



St. John's Lutheran Church	Christmas Lutheran Church
Salisbury, North Carolina	Bethlehem

Introduction

If you've been around the church a while, a few words, images, and colors come to mind when we say the word Advent: hope, waiting, preparing, blue, darkness, candlelight, "O come, O come Emmanuel." For many, none of that makes sense, especially as stores, houses, and downtowns are transformed into a winter wonderland of Christmas lights and glitter. It makes for a wonderful time of year.

So how does Advent fit in?

Traditionally, Advent has been a season of prayer and preparation for the second coming of Christ. In a nutshell, if Christmas is the first incarnation of God, Advent prepares believers for God's *second* incarnation.

But if we're honest, Advent feels like the grandma who won't let you eat dessert before supper ... or the coach who won't let you play in the game if you haven't come to practice ... or the Lutheran pastor who won't let you sing Christmas carols until Christmas Eve! "Do we *really* have to wait??"

... or is it more than that? Well, yes it is. Rather than "waiting," think of Advent as a season of "hope-filled anticipation" for what God has done and continues to do through Christ. During Advent we return to the voice of the prophets and consider why Jesus came to us in the first place — to bring justice, mercy, fulfillment, and redemption. As we "wait" for the day when those things will be fully revealed, we live in "hope-filled anticipation" for Jesus' promise to bring glimpses of his kingdom *even now*.

The title of this year's devotional is "All Earth is Hopeful," a phrase drawn from Alberto Taule's beautiful Spanish Advent song, "Toda La Tierra." The first and fourth verses are particularly beautiful reminders of why Advent matters:

All earth is hopeful, the Savior comes at last!
 Furrows lie open for God's creative task:
 this, the labor of people who struggle to see
 how God's truth and justice set everybody free.

We first saw Jesus a baby in a crib.
 This same Lord Jesus today has come to live
 in our world; he is present, in neighbors we see
 our Jesus is with us, and ever sets us free.

Throughout these four weeks of Advent, we invite you into deeper reflection about what gives you hope. As you think about your future, *what are your hopes and dreams?* As we continue to navigate these unusual Covid waters, *where does our hope come from?*

Again this year, members of two sister congregations have prepared these Advent Devotions: Christmas Lutheran in Bethlehem and St. John's in Salisbury. In September 2019 – four months before we caught wind of a pandemic -- Christmas and St. John's entered into a formal partnership in which we agreed to accompany one another in our journey of faith, walk in solidarity in our struggle for mercy and justice, and learn from the other's experience and wisdom. This Advent Devotional gives us the opportunity to hear from members of both congregations, each writing from very different contexts, but yoked together as sisters and brothers in Christ.

We stand in great thanksgiving for what God is doing through our two congregations. Even during these most unusual days, we stand as witnesses to the grace, love, and mercy of God — something this world is certainly longing for.

Advent blessings to you.

Pastor Rhodes Woolly

*St. John's Lutheran Church
Salisbury, North Carolina, USA*

Pastor Munther Isaac

*Evangelical Christmas Lutheran Church
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*Pastor Rhodes Woolly and Pastor Munther Isaac,
September 2019*

What a Prophet and A Prophecy!

Translated from Arabic by Pastor Munther Isaac

Comfort, comfort, my people.

Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

For the glory of the Lord shall be revealed. Isaiah 40:1, 3, 5

What a prophet and a prophecy!

This chapter is announcing really good news for those who are in the midst of despair and hopelessness! Announcing the very near salvation to the people of God and to all nations who believe in Christ and his kingdom around the globe. Nowadays, we live hard circumstances with no shining light in the horizon for ending the oppressions, the epidemic situation, and the homelessness in the Middle East.

Verse 1 comes to us as a message of relief and comfort. God will never forget his creation; he loved us despite our sins and abuses. He promised; he will never abandon us because he is God of love and mercy. He is a God of forgiveness. God wants us to be free and united, but he asks us to prepare the way to welcome him in our life and for the coming of Jesus Christ.

Let's consider the prophet Isaiah, prophet for all believers in ancient times and in our days. God cares for us. God cares for the poor, the neglected, the needy, the oppressed, and those who are living in miserable conditions. Isaiah spoke to hopeless people, and proclaimed the words of God all over the world.

His words of consolation are essential for those who are looking for acceptance, justice, and respect, despite of their race, religion, language and culture. Let's together make the roads straight in our daily life. Let's light our lamps, justly for the marginalized and ignored communities.

To have faith alone is not enough! Good deeds complete strong faith. Now, the road is clean, well prepared, and full of joy to welcome the coming Christ. He is coming with power and glory to strengthen us against evil temptations, to purify us from all sins to come into his Kingdom.

"And the glory of the lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." Amen

Faraj Allati

Christmas Lutheran Church

Our Time on Earth

Lord you have been our dwelling place in all generations.

Psalm 90:1

Psalm 90 This psalm is talking about an encounter between God's divine nature and human weakness. Our time on earth is limited. We must use it wisely, so that we do not live for the present moment, but rather our eternal home must be with God.

God is our refuge, he is always with us, and he does not leave us. He protects us. This psalm is considered one of the oldest psalms since the beginning. As the days advance us, we show our weakness and helplessness, but at the same time, God's faithfulness to us appears. Before Moses began his prayer, he first acknowledged God's power and God's ability to protect his people. "You turn man back to the dust and say: 'Go back, O children of Adam.'" (Psalm 90:3) We notice that Moses humbled himself before God and acknowledged the weakness of humankind. Moses takes us in thought, but in the end, God is our refuge and glory in the name of the Lord. We have only one refuge, which is our Christ who died on the cross for us. Have we shielded ourselves from God as a refuge?

This psalm reminds us that a thousand years with the Lord is like one day, for God is not limited by time. It is easy to get frustrated when the years go by without the world getting better. Since we can't see what lies ahead, we may sometimes ask if God sees the future. We are mistaken in assuming that God is as limited as we are, because God is not limited by time.

Jesus Christ is yesterday, today and forever, the beginning and the end. God knows the past, the present and the future. God knows what is inside us, so there is no need to cover the sins in our hearts, because everything is exposed before Him. We should pray and ask forgiveness from Him, for He is a loving and forgiving God who forgives our sins. If we confess our sins, then the Lord is faithful and just to forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. God is a refuge and protection for us in the time of our fears and at all times, so we see God always with us guiding us, and strengthening us and giving us the ability to overcome the dangers and fears of life, which gives us strong confidence in God so we replace all our fears with faith in Him, whatever these fears.

It is easy to forget that life is actually short. Being aware of life's shortness helps us use the short time before us more wisely and helps us focus on using our lives for the eternal good of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Come back, Lord! How long? These words are filled with longing and nostalgia for the face of God. "Let us rejoice and be rejoiced." We rejoice the rest of the days and pray with full confidence and praise God with spiritual songs in Christ Jesus, our Lord, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Lubna Nassar

Christmas Lutheran Church

Bursting with Gratitude

Then King David went in and sat before the Lord, and said, “Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?... Therefore you are great, O Lord God; for there is no one like you, and there is no God besides you.”

2 Samuel 7:18,22

Have you ever been so awestruck by a gift that you were bursting with gratitude, but hardly knew how to express it?

That seems to be David’s reaction when the prophet Nathan tells him, in 2 Samuel 7:16, God’s message that “Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.” David focuses on God, expresses his own unworthiness, and praises God.

Fast-forward to the genealogy of Jesus in the first chapter of Matthew. David’s (and therefore Jesus’) ancestors included Abraham, who lied to Pharaoh that Sarah was Abraham’s sister rather than wife; Jacob, who cheated Esau out of his birthright; and Judah, who unwittingly fathered Perez, also a forebear of Jesus, with a widowed daughter-in-law. The genealogy lists David as “the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah,” not sugarcoating David’s sin of adultery with Bathsheba and, for all practical purposes, murder of Uriah. Solomon married idolatrous foreign women, and overtaxed his people. Solomon’s son Rehoboam followed the foolish advice of peers and made his people’s yoke even heavier. You get the picture – God provided Jesus as our promised Messiah through David’s royal line in spite of ancestors’ sins. Also, Jesus’ genealogy in Matthew, unlike many Jewish ones, names women, including the Gentile women Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth.

God continues to be a God of surprises. He’s bigger than Jesus’ forefathers and foremothers. Bigger than the oppressive Romans of Jesus’ earthly lifetime. Bigger than the current oppressors of Palestine. Bigger than the hostile dividedness in the United States.

Lord Jesus, as hymns say, we need Thee every hour, there is none like You, You have promised good to us, and Your word our hope secures. You – our Redeemer and Savior – are indeed King of kings and Lord of lords, and You shall reign forever and ever. Amen.

BJ Connor

St. John’s Lutheran Church

Thursday, December 2

Shalom

*I will listen to what God the Lord says;
he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants.*

Psalm 85:8

Psalm 85 is a worship prayer in a time of crisis—specifically the era of Ezra and Nehemiah upon the return from exile, only to realize that maybe things never again will be “like the good old days.” Having lost their joy, perhaps their way and their hope they pray for what only God can restore. The Hebrew word used in verse 8 is *Shalom*. We translate it “peace,” but it’s even deeper than that. Wholeness. Deep contentment, joy, even in struggle and pain and confusion. God’s got this. God’s got us.

The Psalm breaks down in roughly this way:

Verses 1-3, remembrance of God’s previous acts of restoration

Verses 4-7, crying out to God amid their new struggles

Verses 8-13, the assurance that God is in control and will yet again restore God’s people

You may remember that Martin Luther was an Old Testament scholar and professor, and he studied and wrote on the Psalms extensively. In part, this was because of his own personal despair and search for hope and wholeness. Luther and Psalm 85 land in the same place as the source of hope. It’s the Word. God’s Word that calls all things into being. God’s Word made flesh in Jesus. From the beginning, in Genesis, God has something to say that actually brings forth. “Let there be light.” Here, the Psalmist affirms God’s word as the source of hope. “I will listen to what God the Lord says—he promises peace to his people. Shalom. Wholeness. Restoration.

Unlimited voices assault us, all with their own political, financial, social, personal agendas. Only God’s voice creates, and only God’s voice comes in righteousness and peace. The Advent word for the Church is an invitation to listen, cut through, take time amid so many life-draining voices to be still. Listen. Pay attention. God is still speaking, restoring, giving Shalom.

And that, friends, is hopeful, joyful, needful. God speaks to us in Word, Sacrament, Christian community. As we seek vaccines to end this pandemic, may we seek even more strongly God’s word as we anticipate the promise of Jesus, the Word made flesh to heal us to the very core of our being.

Help us, O God, to return to solitude and to your Word, that all of the other cacophony of voices may be stilled and we and all creation might be restored. Give us your Shalom, and use us as vessels of your Shalom, your hope and peace. Amen.

Bishop Tim Smith

NC Synod, ELCA

Friday, December 8

Hope is more than a word

That with the Lord one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day ... 2 Peter 3:8

Advent is a time of hoping, of waiting, of a feeling of expectation, of preparation for the Nativity of Christ and for the return of Christ. Whenever we light the Advent wreath and see the Chrismon tree, we are reminded that God's promise to us will be fulfilled ... but not necessarily by our personal clock or timetable.

God's clock is different from ours. He is patiently giving us time and opportunity to correct world problems and to repent on our own. We, however, impatiently wait and hope for peace, for joy, for a new heaven, a new earth. We have been hoping for these things for generations.

We frequently use the word Hope ... hope you are feeling better ... hope you have a safe trip ... hope you enjoy your dinner ... hope the Panthers win. Christian hope, however, is much more than wishful thinking. Christian hope is when we trust what God has told us about salvation through his son, Jesus Christ, is true.

One of my favorite hymns is "My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness." The lyrics seem to describe what Christian hope is all about. The words refer to God's covenant, to his promise to support us, to his unchanging grace, to his promise to rescue and restore our world, to his encouragement and justice ... all in God's time.

While we are hoping and waiting, how should we act? 2nd Peter encourages us to be at peace and to grow in grace and knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

May your Advent season be filled with Christian hope, love, and peace.

In this Advent season, may all the world be hopeful for the fulfillment of your promise to us in your time. While waiting, help us to be kind, to be at peace, and to grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Eleanor Sifford
St. John's Lutheran Church

We Three Kings

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi^[a] from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

Matthew 2:1-2

Every year my brother and I set up a Christmas Nativity at our house. It includes the baby Jesus, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, some animals, and the surrounding village. My favorite pieces are the three Wisemen. Each Wiseman has his own animal. One has a horse. One has a camel. One even has an elephant!

I always like the Wisemen best in the Christmas story. *We Three Kings* is also my favorite Christmas carol. I think these three guys are my favorite because they travelled so far – from like the other side of the continent – following a star that they knew was a sign. But they didn’t know where the star would lead or what they would encounter when they got there. They showed great perseverance in their travels to find Jesus.

As I look at the three Wisemen in our nativity and sing *We Three Kings*, I remember that, when God gives us a goal, never quit following the way he leads. Sometimes that is tough. But the Wisemen help us remember the special gift we can find at the end of our journey.

It’s pretty cool that they got to give Jesus his first Christmas gifts, too!

Ashton Williams, age 10
St. John’s Lutheran Church

Be Prepared

John the Baptist went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

*A voice of one calling in the desert,
Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.
Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low.
The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.
And all mankind will see God's salvation.*

Luke 3:3-6

Be Prepared. When you hear these words, perhaps you think of the Boy Scout motto, or stocking up on food and essentials in event of an emergency, or even Scar singing in the Lion King about his nefarious plan to become king. To be prepared can mean to be in a state of readiness in mind and body, to do your duty, to proactively take care of your physical needs, or to heed the warning of what is to come.

But how do we prepare in our world today when so often we do not know what lies ahead? A global pandemic that has altered our lives. Societal issues of injustice and division. Economic challenges of inflation and shortages. Personal struggles with relationships and health. All of these can overwhelm us, and alone, we may lose hope.

But there is reason to be hopeful as the voice in the wilderness gives us the answer. We may not be able to prepare for all we face in the world today, but we can prepare our hearts for the Lord. Trust in Him and open your heart to Him. Repent for the forgiveness of your sins, and make straight paths for the Lord. And the Good News, He will do the rest. He will fill every valley, He will make every mountain and hill low, He will make the crooked roads straight and the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God's salvation.

Gracious God, e thank you for the gift of your Son, the savior of the world, whose grace and mercy sustain us. In this season of Advent, help us to prepare our hearts for Him, and to trust in His provisions for our lives. In Him, All Earth is Hopeful. Amen.

Stan Jordan
St. John's Lutheran Church

Tuesday, December 7

What to Think About Fall

⁴In him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

John 1:4

I have to admit something: I don't know what to think about the fall. I know, I know – it's hard to argue against those crisp autumn mornings, football games, Halloween, the leaves changing, pumpkin pie, flannels, or nights by a crackling fire. Those things are all great. But where fall falls flat for me is knowing what comes next — the cold and dark of winter. That's particularly true for me today, as I'm writing, the Monday after daylight savings time. Sure, there is a lot to love about winter (Christmas being at the top of that list), but getting out of work at 5 and facing a sun that sets at 5:30 sort of stinks.

There is something beautiful about Christmas falling during this period. At a time when the trees are bare, the weather is cold, and the days are short, the words of Isaiah take on a special new meaning.

"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned." (Isaiah 9: 2-3)

Advent means something special to us as Christians. We are a fallen and broken people. At our most basic nature, we are sinful and lost, wandering about in the desert. But Advent gives us hope. The promise of Advent is that light exists in the world and we are called to prepare the way for the coming of that light, that great promise of hope in the person of Jesus Christ. "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men." (John 1:4) In the midst of the cold and the dark of the season, Christ comes to earth. Let's prepare for him the way.

Lord God, you are the light in our darkness, our hope for what is to come. Teach us to trust you above all else, even as shadows lengthen and the days are long. As we step into a new day, reveal to us your holy light. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Carter Woolly

St. John's Lutheran Church

The Birth of John the Baptist Foretold

¹³But 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. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. Luke 1:13-15a

Oh, Mighty Lord. How Great thou art. How Great thou art. From the bottom of our hearts, we thank you, oh Lord for your presence in our daily life. You extend your support to us in many different and unexpected ways that exceed our imagination! Above all, we remain humans. We often fail to understand your plans that you prepared for us and for our future. So, we ask you, oh Lord, not to leave us alone during our daily challenges. Help us to dedicate our souls to you, to open our hearts and minds to listen to your words.

Help us to have a strong faith like Zechariah, who did not give up even when all the chances are seemingly gone. Zechariah did not lose his faith in you oh Lord. Zechariah kept your words in his heart and challenged all the people around him. He was faithful and surrendered completely to you.

Oh Lord, you promised Zechariah that you would give him joy and gladness and let him rejoice at the birth of his son. The birth of John who came to this world by a miracle. Nowadays, as we are preparing ourselves for Christmas, we remember John the Baptist who set the road before you and baptized the people on the Jordan River.

As a baptized Christian community, we stand before you, Lord, and witness the birth of Jesus in the little town of Bethlehem. On top of that, we are witnessing the birth of Jesus in our hearts. Let us carry the love that Jesus gave us to one another and remember that baby Jesus defeated the largest armies of the ancient world with the love He brought to this world. Herod the Great's words still echo in the Jerusalem desert: How is it that Baby Jesus defeated the strongest armies? How is it that He escaped the babies' massacre in Bethlehem? How is it the Holy family managed to escape to Egypt and save baby Jesus? How is it that this Love that came to this little town of Bethlehem was capable to spread all over the world within the absence of media and technology? How is it that this Love that was born in the manger of Bethlehem delivers power and hope to all weak and poor on earth? How is it that famous kings and emperors in the ancient history were forgotten and the name of Jesus Christ is still alive, king of kings and Lord of Lords?

From the other side of the Jerusalem desert, John the Baptist words heard echoing and answering Herod the Great: "I baptize you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Yes, dear Brothers and sisters in Christ, by these words we are sure that God is just and faithful. Jesus promised to give us joy and gladness that we do not deserve in the first place, but in Grace, we unite with God by the Holy Spirit and have an eternal life. Amen.

A Faithful Response

"For nothing is impossible with God"

Luke 1:37

At some point in all our lives we come face to face with situations that seem impossible. Circumstances that are confusing and frustrating, and burdens that seem insurmountable. We grapple with events and decisions we can't seem to wrap our heads around. (Mine generally happen at 2 o'clock in the morning!) Often, fear and confusion take over. *How is this ever going to work out?* Unfortunately, even when I take it to the Lord in prayer, I can't quite "let go and let God."

At the beginning of this passage, Mary is happily planning her wedding to Joseph and thinking about their future together. I imagine she is focused on all the details that consume many brides. Having never been happier, she can hardly think of anything but the wonderful life she and Joseph are about to begin.

While drawing water from the well, Mary encounters the angel Gabriel with his message from God. Gabriel proceeds to tell Mary something that she almost certainly does not understand. He tells her she's going to have a baby. And, not just *any* baby; she's going to give birth to the Son of God. Confusion replaces the happy dreams of a beautiful wedding and a peaceful life. Mary is filled with doubt. She wonders how this news will affect her body, her reputation, her family, her relationship with Joseph? She struggles to understand, *"How can this be?"*

Gabriel knew Mary would be confused; and, in verse 37 Gabriel shares with Mary, and with us, God's solemn promise, ***"For nothing will be impossible with God."***

Luke makes it clear in verse 38 that Mary was filled with very real doubts and very real questions. But Mary relied on her faith in God when she courageously replied, "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said."

God asked Mary if she was willing to believe in the impossible. Mary yielded to God, and said, "Yes!" She didn't have all the answers, but she trusted God's promise - *"For nothing is impossible with God!"*

Mary holds out courage. She helps me face the uncertainties of life. She reminds me that because of Christ, my circumstances don't have the last word; that even in the darkest places, I am seen and not forgotten in God's story. She inspires me to greater faith.

Dear Lord, give us just a portion of Mary's willingness to follow You. Help us to courageously cling to your promise, that we might yet become the people you have called us to be. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Leap for Joy

For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. Luke 1:44

For most couples it is a joyful experience to learn that they have a child on the way. This is especially true for those who have waited a long time to become parents.

Aged Zechariah and his barren wife, Elizabeth, found out about her pregnancy in a most unusual way. An angel appeared to Zechariah and told him that his wife, Elizabeth, would bear a son and his name would be John.

Imagine the joy that Elizabeth felt being in the presence of her cousin, Mary, who was also pregnant! Imagine the joy that Elizabeth felt as she was filled with the Holy Spirit, being in the presence of the Son of God. John felt so much joy that he leaped in his mother's womb. John knew that he was in the presence of the One that the world had been waiting for. Even in his mother's womb, he knew that he would play a major role in preparing the world for the arrival of the Messiah. The infertility Elizabeth suffered is an unspoken affliction many couples share today. And when God blesses a couple with a child after a long wait, there is joy beyond description.

We can certainly identify with today's scripture. Just as Elizabeth yearned for a child, we also waited seven years for a pregnancy. We had gone through tests and interviews for the adoption process. In order to be eligible for adoption, we had to have a doctor tell us that we could not have a child. It was a sad day when Margaret was handed that very news. But eventually we were told by the adoption agency that we needed to prepare our nursery as we were next in line for a child.

Imagine the joy we felt when we learned Margaret was pregnant! We couldn't believe it. Although the waiting was difficult, it made the anticipation of the birth of our child even more extraordinary. We might have leaped for joy but we can't remember if we did.

Advent is a time of waiting and preparation. Elizabeth and Mary knew that they were chosen by God to bring forth children who would change the world. John knew even in his mother's womb that he, as an adult, would pave the way for the coming of the long-awaited Messiah. John knew his role was to prepare the way for someone who was greater than he. He leaped for joy at the prospect.

Gracious God, console those infertile couples who long for a child. Amen.

Dale and Margaret Basinger
St. John's Lutheran Church

Saturday, December 11

Love and Mercy Forever

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. Luke 1:46-49

The theme for our Advent Devotional this year is "All Earth is Hopeful." The past few years our world, country, community and even our church have been through many challenges. We hoped the pandemic would end quickly. We hoped schools would return to normal. We hoped we could return to church in person. We hoped for NORMALCY again.

In Luke 1:46-55, Mary praises the Lord and rejoices in her God and Savior. Generation after generation would remember her forever. She said His mercy will go on from generation to generation to all who honor, love and respect God. She also said he has not forgotten his promise to be merciful forever. As I read the scripture I kept hearing, "from generation to generation" and his promise of mercy forever. This should give all the earth hope. The generation to generation part reminds me of my childhood church, Messiah Lutheran Church on Lafayette St. in Salisbury. My Paw Paw Cline, William Grady Cline, was a Carpenter and helped build Messiah. He was also a charter member.

His generation started at Messiah and my little mama, Mary Katherine, and many of my aunts and uncles attended Messiah. My brother and I grew up there along with lots of our cousins. I then attended another Lutheran Church with my husband and our family and my brother attended a Lutheran Church with his wife and family. Our children attend church and our son is a Lutheran Minister. My niece and her family attend St. John's. Do you see where I'm going with this? Generation after generation, just from my family, is receiving God's mercy forever just as Mary said.

So, while we have struggled for things to be the way they were, we have learned to pivot and worship online and attend Bible Study via Zoom meetings, wear a mask and smile with our eyes, pray diligently for each other in sickness, appreciate what a REAL hug or handshake feels like. No, it's NOT the same but God is in the midst of it all forever. His love and mercy is forever...and THAT should make All the Earth Hopeful.

Father God, we thank you for every opportunity to worship you no matter where it is. We are thankful for all your mercies that go on from generation to generation....and All the Earth is Hopeful. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Cathy Eller
St. John's Lutheran Church

When I Grow Up

And all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, "What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him. Luke 1:66

What an exciting moment! Elizabeth has just given birth to a son and God's promise, as always, is fulfilled. That alone is cause for celebration and great joy, but that isn't the only thing that we see happen in these verses; Zechariah, whom had been left unable to speak, as we read about in scriptures previous, has his speech returned to him, and after which immediately begins praising God.

All of this must have been overwhelming and most certainly reason for excitement. However, what I find most exciting about this passage is when it says that the people asked *"What then will this child be?"* and it goes on to say *for the hand of the Lord was with him*. I find that so encouraging because it is a reminder that we do not hold our tomorrows in our hands, but we thankfully know who does. He is the great Almighty, and we read countless times throughout the Bible, that He has marvelous and wonderful plans in store for us.

This baby boy, whom we find out has been called John, had just breathed his first breath of life and had the entire world ahead of him. He could have been anything. He could have done anything! And that is what I love about this verse; it is so full of hope and anticipation! To imagine Elizabeth and Zechariah staring down at this new treasure, placed within their arms, only able to barely fathom how God was going to one day use this child and consider all of the great things that he would do.

Friends, today we can find hope in the knowledge that God has laid out a beautiful plan for each of us. We couldn't possibly know what we are going to "grow up to be" someday, but all along, we can have the confidence of God, knowing that we have been destined for great things.

Gracious and loving God, we are thankful for how You hold us in Your hands every day and for how You have promised that You have a plan for each and every one of us. Help us to draw closer to You, as we continue to walk in Your love and seek Your will for us. Amen.

Ricky Howsare
St. John's Lutheran Church

Tuesday, December 14

Great Anticipation

Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, Because he has come and had redeemed his People...And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins...to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.

Luke 1:67-80

I faced the birth of my firstborn son Todd with great anticipation, but also with a considerable amount of anxiety. What would a 20-year old know about bringing up a child? It was almost overwhelming, and in one sense, my inadequate grasp of this wonderful and magnificent event was tantamount to being speechless. Yet, shortly after Todd's birth, when the nurse held this red and crying infant for me to see, I must have felt something of the same thing that Zechariah felt when he first saw John. For a fleeting moment, after trying to count fingers and toes, I could have burst into song, for God had indeed touched my life. I think I briefly glimpsed the promise of the years unfold before my eyes.

Zechariah was a priest, holy and righteous. Yet he was also a man of life experience, so it is quite understandable that he believed that fatherhood for him was impossible. No couple that he had ever known had ever become parents at the advanced ages that he and Elizabeth attained. Yet, when Gabriel's prophecy was fulfilled, Zechariah fully realized that all things are possible in God's kingdom. He regained his lost ability to express himself and burst forth in praise and thanksgiving for this gift of a son, and a vision of John's calling to prepare the way for the Kingdom of God to come near in the person of Jesus.

I believe that we as parents, are endowed by the Holy Spirit to share with our children the fruition of John's preparation by sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ in our own time and place. Scott and I have been blessed that Todd, our older son, has matured into a loving and accomplished son who has shown much kindness and compassion to others.

We have also been similarly blessed with a second son, Davey, who although disabled, has taught us so much about the depths of unconditional love and the use of gifts and talents to the upmost of his ability. Recently, a former neighbor, who lost his only son much too early, and with whom we shared grief and sorrow, purposefully stopped one day while I was out walking to ask about Davie. After a brief conversation, she shared with me that, "When I see Davey, I see the face of God." I was totally speechless; I never fully realized the light that Davey has shined on the others.

I believe that, like Zechariah, the music of the Lord has entered our souls to proclaim the joy and freedom of the Word of God.

Gary Rhodes
St. John's Lutheran Church

Light in the Darkness

² *The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness —
on them light has shined.*
Isaiah 9:2

August 17 is a date that will be forever burned into my memory as that was the day my husband stopped living. With his death my world stopped turning, and I began walking in darkness. Brian is the one whom my soul loves. We thought we had forever in front of us and had started making plans for retirement. As we would soon find out, God had a different plan for our lives.

We had planned a trip to Bryson City with my brother and his family for late July. The Big Six we called ourselves (Brian, me, Callie, Eddie, Beth, and Mckenna) as we set off on one adventure after another. Brian and I had been invited to a wedding the Saturday before we had to leave for Bryson City. A little voice inside my head spoke up and said, "You really should not be going to this wedding-you have way too much to do to get ready for the Big Six trip to Bryson City." I pushed the nagging voice out of my head and away to the wedding we went. Did I mention it was a mask-less wedding? Not a mask in sight, and again with that little nagging voice invading my head and saying, "I wonder how many people here have Covid?" Again, I pushed that nagging voice away. Three days later, the Big Six went to Bryson City. Two days after we returned Brian, Callie, and I were diagnosed with Covid 19. Fifteen days after that diagnosis, the love of my life stopped living.

Isaiah 9:2 says that, "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned." I have become a person walking in darkness, but I know that the light of God has never stopped shining on me. I just cannot seem to see the light right now and am stumbling around in the dark trying to make sense of Brian's death. I have experienced some moments of comfort from knowing that Brian is basking in the love of that great light where I will join him one day.

Dear God, Thank you for your unending love and for never leaving me alone in the dark. Keep shining your light on me even when I cannot see it. In your name I pray. Amen.

Lynn Wisecarver
St. John's Lutheran Church

We wait for the Lord

¹ *I waited patiently for the LORD;
he inclined to me and heard my cry.*
² *He drew me up from the desolate pit,
out of the miry bog,
and set my feet upon a rock,
making my steps secure.*
³ *He put a new song in my mouth,
a song of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear,
and put their trust in the LORD.*
Psalm 40:1-3

Christmas is a very special season in Bethlehem. The attention our city receives and the scores of pilgrims who visit the town, bring an annual breeze of fresh air. There is a festive atmosphere in the city, and this is especially evident in street marches and processions. This is why the impact of Covid-19 on our city is very severe. Covid-19 has impacted our tourism and economy, but it's also affected us as a community and a society. Our sense of isolation behind the wall was emphasized.

Yet, advent is a season of hope! Psalm 40 anchors our hope in the Lord; not in political realities, not in worldly leaders, or in change of our circumstance. It reminds us that our hope is in the Lord, and this is a hope that exists despite the circumstances, not because the circumstances changed or will change. Granted, we hope and pray for a breakthrough in our situation. We pray and hope for the end of the military occupation to our land. We pray and hope for the wall of separation to fall down. We pray and hope to an end to all forms of extremism and all exclusive ideologies and theologies. And we certainly pray and hope to the end of the pandemic. Our hope, in return, compels us to work these things we hope for; it is therefore an active hope. And as we hope and work, we wait for the Lord. "He put a new song in my mouth" – a song that celebrates what is to come, not what we see now; but what we see in hope! It is a new song in the midst of the pit, a song of hope that "Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD".

Lord, give us this advent season to put our hope in you, and in what you are about to do in our world and lives. And as we wait and hope, give us a new song of praise. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Munther Isaac
Pastor, Christmas Lutheran Church

Not Perfect, But Faithful

"The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name which it will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'"
Jeremiah 33:14-16

The righteous Branch is Jesus, who brings us hope during this season of Advent, as we wait with great expectations. Expect Jesus to come to change you. It is God's Christmas gift to us.

For the past two years with the pandemic continuing to hang around, many of our expectations have been dashed or altered in some way. We long for things to get back to normal. The good news is that Jesus, the righteous Branch, offers us long term hope which cannot be dashed as long as we are faithful to him. Amid chaos and uncertainty, God gave this healing and refreshing promise to Jeremiah and all people. The promise of a righteous King from David's line. One who would do what is just and right.

So, this year, while we scurry around planning the perfect Christmas tree, the perfect presents, the perfect dinner and the perfect outfit, remember that God does not expect us to be perfect, but to be faithful.

Instead of spending our time "perfecting" this season, we can take God's promise and use it to open our eyes and our hearts to those around us who desperately need hope. Take time to help those less fortunate to see the light of Jesus shine in you and make their Christmas a little brighter.

Rejoice with Jeremiah. Live in the present with eyes on the hope of the future of Christ's return.

Jesus mine, in me shine; in me shine, Jesus mine; fill my heart with light divine. Amen.

Sherry Mason Brown
St. John's Lutheran Church

Hope for All

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, and training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds. Titus 2:11–14

At the time Paul wrote this letter to his gentile friend Titus, it was believed that Christ's return would happen soon. Paul is advising Titus to live as Jesus had taught so he would be ready for Jesus' return. But the second coming of Jesus did not happen in their lifetimes as they expected.

There are people today who believe that Christ's return is imminent. They are disillusioned by the world today – war, famine, Covid-19, climate change, hate, violence and inhumanity.

I am reminded of the Christmas carol, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" which is based on a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. It says, "And in despair I bowed my head, there is no peace on earth, I said, for hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth, good will to men."

But Paul expressed hope: "...the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God...." Could it be that we are the ones who can facilitate the manifestation of the glory of God? Could we be the people who are zealous for good deeds?

In Longfellow's poem, as the bells peal more loudly, he concludes, "God is not dead, nor doth he sleep." The spirit of God within us can help to bring peace on earth. We can work to seek justice, fight prejudice, and feed the hungry. We can be accepting of those who are different from us and whose beliefs differ from our own.

Paul's message of hope to Titus, a gentile, was for ALL people and faiths. It's still relevant for us today.

Lord God, in this season of longing and hope, help us to love our neighbor and to understand our role in bringing peace and justice to our world. Amen.

Missy Shives
St. John's Lutheran Church

Constant Change and God's Plan

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. 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. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

Luke 2:1-5

Joseph's life is entirely out of his control; he is required to begin unexpected travels to the homeland of his generationally distant relative all while his fiancé is bearing an unplanned child. From Joseph's perspective, he lives in an uncontrollable, unavoidable chaos - something we can all relate with to some degree.

It still amazes me to think about the large-scale changes our world underwent in the past few years, but it equally amazes me to think about the direction in which we are headed. Whether reflecting on the ubiquity of the global pandemic, or of the recent announcement by Mark Zuckerberg, creator of Facebook, detailing his vision of the future metaverse, our world functions in ways that, like Joseph, are entirely out of our control. There are only two factors we as humans can truly count on: consistent change and God's plan.

The common man may have felt as if Emperor Augustus was in control when he ordered a census to be taken of all men in their homeland, but he was merely a pawn in God's grand plan. Centuries before Christ's birth, it was prophesied that Jesus, the son of God, was to be born in the town of Bethlehem. Joseph's genealogy traces him back to King David, and Bethlehem is referred to as "the city of David". It was no coincidence that Emperor Augustus decreed all men to return to their homelands as this required Joseph to travel to Bethlehem, which is exactly the place God intended for Jesus to be born. This chaos in Joseph's life was not the result of the Emperor's rule or of an unplanned child, but it was the direct result of God's plan for Jesus to be born and live amongst men on Earth.

Lord, we know change to be uncertain, undesired, and often intimidating. Let it be comforting for us to have confidence in your will to move people and manage situations to satisfy your perfect plan for us. Amen.

Kevin Agner
St. John's Lutheran Church

Tuesday, December 21

Humble Beginnings

“And while [Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem], the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger because there was no lodging available for them.”

Luke 2: 6-7

In his humble birth, our savior Jesus Christ fulfilled God’s eternal plan for world redemption. His meek beginning, in an ordinary manger, among commoners, is of immense significance. It embodies a profoundly moving truth that speaks of His humility by highlighting the powerful image of Jesus’ first bed, which was the place where God’s creatures came to eat.

Instead of coming to earth as a privileged ruler, Jesus was born in the lowliest of circumstances as one of us and humbled Himself as a servant to a prideful and thankless mankind. His incarnation reflects God’s character and heart. Through His journey on earth, Jesus strived to enrich our humanity with the radiance of God’s glory. His deity was not asserted over us. He did not insist on His rights and privileges to be honored, understood, or viewed rightly. He came as an infant to earn that righteousness for us.

Jesus did not choose humility only to fulfill the prophecy and accomplish a task on earth. Humility is part of His eternal nature. In this regard, humility should occupy a big portion of our heart today, a heart that mirrors Jesus. Humility is a magnet to God’s ongoing grace. We should embrace this important lesson by learning to clothe ourselves in noble garments and focus on the beauty of the lowliest to serve as Jesus did. Jesus asks us to open our hearts and make room for Him.

In this season, let us reflect on what it really means for the King of Kings to be born in a humble manger, live a humble life, and die a selfless death for our sins. By trusting him in humble obedience, we experience the wonder of that night in the little town of Bethlehem long ago, when a humble manger held the King of Kings. We shall open our hearts today, right here, right now for our savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Shadin Nassar

Christmas Lutheran Church

Shepherd's Fields

Suddenly, God's angel stood among them and God's glory blazed around them. They were terrified. The angel said, "Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide."

Luke 2:9-10 The Message

When I reflect on Luke's account of the Christmas announcement, I see a God of compassion. Compassion is derived from Latin words meaning "to suffer with." The proclamation is targeted to shepherds living in a field. I imagine they led rugged lives and were somewhat marginalized members of their society. God chooses suffering servants to be the first Christian evangelists.

Although the shepherds were understandably terrified, they may have been amazed and enthused that they were selected to share this wonderful news. In any event, the shepherds understood God's compassion for them needed to be shared with others.

We rejoice in this blessed announcement, but we also know the rest of the story. Throughout His ministry, Jesus will exhibit compassion to those around Him while being scorned, ridiculed, and eventually executed. Through Jesus, we see divine compassion.

Shepherds' Field in Beit Sahour is the site commemorating the announcement to the shepherds. It's located on a beautiful hillside with various small caves which would provide the sheep and shepherds a safe nightly haven. It's also a wonderful opportunity to contemplate the angels and God's glory appearing to the shepherds. You can also imagine the shepherds hurrying to Bethlehem, on a nearby hillside just over a mile away, to share the good news.

Unfortunately, the valley between Beit Sahour and Bethlehem reminds you of the current Israel/Palestine conflict, due to the presence of an Israeli military restricted road with barriers and barbed wire fencing. Though it's a stark reminder of current pain and suffering, viewing it from the top of Shepherds' Field is a powerful reassurance that Jesus' joyful birth provides hope for all.

Lord, we are thankful for Your compassion toward us. We confess the various times we allow life stresses to distract us from demonstrating compassion toward others. May the shepherds' example prompt us to share that Christmas is meant for everybody, worldwide. Amen.

Mike Connor
St. John's Lutheran Church

Thursday, December 23

Tell It On the Mountain

As the angel choir withdrew into heaven, the shepherds talked it over. "Let's get over to Bethlehem as fast as we can and see for ourselves what God has revealed to us." They left, running, and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. Seeing was believing. They told everyone they met what the angels had said about this child. All who heard the shepherds were impressed. Mary kept all these things to herself, holding them dear, deep within herself. The shepherds returned and let loose, glorifying and praising God for everything they had heard and seen. It turned out exactly the way they'd been told!

Luke 2:15-20

Though the shepherds standing under a starry sky were social pariahs rarely invited into conversation who found themselves suddenly confronted with an angel from on high, they responded joyously to the unusual situation. Without hesitation, given instruction and information, basking in the pure joy of the news, they left immediately to see the Wonder of the World!

Traveling through the night and finding the Christ child swaddled and in a manger, they stood before the miraculous child and announced in the presence of his earthly parents the wondrous news of his birth "to all people." The child, they related, would be Christ, the very savior that all had waited for so long.

Mary, the mother of the Christ child, sat quietly and listened. The news must have filled her with great joy, but she remained silent for almost 33 years. The shepherds, though, returned to their homes, "glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen." They did not remain quiet about the event that they had been brought into as witnesses.

From that point onward, I imagine they spoke of seeing the birth of this child, as many of us have spoken of seeing the interesting or wonderful things in our lives. Births, perhaps... or winning horses... beautiful vacation spots... a beautiful, fast car.

But we so soon tire of telling and retelling the same story and pass it off for a new and exciting something to tell and retell.

How many of us go tell the story of Jesus on the mountain daily, or feel special because we are chosen to tell Christ's story? Do we invite others into Christ's presence? The lowly shepherds did. They continued to glorify and praise God for all they had been told. Let's do the same.

Gerrie Blackwelder
St. John's Lutheran Church

Light Revealed to All Nations

“Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him.” Luke 2:25

The name Simeon means the listener or the obedient, and it refers to the obedient believers who waited for the fulfillment of the prophecies. And Simeon the Elder, according to church tradition, was one of the 72 elders who translated the Bible into Greek. The Holy Bible tells us that Simeon the Elder was righteous and pious, awaiting the consolation of Israel, meaning that he knew from the prophecies of the Old Testament prophets that the Savior Jesus Christ would come. The king will come, the Savior will come to save his people, and so Simeon was waiting for God to fulfill this promise, that his love be revealed through Jesus. Simeon lived with all confidence and hope to see the Lord's Messiah. Simeon was a man of prayer, so the Holy Spirit would lead him to go to the temple. At the same time, Jesus was 40 days old, accompanied by his mother, the Virgin Mary and Joseph, to present him to the Lord for the temple, according to the Jews' custom to dedicate him to the Lord.

The Holy Spirit leads Simeon and points to the baby Jesus Christ. There are hundreds of people in the temple, but the Spirit leads Simeon to the baby Jesus. Simeon takes the baby Jesus in his arms, embraces him, hugs him, kisses him, returns him to his mother, raises his eyes to heaven with great joy, and blesses God and says Now, O Lord, release your servant in peace, because my eyes have seen your salvation, as if he is saying that he is now satisfied with life, because he has seen the Savior. It is glory to the people of the prophets, for without the salvation of Christ, there is no glory for them.

Simeon continues and says, “Light is a revelation to all nations.” It means that Christ will be revealed to all nations, and salvation will be a light that the whole world will see. Salvation is offered to all the world and to all peoples, and it is a light to all people who dwell in darkness.

My prayer on this day is that we welcome your blessed and glorious son with peace and joy, and that we prepare our hearts, homes and lives to receive you. And to purify our hearts from all hatred, and to love everyone as you taught us and commanded us, O Jesus, help us to receive your coming, full of mercies, and your birth bearing blessings. Amen.

Emily Giacaman
Teacher at Dar Alkalima School

A Cave?

When I first learned that the “stable” was likely a cave, I went into denial.

I don’t know how old I was, but the story took a dramatic shift in an instant. Before you know it they’ll tell me that cows weren’t there either. Or the little drummer boy. And how would you get a Christmas tree inside a cave? So confusing.

Every now and then the details of my faith journey — and the faith story I’ve known — get a bit confused. That happens in all aspects of life, I suppose. Like when I learned that George Washington *didn’t* chop down a cherry tree or Santa *didn’t* come down my North New Hope Road chimney at Christmas. (The jury’s still out on that one.)

The details of the story make the story interesting, without a doubt. But sometimes the details confuse the message ... or take our eyes off of the message.

Like the stable. It doesn’t matter if Jesus was born in a stable or a cave. It doesn’t matter if there were three kings or seven. It doesn’t matter if they were “kings” at all. What matters is that God took on flesh and became one of us, who:

though he was in the very nature of God ...
made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:6-8)

The story of Christmas is a profoundly remarkable and significant story — not because of little drummer boys or mangers or stables, but because of a God whose love for us caused him to stoop down from heaven so that we might touch the very face of God.

May that story — may that profound Truth — give you hope and peace this Christmas season.

Dear God, in the beauty of this season, keep my eyes on you. In the mystery of this season, make me ever-thankful that your love has come. In the joy of this season, give me courage to join the choirs of angels and sing, “O Come, let us adore him.” In Jesus’ name. Amen.

The **Evangelical Christmas Lutheran Church** is the oldest Lutheran Church in Palestine, started in 1854 by German missionaries. Today it is one of six Lutheran churches of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land. The sanctuary was built in 1893 and features 14 stunning stained glass windows and a tower of bells donated by the German emperor, Wilhelm II. Members of the congregation take seriously their call to “continue Christ’s ministry of preaching, teaching and healing in His birthplace,” especially in their active partnership with the Dar al-Kalima school for children and the Dar al-Kalima University College.

Visit us at bethlehemchristmaslutheran.org



St. John’s Lutheran Church is a congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Founded in 1747 by German immigrants, St. John’s was the first church founded in Salisbury, North Carolina, a city of 35,000 just north of Charlotte. The current sanctuary was built in 1927 and features a beautiful hand-painted triptych and one of the few sets of Deagan Tower Chimes, whose music can be heard throughout the city. The congregation’s many ministries include a school of 225 students (infant through kindergarten), a 35-voice Men’s Chorus, and an active youth ministry that draws students from throughout the county.

Visit us at stjohns-salisbury.org

