God], You herald of good tidings! Make the news ring out! Don’t be afraid! Say to [one another]: “Behold your God!”*

*Living God, we pray for courage and willing hearts in this season of Advent to give voice to Your birth wherever we find ourselves; our schools, work places, the hospitals and nursing homes, airports and shopping lines. Open up opportunities that we may share of your love and mercy in creative ways through our gifts, our time and our voice. Amen.*

~Deacon Mary Stoneback  
Ascension Lutheran Church

**Tuesday, Second Week of Advent – December 12**

*Psalm 27*

*The LORD is my light and my salvation;  
whom shall I fear?  
The LORD is the stronghold<sup>[a]</sup> of my life;  
of whom shall I be afraid?*

*<sup>13</sup> I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD  
in the land of the living.*

*<sup>14</sup> Wait for the LORD;  
be strong, and let your heart take courage;  
wait for the LORD!*

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Psalm 27 is a song of confidence amidst adversity. That's important to me this season because confident is something that I am not. For me this is a season of fear - while others are doing their Advent devotions, and their Christmas shopping, I will, God willing, be recovering from open heart surgery. Yep, I'm terrified. And I think David was too.

He starts the psalm saying, "Whom shall I fear?". He tells us that enemies are all around him. That's how I feel right now too. And even the rational knowledge that they are not hulking Goliaths with sharp swords but instead dedicated doctors and nurses with scalpels and needles doesn't change the image in my head of being besieged by people trying to kill me. Death is a very real possible outcome of my surgery. I want to run away, but instead I must walk calmly into the fray. Worst of all, I must be passive while others take up the battle for my life.

The last lines of the psalm are what I am taking with me into the operating room. "I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord *in the land of the living*. Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage."

~Mem Morman  
Christ the King Lutheran Church

## Wednesday, Second Week of Advent – December 13

*Luke 1:5-17*

*<sup>7</sup> But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.*

*<sup>8</sup> Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, <sup>9</sup> he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. <sup>10</sup> Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. <sup>11</sup> Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup> When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. <sup>13</sup> But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. <sup>14</sup> You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, <sup>15</sup> for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.*

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Luke 1:5-17 is a story about a priest named Zacharias and how by an angel of the lord, he was told of the coming birth of his son. v13 “Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.” And verse 7, “Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years.” let’s us know they were in there golden years. I can sense the expectation; the waiting, both Zacharias and Elizabeth must have felt.

I had a similar expectation; waiting. It was when I had lost my job. I was getting antsy about finding work; I had a young family of 4 to take care of. I could usually get a job quickly however it had been about 30 days since I last worked. I was in my shop working very late one night. At about 11 pm, out of the blue, I received a call from a good friend of mine that I used to work with, and he had a job opportunity. The catch was, the job was in

Saudi Arabia and I would need to temporarily leave Cathie and the kids behind. Dear God, what should I do? After prayerfully speaking to God to either open or close the doors of opportunities; I took the job. All doors were opened and things were happening very quickly. So quickly, we could not believe how fast God’s plan could work. Within a month, I was gone. That experience had been sufficient enough to provide me with a life time career.

*Most understanding God, thank you for granting us our prayers.  
Thank you Lord for patience, for when I thought you did not hear  
me; you opened all doors.*

~Randy White  
Grace Lutheran Church

### **Thursday, Second Week of Advent – December 14**

*Habakkuk 2:1-4*

3 For the revelation awaits an appointed time;  
it speaks of the end  
and will not prove false.  
Though it linger, wait for it;  
it [c] will certainly come  
and will not delay.

4 “See, the enemy is puffed up;  
his desires are not upright—  
but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness [d] —

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*A Lesson in Waiting:* We live in a cultural that is always pushing things before their time. Whether it is putting up Christmas decoration or black Friday prices we seem to not be able to wait and do things in their appropriate time. As we celebrate the

season of Advent I pray we learn the discipline of waiting. I had an experience when I was first in Saudi Arabia. This passage reminded of that experience. I had been in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for about three months and my wife's visa had arrived. I planned to meet her in London. At that time the process involved handing in your passport to get an exit permit.

This essential document would appear on an easel prior to check-in. I was traveling with a couple of colleagues. One was an old hand in the kingdom. I was of course extremely anxious as we were waiting for our passports to appear. Perhaps the men in charge sensing my anxiety exercised their control by going slow with the return of the passports. In the midst of this tense situation for me, my friend suggested the three of us go get a cup of coffee in a nearby snack area. I thought he was crazy, but went along anyway. We enjoyed our coffee and came back in time for our flight and our passports were waiting for us. Verse 4 seems to speak directly to me to learn the art of waiting. The process of Advent is the time to learn and appreciate the art of waiting.

*Dear Lord, help to us to understand and learn the blessing of  
waiting.  
Amen*

~Gary Gabrielson  
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church

## **Friday, Second Week of Advent – December 15**

*Philippians 3:12-16*

<sup>12</sup> *Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal;*<sup>[a]</sup> *but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.* <sup>13</sup> *Beloved,*<sup>[b]</sup> *I do not consider that I have made it my own;*<sup>[c]</sup> *but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,* <sup>14</sup> *I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly*<sup>[d]</sup> *call of God in Christ Jesus.* <sup>15</sup> *Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind;*

*and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. <sup>16</sup> Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.*

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We seek to know God, to love God, to lead the life God wants for us. This requires a lot of energy. And Paul exhorts us to “press on” whenever we become exhausted or discouraged.

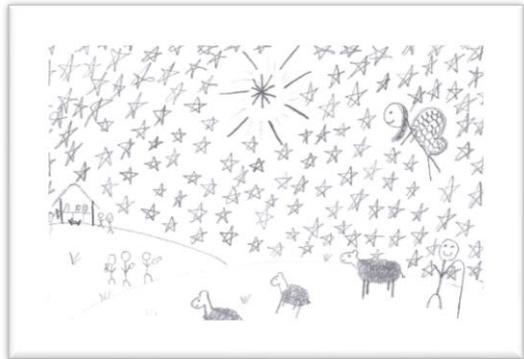
Sometimes when the world, or at least my life, seems to be in disarray, it is so hard to lead the kind of life God wants for me. I feel downhearted and discouraged, even helpless. I don’t have the energy, or the will, to “press on.”

But Paul assures us that when that happens, God will remind us of our goal to know God in Christ Jesus.

And isn’t Advent just that? It is God’s way of reminding us of what is to come—God’s greatest gift to us, our invitation to heaven. So instead of wallowing in despair, we wait with anticipation, hope, and renewed energy.

*Dear Lord, thank you for your constant love, even when we feel we feel tired and unworthy. Thank you for sending us your Son to show us the way and invite us to heaven. Amen.*

~Leslie Giordano  
Ascension Lutheran Church



*By Karissa Kocourek, Ascension Lutheran Church*

## Saturday, Second Week of Advent – December 16

*John 1:6-8, 19-28*

*<sup>6</sup> There was a man sent from God whose name was John. <sup>7</sup> He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. <sup>8</sup> He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.*

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The hymnist, James Lewis Milligan, wrote, “There’s a voice in the wilderness crying, A call from the ways untrod: Prepare in the desert a highway, a highway for our God! The valleys shall be exalted, the lofty hills brought low: Make straight all the crooked places where God, our God, may go!”

Where are the places in your existence that need to be straightened today, in a way that will permit the breath of life to enter and enliven as never before? Like dusty old boxes in the attic, there can be corners in our lives that wait impatiently to be cleared out or re-opened. Take your questions and your unresolved chapters of life to a quiet spot today and revisit them. Create a space for joy.

*God, you go before and after us. There is nowhere we can hide from you. And yet, you wait for us to invite you into our hearts. Come into our hearts, Lord Jesus. Amen.*

Pastor Paula Stecker  
Christ the King Lutheran Church

## Third Sunday of Advent – December 17

*Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11*

<sup>1</sup> *The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,  
because the LORD has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim freedom for the captives  
and release from darkness for the prisoners,<sup>[a]</sup>*

<sup>2</sup> *to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor  
and the day of vengeance of our God,  
to comfort all who mourn,*

<sup>3</sup> *and provide for those who grieve in Zion—  
to bestow on them a crown of beauty  
instead of ashes,  
the oil of joy  
instead of mourning,  
and a garment of praise  
instead of a spirit of despair.*

*They will be called oaks of righteousness,  
a planting of the LORD  
for the display of his splendor.*

<sup>4</sup> *They will rebuild the ancient ruins  
and restore the places long devastated;  
they will renew the ruined cities  
that have been devastated for generations.*

<sup>8</sup> *“For I, the LORD, love justice;  
I hate robbery and wrongdoing.*

*In my faithfulness I will reward my people  
and make an everlasting covenant with them.*

<sup>9</sup> *Their descendants will be known among the nations  
and their offspring among the peoples.*

*All who see them will acknowledge  
that they are a people the LORD has blessed.”*

*<sup>10</sup> I delight greatly in the LORD;  
my soul rejoices in my God.  
For he has clothed me with garments of salvation  
and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness,  
as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest,  
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.  
<sup>11</sup> For as the soil makes the sprout come up  
and a garden causes seeds to grow,  
so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness  
and praise spring up before all nations.*

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The prophet Isaiah begins this chapter with a summary of human yearnings:

*We want to hear good news.  
We want to our broken hearts to be healed.  
We want to be liberated from all that enslaves us.  
We want to be comforted in our mourning.  
We want our ruined culture to be rebuilt.*

But the reality of our lives is all too often the opposite of our yearnings:

*Our efforts fail.  
Our yearnings are thwarted.  
Our hopes are disappointed.*

In those failures and disappointments, we come to wonder whether our yearnings were just delusions, bound to mislead us into thinking true life is possible. In our doubts and despair, the Gospel message to us can be summarized in two brief sentences: Christ is born. Christ is risen.

Christ is born. With Christ's birth, God is with us. And His being with us is always being for us, even being one of us. With

Christ, Isaiah's prophecy becomes true (Luke 4: 21). Christ is risen. Christ has destroyed death, the last and ultimate enemy of all that we have yearned for. Our yearnings for this life become fulfilled in the life He gives us.

*Lord, may our yearnings find their fulfillment in you. Amen.*

~Richard Nehring  
Grace Lutheran Church

## **Monday, Third Week of Advent – December 18**

### *Psalm 126*

<sup>1</sup> *When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,<sup>[a]</sup>  
we were like those who dream.*

<sup>2</sup> *Then our mouth was filled with laughter,  
and our tongue with shouts of joy;  
then it was said among the nations,  
“The LORD has done great things for them.”*

<sup>3</sup> *The LORD has done great things for us,  
and we rejoiced.*

<sup>4</sup> *Restore our fortunes, O LORD,  
like the watercourses in the Negeb.*

<sup>5</sup> *May those who sow in tears  
reap with shouts of joy.*

<sup>6</sup> *Those who go out weeping,  
bearing the seed for sowing,  
shall come home with shouts of joy,  
carrying their sheaves.*

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This passage reflects my compassion for refugees. When Russia invaded Poland, my maternal grandparents fled to Germany with their two daughters. The dream of planting seeds and

freedom, out-weighed their heavy hearts of leaving family and community. My mother was the first child to be born in Germany. The joy of their new addition was short lived. The Nazi party soon occupied their town. My grandfather was approached by two Nazi soldiers and asked to Heil Hitler, by refusing they killed him. My mother was three months old. My grandmother was arrested many times for not marching with the party thru the town streets. Facing grave danger, deep despair, and surrounded by massive killings, she took her three daughters to a bridge planning to throw each one over and then herself. She could not pursue this suicide mission.

More than a decade later, my grandmother married a refugee from Hungary. "They weep as they go to plant their seed, but they sing as they return with harvest" For years my grandmother and Aunts brought their "harvest" of money, clothing and food to the few surviving members of our family, who survived suppression in Poland.

*Lord, open our hearts with compassion for refugees. Amen.*

~Joan Su'e  
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church

## **Tuesday, Third Week of Advent – December 19**

*1 Thessalonians 5:16-24*

*<sup>16</sup> Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup> pray without ceasing, <sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. <sup>19</sup> Do not quench the Spirit. <sup>20</sup> Do not despise the words of prophets,<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>21</sup> but test everything; hold fast to what is good; <sup>22</sup> abstain from every form of evil.*

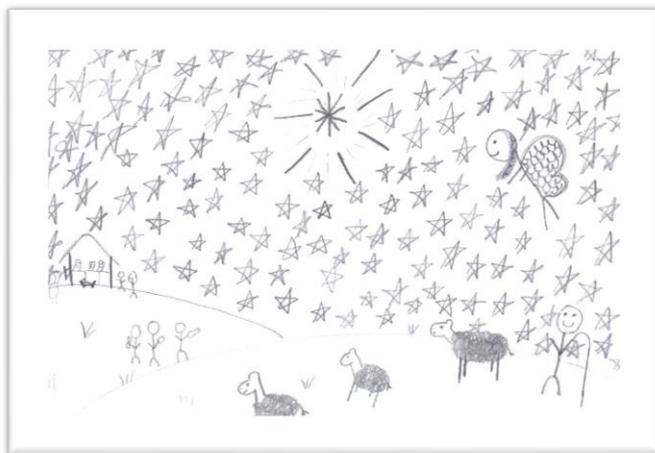
*<sup>23</sup> May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound<sup>[b]</sup> and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup> The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.*

I believe that most scripture can be interpreted in a simple, or easy, way so God can get it through. This passage gives us, as Christians, clear and direct instructions. The first five words “rejoice always, pray without ceasing” are echoed throughout the Bible. Everyone, young or old, scholarly or not, can understand these actions. The problem comes when we have to actually do these things. As humans, we are imperfect and machines for mistakes, and these instructions leave a lot of space for failure. Especially after Thanksgiving, the idea of giving thanks in all circumstances seems even more daunting.

When I went to visit my grandpa, I was grateful for him and for a fun and relaxing vacation that I got to have. How am I supposed to be as grateful for homework or an extreme lack of sleep? Constant gratefulness is extremely challenging, but all we can do, as Christians, is an attempt to follow God’s instructions, and trust in Him. God promises us that we will be loved and saved and the conclusion of this passage reminds me that Jesus’ faith in us is eternal, and a strong faith will aid us when we struggle to maintain God’s will.

*God, Please keep reminding us daily that you are with us, and remind us to “rejoice always and pray without ceasing.” Bless us and continue to give us things every day to be grateful for. Command us in the name of your Son our Lord and help us to live our best lives in you. When we fall down God, pick us up, and renew in us our faith every day. Amen*

~Mikayla Britsch  
Ascension Lutheran Church



*By Katarina Kocourek, Ascension Lutheran Church*

### **Wednesday, Third Week of Advent – December 20**

*Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26*

*1-4: I will sing of thy steadfast love, O Lord, forever; with my mouth, I will proclaim thy faithfulness to all generations. For thy steadfast love was established forever, thy faithfulness is firm as the heavens. Thou hast said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David, my servant. I will establish your descendants forever and build your throne for all generations." 19-26: Of old thou didst speak in a vision to thy faithful one, and say: "I have set the crown upon one who is mighty. I have exalted one chosen from the people. I have found David, my servant; with my oil I have anointed him; so that my hand shall ever abide with him, my arm also shall strengthen him. The enemy shall not outwit him, the wicked shall not humble him. I will crush his foes before him and strike down those who hate him. My faithfulness and my steadfast love shall be with him, and in my name, shall his horn be exalted. I will set his hand on the sea and his right hand on the rivers. He shall cry to me, "Thou art my father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation.""*

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Covenants, Steadfast Love, Faithfulness: When have we elected to enter into a covenant with another person or party in the civic sense? Perhaps we think of the HOA covenant with its communal terms. Do these covenants establish relations, build community, or maybe define what's neighborly? If we flinch at the prospects of freely binding ourselves relationally to such a tenuous covenant, Psalm 89 recuperates covenant by reassuring us of the steadfast love that is firmly fixed in place as God's promise to His people. Further, faithfulness is a characteristic of God's nature, a constancy in His relations with His people. He is constant or faithful in keeping His covenant promises.

*Today we give thanks for the faithfulness of God the father, who made His covenant and kept His promise: the promise of Jesus the Messiah, whose birth we await in reciprocal trust and steadfast faith. We celebrate our conviction that in Jesus, God's steadfast love is secured forever. Amen.*

~Debra Frank Dew  
Christ the King Lutheran Church

## **Thursday, Third Week of Advent – December 21**

*Luke 1:26-38*

*<sup>28</sup> And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."<sup>[a]</sup><sup>29</sup> But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. <sup>33</sup> He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."*

When I read this passage, I hear these words to Mary, but also to me. “Greetings you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.” Yes, I am blessed beyond measure and I am aware of God’s presence in my life, each and every day (well usually). Mary was “greatly troubled” and wondered what was coming. And then she was told that she was to bear a son, and name him Jesus. A surprise or more probably a great, great shock. “How can this be?” How often I have said those words about things in my life and certainly about events in our world. But then, thank goodness I hear the words of the angel, “The Holy spirit will come upon you and the Most High will overshadow you” Wow, what a promise!!

Surprises, most often happy ones and shocks, usually negative and stressful come to each of us. Hopefully, we can say, as Mary did, “I am the Lord’s servant” and feel in our inmost being the presence of the Holy Spirit, and know with assurance that God is with us in ALL circumstances.

*God, our sustainer in all of life, help us to know that amidst the surprises and shocks of this life that you are always with us.*

~Jean Magnuson  
Grace Lutheran Church

## **Friday, Third Week of Advent – December 22**

*Luke 1:39-45*

*<sup>39</sup> In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, <sup>40</sup> where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit <sup>42</sup> and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. <sup>43</sup> And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? <sup>44</sup> For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb*

*leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup> And blessed is she who believed that there would be<sup>[a]</sup> a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”*

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Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Did you know that when I ask people who was or is the most influential person in their faith development and journey, the response I most often hear is that their faith has been shaped by a mother, a grandmother, an aunt, a sister, or a female friend? We are a part of a wonderful realization by Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, & Mary the mother of Jesus, that they are going to be very influential women in the lives of their children. Joy to the World.

As the baby in Elizabeth’s womb leaped, I’m willing to guess for joy, Elizabeth herself was filled with an adrenaline rush that caused her to speak God’s praises. Elizabeth’s words of praise may have been the catalyst for her coming son to be the prophetic voice crying out in the wilderness. Elizabeth is also amazed to see Mary’s trust in the angel’s message about her pregnancy.

Not only do we celebrate Elizabeth’s joy, especially in the coming of our Savior, but we also offer thanksgiving for the way people have empowered our faith. This year also marks the 47th anniversary year of women’s ordination in the ELCA. Since that time, over 4,000 women have been ordained into the ministry of Word & Sacrament. Our church has been blessed with extraordinary and gifted women as they have shared their testimonies & thanksgiving to the greatness of God.

Thanks be to God for gift of influential people in our faith lives, thanks be to God for the gift of women in our faith lives and thanks be to God for the opportunity to hear Elizabeth’s words of thanksgiving. Joy to the World.

~Pastor Dave Cruson  
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church

**Saturday, Third Week of Advent – December 23**

*Luke 1:46-55*

*46 And Mary<sup>[a]</sup> said,*

*“My soul magnifies the Lord,*

*47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,*

*48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.*

*Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;*

*49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.*

*50 His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.*

*51 He has shown strength with his arm;*

*he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.*

*52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;*

*53 he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.*

*54 He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,*

*55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”*

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Can you remember a time when you were overwhelmed by God’s presence in your life? How did you respond? Mary’s response might be unexpected, and even remarkable. Mary, a young Jewish girl, must have been excited about her upcoming marriage to Joseph. She must have been planning her wedding, thinking about her new home and even future children—all the possibilities of her life with Joseph. Then, suddenly, without any warning or preparation, Gabriel arrived with an astonishing message from the LORD: Mary, you are blessed by God for you have been chosen to bear His Son, the long-awaited Messiah of Israel. How must she have felt? Afraid? Shocked? Incredulous?

Mary's first response was very practical: I have never been with a man. How can I be pregnant? But, almost immediately she received Gabriel's message and in humility accepted God's Will for her life. What an example of faith and trust in God! Now with time to reflect, while visiting her cousin Elizabeth, John's mother, Mary is overwhelmed. As she ponders all these things that have and will happen in her life, her heart overflows with joy. Her song of praise is a wonderful example of how we too can rejoice in God's love and grace in our lives, accepting His blessings and humbly using His gifts to praise and serve Him. Great is God's faithfulness, then and now!

~Rich & Judy Heeren  
Ascension Lutheran Church

## **Sunday of Christmas Week - December 24 – Christmas Eve**

*Luke 2:1-20*

*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup> This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup> All went to their own towns to be registered. <sup>4</sup> Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. <sup>5</sup> He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup> While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup> And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

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The more I study the Bible the more amazed I am at God's unconditional love for us. God wants all humans to say yes to his offer of eternal life in heaven with him and Jesus Christ. The God we envision every day is way too small and limited by our

perceptions of righteousness and forgiveness. Sometimes it takes expanding our minds to understand the vastness of His heart.

*Luke 2.1-20 – A Poem*

The Story that set Mankind free - even from death.

The Hebrews need a warrior leader to overthrow the Romans and became King.

But.

God, the Creator of the Universe and all that is, sends his son to us as a lowly

illegitimate peasant child, just another simple human.

And the only dignitaries invited are a bunch of grubby shepherds from the countryside

and three Gentile Kings from a different religion and region.

Why?

Because...

Rulers are temporary, never set anyone free, and  
Jesus came to change All Mankind not just men of his time.

Dear Lord,

Open up the shutters to my heart & mind  
To comprehend your word as you spoke it  
To see others as you see them  
To understand others as you understand them

And

Inspire me to bring a small piece of your joy to their world  
As you bring great joy to mine.

~Charles B. Sides  
Christ the King Lutheran Church

## Monday of Christmas Week – December 25 – Christmas Day

*John 1:1-14*

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup> in him was life,<sup>[a]</sup> and the life was the light of all people. <sup>5</sup> The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

*<sup>6</sup> There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup> He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup> He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. <sup>9</sup> The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.<sup>[b]</sup>*

*<sup>10</sup> He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. <sup>11</sup> He came to what was his own,<sup>[c]</sup> and his own people did not accept him. <sup>12</sup> But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, <sup>13</sup> who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.*

*<sup>14</sup> And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son,<sup>[d]</sup> full of grace and truth.*

Christmas Day is finally here. We've waited and waited, and the day has arrived. Today we celebrate the day that God sent Jesus as the light of hope, peace, love and grace to this world. Today we each go forward to spread this light, at least that is my prayer. I know that sometimes after the big day, I can feel a bit down. There was so much preparation, so much fun, just so much! This time around I'm not going to allow the post-Christmas blues to stop me from sharing the light.

There is a lot of re-gifting to do (and that's not a bad thing!). He gave us this gift on the day Jesus was born, over 2000

years ago. Do you think God intended for us to hang on to this light and not share it? Do you think it's better to keep it hidden away? Absolutely not! We get to re-gift by giving it away, over and over again. And we get to keep it, too.

*Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for giving us the best gift ever by sending Jesus to this world. Please help each of us truly feel the warmth of his light and to not be hesitant in sharing it with others. We love you!  
Amen*

~Tammi Clawson  
Grace Lutheran Church



*By Anika Hagen, Ascension Lutheran Church*



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**LUTHERAN CHURCH**  
a community of grace called to serve