

DAILY PRAYERS

The Word of God

Eternal God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, grant us Thy Holy Spirit that He may write Thy Word upon our hearts, that we may receive and believe it, and that it may give us cheer and comfort into eternity. Glorify Thy Word in our hearts that by Thy holy inspiration we may think what is right and by Thy power perform the same, for the sake of Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

Morning

I thank Thee, my Heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Thy dear Son, that Thou hast kept me this night from all harm and danger; and I pray Thee that Thou wouldst keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please Thee. For into Thy hands I commend my body and soul, and all things. Let thy holy angel be with me, that the wicked foe may have no power over me. Amen.

Evening

I thank Thee, my Heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Thy dear Son, that Thou hast graciously kept me this day; and I pray Thee that Thou wouldst forgive me all my sins, wherever I have done wrong, and graciously keep me this night. For into Thy hands I commend my body and soul, and all things. Let Thy holy angel be with me, that the wicked foe may have no power over me. Amen.

Before Meals

The eyes of all wait upon Thee, O Lord, and Thou givest them their meat in due season; Thou openest Thine hands and satisfiest the desire of every living thing.

Lord God, Heavenly Father, bless us and these Thy gifts, which we receive from thy bountiful goodness, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

After Meals

O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good; for His mercy endureth forever.

We thank Thee, Lord God, Heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, for all Thy benefits, who livest and reignest for ever and ever. Amen.

CLC Daily Devotions



But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. Gal. 4:4-5

Dec. 3, 2018 - Mar. 2, 2019

Devotions taken from a collection of brief meditations written by several pastors of the Church of the Lutheran Confession. You can subscribe to daily devotions via email at: <http://www.redeemerclc.info/ministries>

Monday December 3

Acts 2:14 But Peter, standing up with the eleven, raised his voice and said to them, "Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and heed my words."

BOLD PROCLAMATIONS

The second chapter of Acts reveals the account of the coming of the "Helper" (the Holy Spirit) Jesus had promised before He ascended to the Father's right hand. We also have revealed to us, the first sermon preached in the New Testament era. This sermon was preached by Peter. Remember Peter, the cowardly denier of Jesus becomes the bold proclaimer of Jesus!

When the disciples received the Holy Spirit that day they were given the special gift of speaking in the languages of the many people who were gathered in Jerusalem from all over the known world. Some of those gathered at the sight accused the disciples of being drunk. It was at that point that Peter stood to speak. He goes on to preach a bold Law and Gospel sermon. A sermon that we're later told cut the listeners to the heart as they were convicted of their sins and a need for a Savior. They asked what they needed to do. Peter didn't give them a long list of things that they needed to do in order to get on God's good side. Instead, he told them simply to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins and then they too would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit!

Several mission minded devotions could come from this second chapter of Acts as we see the very beginning of the spread of the Gospel in the New Testament era. But the one take away for today is to see the manner in which Peter approaches this opportunity to proclaim God's saving word. He doesn't pull punches in an attempt to make the message palatable to the masses. Instead he proclaims the Law boldly to show the sins of the hearers, and he proclaims the Gospel with love and compassion to show these sinners that they do indeed have a Savior.

In this day and age of political correctness, we can learn a lesson from Peter about boldness in proclaiming God's saving word. On that day, we're told about three thousand souls were added to the Church! And they continued in the apostles' doctrine!

Saturday March 2

John 5:28-29 Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth--

RISING TO ETERNAL LIFE

This event, this rising, will take place at the Last Judgment. In that hour, all who are in the graves, all the dead-- whether they died believers or unbelievers-- will hear His voice and come out. Once again, only the Son of God can speak to the physically dead and cause them both to hear and to rise. We know that He has the power because He raised both Lazarus and Jairus' daughter during His earthly ministry, and Himself arose the third day.

There will be one resurrection of the dead, not many. There will be one return of Christ, not many. Christ is the only one who can offer life to the spiritually dead and life to the physically dead. He offers both by means of His powerful word, which is why He can say (John 8:51, NIV): "If anyone keeps my word, He will never see death."

We entered this world in the dark, spiritually dead, but have been given life through faith, faith created by His powerful word.

We will enter into physical death, but will rise at His voice to eternal life.

Come, Lord Jesus!

Friday March 1

John 5:24 "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life."

WHEW ... I CAN STOP HOLDING MY BREATH NOW

I don't know about you, but I'm sure glad that the Judge doesn't say, "Whoever keeps my law perfectly without deviating to the left or the right ... will not come into judgment." I'm glad because I'd have no hope. After all, I have sinned in thought, word and action. I've done what God forbids; I've left undone what He commands. I know that you are in the same boat because God's Word, the Law, says so.

But the Judge Himself assures us by oath. That's what "most assuredly" or "truly, truly" or "verily, verily" means! It means that the Judge is Himself confirming that what he is about to say is completely true and reliable. Don't drift off into sleep, this is so important that the Judge Himself begins by twice repeating the word "amen" which means "it is certain."

What is certain? What is a sure thing? This:

Whoever-- hears His Word (which comes from the Father, cf. John 14:24) and believes in the Father who sent Him-- already has everlasting life and will not come into judgment. Every human being will have to appear before the Judge, but whoever listens to Jesus' Word and believes it, trusting in the Father who sent Him, already has everlasting life and shall not come into judgment (i.e. shall not be condemned).

Well, that's not really a new verdict, is it? This message or verdict of the judge is repeated in the most familiar of all Bible passages (John 3:16): "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

Tuesday December 4

Psalm 100:1-2 Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth! Serve the Lord with gladness! Come into his presence with singing!

PREPARE FOR JOY

As we begin the season of preparation for Christmas, we are not alone. People all around the world will be preparing for Christmas during the next few weeks. Music is being prepared and presented by children, choirs, and instrumentalists, amateur and professional. Food is being gathered and prepared for the great feast days to come. Gifts are being prepared, wrapped, shopped and shipped by millions of people. Decorations are being constructed, purchased, installed, plugged in and turned on. Yet, with all of these preparations going on, the Christian knows that it is all worthless if we are not also preparing ourselves.

Of course, we have seen signs of Christmas even before this, and it really does not matter exactly when one begins Christmas preparations. The real question in all of this is: how are we preparing? The Psalm suggests that we should enter the season, and welcome our God with joy, and with thanksgiving.

What kind of Christmas are you looking for? Are you looking for a quiet and serene holiday this year-- sitting on the sofa in front of a beautifully decorated tree, nursing a mug of your favorite warm drink? We can all use times like that, can't we-- silent times, like those we sing about, when all is calm and all is bright around the Virgin Mary and her holy Child?

But the Psalmist calls for more than mere resting on the holiday. He calls upon us to welcome the LORD with shouts of joy. "Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth." May such a joy pervade even our quiet moments in the month ahead.

Wednesday December 5

Psalm 150:1-3 Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens! Praise him for his mighty deeds; Praise him with trumpet sound.

PRAISE THE LORD!

It hardly seems necessary to mention that Christmas is a time for music. So why does God's Word bother to tell us to praise the Lord with the sound of the trumpet, the lute, the harp, the timbrel, dance, strings, and flutes; with cymbals, crashing cymbals, with loud crashing cymbals? Sometimes we might be tempted to think that because we are a flute and not a trumpet, we cannot glorify God. Or if only we were a violin, then we could gently sing of His mercy. Yet here we see any and all praising the LORD.

But so often the fanfares and flourishes of our human nature at Christmas praise the goodness of humanity. So we can use reminders during these days, can't we, about whom to seek, and whom to praise as we journey to Bethlehem?

Not so in His mighty firmament. There the angels are praising God in the highest. Jesus did not come to pay for their sins, and yet they rejoice and praise God because peace and goodwill are God's gifts to lost mankind. They praise the Lord for His mighty act of becoming the lowliest of mortals in order to rescue us all!

Christ Jehovah is His name, our perfect Shepherd came,
Leaving heaven's wondrous charms To take the lost sheep in His arms.

Lowly stoops our Lord and King, In our darkness Light to bring
Peace, forgiveness-- though it cost His very life to save the lost.

Glory be to You, dear Child; On us now our God has smiled!
Blessing, honor, praise we sing This day to You, our new-born King!

Thursday February 28

Will those who have died in Christ be left behind at the coming of the Lord? NO! In fact, the living at the coming of the Lord will not depart to be with Christ until after the dead in Christ arise. After all these words do not only concern the dead in Christ, but also those who are still alive at the Coming of the Lord:

1 Thessalonians 4:15-16 For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.

THE DEAD WILL RISE!

Don't be confused by the word "first" -- it means simply that those believers who have died will be raised before the living depart to be with the Lord, rising into the air to meet the returning Lord of Glory.

Don't be confused by the word "first" -- it doesn't mean that there will be multiple resurrections. Jesus didn't promise to return multiple times secretly to whisk away believers before the final judgment. While the unbelieving dead aren't specifically referred to here, they will also be raised up at the same time, but to meet the Lord as their final Judge rather than as their glorious Savior.

Then, after those who have died believing in Jesus have been raised, all who believe will rise into the sky:

1 Thessalonians 4:17 Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.

Therefore may the Spirit of God use these words to comfort us and reveal to us what will happen at the coming of the Lord-- To both those who have died in Christ and those in Christ who yet remain on earth!

Come, Lord Jesus!

Wednesday February 27

1 Thessalonians 4:16 For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.

FOREVER WITH THE LORD

There can be no doubt at all that these words refer to the second coming of the Lord Jesus. The Lord Jesus who visibly ascended will also descend from heaven. Then all these things will occur in an instant (1 Corinthians 15:52):

A cry of command -- There will be a cry or shout of command and all who are in the graves will hear the voice of the Son of God and arise from their graves (John 5:28).

The Voice of an Archangel -- will be heard as the angels of God return with Him to this earth. This will be no secret, but an event unlike any other this world has known.

The Trumpet of God -- will sound announcing the Coming of the Lord to all. Then all the dead will be raised, and the souls of those who died believing in Christ will be reunited with their resurrected bodies and glorified, as it is also written (1 Corinthians 15:51-52): "Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed."

Those who have died in Christ, whose passing we have mourned and whose bodies sleep in their graves to this very day, will arise from the dead. They will not miss out on the glorious return of the Lord Jesus. They will not be left behind here to sleep for eternity.

Therefore, we do not grieve at death as those who have no hope in Christ. We do not merely hope they are in a "better place" for the Scripture declares that they are with the Lord which is far better (Philippians 1:23). They will remain with the Lord Christ until He returns in glory.

Thursday December 6

Matthew 1:20 But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife ...

GOD'S ANGEL

Wouldn't it be nice if every time we were confused, or on the wrong track, God would send an angel to set us right? But the problem is not necessarily that God does not speak to us, is it? His apostles, like Matthew here, are still bringing God's timeless messages to us today. The problem is: how are we going to respond when that message is not what we expected, when it leaves us feeling a bit uncomfortable, or when it doesn't seem to change things?

Joseph was asked to believe the angel enough to take Mary as his wife, just as though nothing were out of the ordinary, to provide the protection of marriage for Mary to have the child that was not his. But Joseph was not commanded to do these things. He was not frightened into it. He was persuaded to believe and to do.

And now we, too, are asked to believe that angel: that this Child is truly God's Son come to save us from all the punishment our sins deserve. When the angel left Joseph, all he had that he hadn't had before was the assurance that the Lord Himself was involved in all that was going on.

And haven't God's messengers given us that same assurance: "All things work together for good to them that love God..." "I will not leave thee nor forsake thee...."

What harm can sin and death then do?
The true God now abides with you.
Let hell and Satan rage and chafe,
Christ is your brother – you are safe!

Friday December 7

Luke 1:19 And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news."

THE SHEPHERDS AND ZACHARIAS

When the angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds, or to Zacharias, they were terribly frightened. In the case of the shepherds, however, it went from fear to faith. In the case of Zacharias, it went from dread to doubting. Zacharias not only lost his fear, but also had the audacity to answer: "How can I know this?" He couldn't just take the angel's word for it.

Answer? "I am Gabriel."

"Gabriel" can mean "God's mighty one," or "God is mighty." Either way, who would question the truthfulness of God's hero, or the ability of the mighty God?

"I stand in the presence of God."

Nothing false or unholy can stand in the presence of God. So how could we doubt the truthfulness of one who so stands?

Human beings have little trouble considering volcanos, earthquakes and other disasters to be "acts of God." But the message of Gabriel was good news, and Zacharias thought it was too good to be true. The shepherds were convinced. They spoke immediately about what had happened in Bethlehem, not waiting to "verify." The Word of God had convinced them.

And the answer was the same for Zacharias: A little more hearing, and a lot less talking was what he needed in the months to come, and this is what the LORD did for him. And in this blessed season, the LORD also gives us a chance for hearing, and for speaking: a chance to welcome to earth our noble Guest. He comes to share our misery. How can we ever thank Him?

Tuesday February 26

We learned yesterday that these words offer comforting information for the living about what will happen to those who have died believing in Jesus at the Coming of the Lord. These words are given to comfort the living that trust in Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 4:14 ... Since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

THIS SAME JESUS

These are the facts declared in God's Word upon which our faith rests: Jesus of Nazareth lived without sin, died for sin and rose again to confirm our sins have been forgiven. Those who believe in Him will not perish but have eternal life.

After the resurrection Jesus instructed the Apostles for 40 days and then ascended into heaven in the presence of a gathering of His disciples. After the Savior's body was hidden from their sight by a cloud, Angels appeared with a question and a statement about the second coming of the Lord Jesus (Acts 1:11, ESV): "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

These words are recorded for us so that we may know that the same Jesus who was visibly taken from them into heaven will also return in the same way, visibly, from heaven. Moreover, when the Lord Jesus comes again, those who have died believing in Jesus will return with Him.

The souls of those who have died believing in Christ will return with Christ to be reunited with their resurrected bodies. They will not miss out on the coming of the Lord, neither will they be left behind.

Come, Lord Jesus!

Monday February 25

1 Thessalonians 4:13 But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

THE COMING OF THE LORD

We don't always read carefully, because we don't have to read every word carefully. When I read the newspaper or a novel for fun, I don't use a highlighter and a dictionary. It's not life or death information.

We should always read God's Word carefully, for only then can we learn the "who" and the "what" and the "why" of the context. Let's take this verse for example. If we read carefully we see the:

WHO -- that the Holy Spirit directed the Apostle Paul to write to those who believe in Thessalonica, because he calls them "brothers."

WHAT -- is also evident-- this concerns "those who are asleep," that is, those who have died believing in Jesus.

WHY -- is also clear. These words are written so that those believing brothers do not grieve as others (unbelievers) who have no hope.

The Holy Spirit isn't speaking about those who have died without faith in Jesus or their ultimate end. The purpose of these words is to comfort believers, to comfort those who have experienced the passing of a loved one who died believing in Jesus.

These are not the only words that speak of the coming of the Lord. The letter to the Thessalonians is a part of the whole, a part of God's Holy Word. It's important then that we understand these words along with all of the other statements concerning the Coming of the Lord recorded in God's Word.

We understand that these words concern the "coming of the Lord" -- the day when the Lord Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead (2 Timothy 4:1). We understand that Jesus will come once, visibly (Revelation 1:7), a second time to bring salvation to those who (by faith) wait for Him, for it is written (Hebrews 9:28, ESV): "... So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him."

Come, Lord Jesus!

Saturday December 8

1 John. 3:8 For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil.

A TERRIBLE TIME FOR SATAN?

At first glance it would seem to be a terrible time of year for Satan, the Devil. For each time Satan hears the Christmas story or a carol proclaiming the Savior, he must cringe. When he considers how "big" Christmas has become, there seems little he can do except to go into hibernation until it all blows over. WRONG! If there is one thing Satan is master of, it is turning an apparently hopeless situation to his advantage.

Buoyed by polls indicating fewer Americans than ever even believe he exists, he is more than happy to remain out of the spotlight at Christmas -- so long as our Christmas celebrations miss the mark! He is happy to see the beautiful Christmas carols secularized. He delights in seeing Christmas commercialized, in seeing people kept busy with all the trimmings of Christmas. He doesn't even mind seeing people being kind to one another, or calling for world peace, or even going to church-- as long as people miss the real meaning of Christmas: why God sent His Son to this earth.

Christmas is a wonderful season, but also one of the Devil's busiest. Have a blessed and happy Christmas-- but don't forget that the "enemy" has not retreated or let down his guard. Rejoice in the coming of the Christ-child and the gift of salvation He brings to you and all mankind. Make this the focal point of all your Christmas activities. For while you will then bring joy to your Father in heaven, you will bring sorrow and remorse to the one and only person you wish to have a truly miserable Christmas. Have a wretched Christmas, Satan.

Remember Christ our Savior Was born on Christmas Day
To save us all from Satan's pow'r When we were gone astray
Oh tidings of comfort and joy!

-- Adapted from the "Lutheran Spokesman"

Monday December 10

OPPORTUNITIES!

The third chapter of Acts continues to follow the ministry of Peter and John through Jerusalem. In this chapter we find them on the steps of the Temple at the hour of prayer. They heal a man who had been lame from the time he was in his mother's womb. This healing leads to another opportunity for Peter to preach a bold Law and Gospel sermon. Last week we briefly discussed the contents of Peter's sermon. With all that happens in chapter three, our mission focus for our devotion today is "opportunities."

"Now Peter and John went up together to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour. And a certain man lame from his mother's womb was carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, to ask alms from those who entered the temple; who, seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, asked for alms. And fixing his eyes on him, with John, Peter said, "Look at us." So he gave them his attention, expecting to receive something from them" (Acts 3:1-5).

Often times I think we, as ambassadors for Christ, feel pressure to create opportunities to tell others about Jesus. The fact of the matter is that there are opportunities all around us. Consider Peter and John in this account. They were not on their way to the Temple to evangelize and yet the Lord provided an opportunity to do just that. The opportunity came from someone who looking for something other than the Gospel. What he received was far greater than the alms he was seeking. He received healing, and even greater than that, he received the Gospel!

This opportunity then led to another opportunity as the man who had been healed clung to them and a crowd gathered. The opportunity to share the Gospel with one person led to an opportunity to share God's saving word with a large group! And Peter, we're told, seized the opportunity to preach another bold Law and Gospel sermon to the crowd.

"Now as the lame man who was healed held on to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them... greatly amazed" (Acts 3:11-12).

Again, it doesn't seem that Peter and John were out creating opportunities to share God's word, but the Lord opened a door they didn't necessarily expect. How great is that-- knowing that God will provide opportunities for us to proclaim the Good News even when we don't expect it!

Saturday February 23

Matthew 24:42-44 Keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

KEEP ALERT FOR HIS COMING

One vivid picture the Lord uses to illustrate the unexpected nature of His return at the end of the age is a thief breaking into a house in the middle of the night. The thief doesn't publicize when he is intending to commit his thievery. He carries out his plan at a time when he knows the homeowner will be caught unawares.

Similarly, Jesus has revealed that His second coming will occur when the citizens of earth least expect it. They'll be carrying on normal everyday activities like surfing the internet, shopping for groceries, watching sports events, raking leaves in the front yard, working at the office. Then, in the twinkle of an eye, the Lord will draw the final curtain on the stage of world history. He'll descend from heaven, burn up the world with fire, consign the godless to hell, but receive His faithful into heaven's lovely mansions.

The urgent lesson for us is that we live in a state of perpetual readiness, with our eyes of faith fixed on our Savior, looking to His cross for forgiveness, expecting His return to happen this very day. Scripture counsels us: "Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, Make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him" (2 Peter 3:11-14). "You, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day ... Since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 4:4-5, 7-9).

Friday February 22

Matthew 24:36 No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven.

UNKNOWABLE ... BUT CERTAIN

A question many have asked down through the years is: When will the Last Day arrive? Many have foolishly attempted to forecast it. Years ago I received a pamphlet in my mailbox: "88 Reasons Why the Rapture Could Be in 1988." Needless to say, the "reasons" were bogus (not to mention that the very notion of a so-called rapture of the Church into heaven before the Last Day is bogus since it's nowhere taught in Scripture).

The Lord has revealed to us that the day of His second coming is unknowable. Jesus said: "Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man. People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all. It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed" (Luke 17:26-30). Peter testified: "The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night" (2 Peter 3:10). Paul: "While people are saying, 'Peace and safety,' destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape" (1 Thessalonians 5:3).

But the Last Day will come! Most certainly! Then all who have anchored their hopes in Christ Jesus will lift up their heads with joy knowing their heavenly homecoming day has arrived!

Tuesday December 11

Isaiah 40:1-2 "Comfort, yes, comfort My people!" says your God. "Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her, that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned; for she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins ..."

THE PREACHER'S ADVENT MESSAGE: PROCLAIMS COMFORT

Bethany Seminary Dean Norman A. Madson (1886-1962) said that no pastor can claim to be fulfilling his calling unless he makes COMFORT the basis for all his preaching and teaching. That is clearly the teaching of our text. While Old Testament prophets were to warn God's people of impending wrath and punishment if they disobeyed Him, their chief calling was to be "comfort bringers." Yes, the people had sinned and been carried away into captivity, but God would see to their safe return to their homeland. He would pardon their iniquity, blessing them even in double measure.

That is also the chief message of God's faithful New Testament messengers. Ever since the verdict pronounced upon Adam for the very first sin, mankind has had a hard way on this Earth. Sin is behind all the wars and violence in the world. Sin is the underlying cause of the ugly unrest in the hearts and souls of sinners.

BUT THERE IS COMFORT, THERE IS PEACE for the sinner, whoever he or she is! That peace is wrapped up in the good tidings first heralded over the plains of Bethlehem by the Christmas angels: "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord....Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

And so we love to sing the Advent hymn based on this Scripture text:

"Comfort, comfort ye, My people, Speak ye peace," thus saith our God;
"Comfort those who sit in darkness, Mourning 'neath their sorrows' load.
Speak ye to Jerusalem Of the peace that waits for them;
Tell her that her sins I cover And her warfare now is over."

Yea, her sins our God will pardon, Blotting out each dark misdeed;
All that well deserved His anger He no more will see or heed.
She hath suffered many a day, Now her griefs have passed away;
God will change her pining sadness Into ever-springing gladness.
(Lutheran Service Book, 347:1-2)

Wednesday December 12

Isaiah 40:1-2 "Comfort, yes, comfort My people!" says your God. "Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her, that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned; for she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins..."

THE PREACHER'S ADVENT MESSAGE

True peace and comfort is embodied in God's free gift wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in Bethlehem's lowly manger. In that Christmas gospel is forgiveness for the sorrowful, encouragement for the fearful, superhuman strength for earth-bound mortals. A certain kind of comfort can be found in secular counseling services, in offices and methods of human psychiatry and psychology. But no comfort can match that which poor sinners receive from hearing that Jesus came into this "world of misery" that He might give Himself a ransom, a sin-payment, for our sins.

The forgiveness He won need not be--cannot be--bought or sold. No gift money can buy on Black Friday, Cyber Monday, or any other day of the year, can afford sinners true comfort. Think of it: whatever sinners experience as a consequence of their sin is replaced "double"--two-fold--from the unfailing storehouse of God's rich grace and mercy in His Son, Jesus.

As writes the apostle Paul: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God..." (2 Corinthians 1:3f).

The same apostle Paul writes to the Roman Christians, "How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things..." (10:11f).

And so we sing:

How beauteous are their feet Who stand on Zion's hill;
Who bring salvation on their tongues And words of peace reveal!
How charming is their voice! How sweet their tidings are!
"Zion, behold thy Savior-King; He reigns and triumphs here."
How happy are the ears That hear this joyful sound,
Which kings and prophets waited for, And sought, but never found.
(The Lutheran Hymnal, 487:1-3)

Thursday February 21

2 Thessalonians 1:5 You will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God.

ME ... WORTHY?

A notable phrase in the passage above is "counted worthy." What does that mean? Well, we all recognize, don't we, that in and of ourselves we are unworthy of the least of God's mercies? Because of our sins against God's holy Law we don't merit any kindness from Him during our sojourn on earth. Nor do we deserve to be received into the joys of His presence in the world to come. We deserve to be shut out from His presence forever, just as much as the rankest of unbelievers and most dyed-in-the-wool atheist. As people who by nature are sinful we have reason to ask with the hymn writer:

How will my heart endure The terrors of that Day
When earth and heaven before His face Astonished shrink away?
(The Lutheran Hymnal, 610:4)

The wonder of the Gospel is that our heavenly Father IS going to COUNT US WORTHY to receive His kingdom, for the sake of the One who was "delivered over to death for our sins and raised to life for our justification" (Romans 4:25). In fact, He has already placed Christ's worthiness, His merits, His righteousness to our credit by faith! So we may look forward for the Last Day with eagerness, singing as we go:

My Savior paid the debt I owe
And for my sin was smitten;
Within the Book of Life I know
My name has now been written.
I will not doubt, for I am free,
And Satan cannot threaten me;
There is no condemnation!
(Lutheran Service Book, 508:5)

Wednesday February 20

2 Thessalonians 1:6 God is just: He will ... give relief to you who are troubled.

SWEET RELIEF

A significant word in the verse above is RELIEF. We are well acquainted with what it means. When we're suffering from the flu we take medications that will help to soothe the symptoms. When we suffer from joint sprains or muscle strains we apply ointments designed to alleviate the discomfort.

The Bible teaches that when the Savior returns on Judgment Day He will bring us permanent relief from all that now pains us. Not only will He transform our bodies so that they are conformed to His and no longer subject to discomfort of any kind (see Philemon 3:21), He will also grant us relief from the sufferings that come our way in this present age on account of our faith-connection to Him, the troubles that the unbelieving world inflicts on us. When the Day of the Lord arrives He is going to turn the tables, so to speak. He will heap untold trouble on His enemies and bring sweet relief to His saints. "The times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began" (Acts 3:21).

Then rest and peace in endless measure
Shall be ours through eternity;
No grief, no care, shall mar our pleasure,
And untold bliss our lot shall be.
Oh, had we wings to hasten yonder--
No more o'er earthly ills to ponder--
To join the glad, triumphant band!
Make haste, my soul, forget all sadness;
For peace awaits thee, joy and gladness,--
The perfect rest is nigh at hand.
(The Lutheran Hymnal, 615:4)

Thursday December 13

Isaiah 40:3-5 The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth; the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

THE PREACHER'S ADVENT MESSAGE: CALLS FOR REPENTANCE

The wilderness preacher, John the Baptizer, the Lord's forerunner, went before Jesus preaching two great themes: "Behold the Lamb of God" and "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

The desert is a picture of the spiritual condition of the hearts of all by nature. Since the fall, our heart is a wasteland, lacking anything to create or sustain a God-pleasing life. Consider that when we are expecting guests, we prepare our homes. Even so, before the coming Lord ungodly attitudes and conditions need to be removed through the power of the Holy Spirit.

"Every valley shall be exalted..." The heart which feels its utter unworthiness needs to be lifted up with the sweet comfort, peace, hope, and joy in the gospel of Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

"... Every mountain and hill brought low." With the jackhammer of God's law the prideful self-sufficiency of the sinful human heart needs to be bulldozed off.

"... The crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth." The loveless ways by which people make life miserable for one another, and the rough places of disobedience to God's Word need to be cleared out that the Savior might find room in the heart.

Hark, the herald's voice is crying In the desert far and near.
Calling sinners to repentance, Since the Kingdom now is here.
O that warning cry obey! Now prepare for God a way;
Let the valleys rise to meet Him And the hills bow down to greet Him.
Make ye straight what long was crooked; Make the rougher places plain.
Let your hearts be true and humble, As befits His holy reign.
For the glory of the Lord Now o'er earth is shed abroad.
And all flesh shall see the token That His Word is never broken.
(Lutheran Service Book, 347:3-4)

Friday December 14

Isaiah 40:6-9 The voice said, "Cry out!" And he said, "What shall I cry?" "All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, because the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flowers fades, but the word of our God stands forever." O Zion, You who bring good tidings, get up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, You who bring good tidings, lift up your voice with strength, lift it up, be not afraid; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!"

THE PREACHER'S ADVENT MESSAGE: PROCLAIMS "BEHOLD YOUR GOD!"

The weakness and frailty of man is here contrasted with the immortal and enduring Word of our God. In our high tech, digital day, an unbelieving world easily bows down before its own power and achievements. Our Christian calling is to counteract such arrogance with the message that all flesh withers as grass and all its glory fades as do the flowers of the field. Indeed, when all mankind's greatest achievements have faded away as a distant memory, only the teachings of the sacred Word of God shall endure.

Therefore, faithful spokes-persons of the Lord's Church of believers ("Zion" and "Jerusalem") will lift their voices with strength and holy fearlessness. Rather than succumbing to pressures of a scornful world to water down or pollute the Word of God, faithful preachers in the pulpits and faithful believers in the pews will together boldly proclaim loudly and clearly: BEHOLD YOUR GOD!

And who is that God? He is not just some generic god. He is none other than Jehovah-God, the Covenant God. Yes, He is the God who at Christmas-time wonderfully fulfilled all His promises to send His Son, the Savior, on a rescue mission to planet Earth!

Arise, O Christian people! Prepare yourselves today;
Prepare to greet the Savior, Who takes your sins away.
To us by grace alone The truth and light were given
The promised Lord from heaven To all the world is shown.
Prepare my heart, Lord Jesus; Turn not from me aside,
And help me to receive You This blessed Advent-tide.
From stall and manger low Come now to dwell within me;
I'll sing Your praises gladly And forth Your glory show. (LSB 354:1, 4)

Tuesday February 19

2 Thessalonians 1:6-7 God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you ... This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels.

TAKE HEART, THOSE WHO TROUBLE YOU WON'T ALWAYS

As we read the account of the early Christian church as recorded in the Book of Acts one thing that jumps out is the fiery trials early believers were called on to endure at the hands of Jesus' enemies, because of their love for Him and their loyalty to His Word. Because of this they were under pressure to abandon their faith. For this reason Paul wrote letters of encouragement to buck them up, urging them to stay true to Jesus, assuring them that troubles they were experiencing would end. When? When the Lord returns at the end of the age to judge the living and the dead.

Aren't we also in need of such encouragement? When we see society treating God's holy commandments as dusty relics from an outmoded past, insinuating that those who believe otherwise are fools. When we see the world treating the Bible teachings as nonsense, especially the message of the cross we hold dear. When the Scripture teaching of a future Day of Reckoning is mocked: "Where is the 'coming' Jesus promised? For eons everything's gone on as it always has! The sun comes up in the morning and sets every night. So it will ever be! You Christians really believe the universe has an expiration date?! Foolish!" ... it can be discouraging. We might even be tempted to think that what Scripture says about Jesus' second coming is a myth.

Therefore, to encourage us to stand firm in God's Truth, the Savior reminds us that "when I return (make no mistake, I WILL return!) I will pay back those who trouble you. I will give the ungodly what they've got coming for refusing the invitation to salvation I extended to them and for mistreating My dear believers." "They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power" (v. 9).

On Christ, by faith, I wish to live,
From Him my life, my all, receive,
To Him devote my fleeting hours,
Serve Him alone with all my powers.
(Christian Worship, 466:2)

Monday February 18

Revelation 2:20 He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon."

KEEP ALERT AS YOU TRAVEL

Did you pay attention to the signs when you drove to work today? That flashing yellow light that clued you in to a busy intersection coming up or a stoplight about to turn red? An orange road construction sign that forewarned you about a lane closure so that you would slow down? I hope so. It's important to keep alert to the roadsigns as you travel. It isn't a good idea to daydream or to get distracted (definitely not to text). It could result, not only in missing your exit but in your being involved in a serious crash.

As Christians we need to pay attention to the signs Jesus has told us about regarding His Second Coming, as we travel down the road of our life towards heaven, signs that are indicators that we're approaching the "exit" that will lead us off of this earth. What are these signs? Jesus speaks of such things as wars and rumors of wars, the proliferation of false prophets who deceive many, disturbances in nature like earthquakes, an increase of wickedness, and the love of many growing cold (see Matthew 24).

Any of these things sound familiar? Well, then, you can be sure the Day of the Savior's return is approaching! When you notice such things happening in the world around you be reminded that your exit from the world is drawing near. May they serve as encouragements to live each day with your eyes of faith fixed on Him.

"Wake, awake, for night is flying,
The watchmen on the heights are crying:
"Awake, Jerusalem, arise!"
Midnight hears the welcome voices
And at the thrilling cry rejoices:
"Oh, where are ye, ye virgins wise?
The Bridegroom comes, awake!
Your lamps with gladness take! Hallelujah!
With bridal care Yourselves prepare
To meet the Bridegroom, who is near."
(The Lutheran Hymnal, 609:1)

Saturday December 15

Isaiah 1:18 Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.

A WHITE CHRISTMAS

Are you dreaming of a white Christmas? For many it just doesn't seem like Christmas without at least a little snow. No wonder then that one of the best selling songs of all time is "White Christmas." Did you know, though, that God predicted a white Christmas? Joseph didn't have to shovel a path to the stable in Bethlehem and the shepherds didn't trudge through three-foot drifts to see the newborn Baby. The climate of Israel is more like Phoenix than Minneapolis. Nevertheless, it was a white Christmas. Some seven centuries before the angels sang of the Savior's birth, God spoke through Isaiah: "Come, now, let us reason together . . . Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool" (Isaiah 1:18).

To make this miracle a reality, God sent His Son: conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary. Jesus truly makes our Christmas "white." He came to calm and quiet the harsh accusations of our guilty conscience. Our conscience reminds us that we are not the people we ought to be. Self-interest all too often interferes with loving and serving God and one another as God's Law commands. Guilt ringing in our ears quickly drowns out joy. But then remember Christmas.

Jesus came to quiet guilt by taking every bit of it upon Himself. He didn't come to condemn us for our sin. He came to be sin for us. Jesus makes our Christmas white by blanketing us with the pure whiteness of His righteousness. Jesus won peace by His holy life and innocent suffering and death. His peace is our peace now by faith. In Christ all is well between you and God. He couldn't be happier with you. Things couldn't be better!

In many places in our country there won't be snowflakes in the air Christmas Eve. Yet that really won't matter. The birth of God's only-begotten Son means we'll still have a "white" Christmas in the very best possible way. That's no dream!

-- Adapted from the "Lutheran Spokesman"

Monday December 17

Acts 4:20 For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.

I JUST CAN'T HELP IT!

I seem to remember as a child being told by my teacher, quite often, to stop messing around in class. When asked by my parents why I didn't seem to listen to my teacher and stop messing around in class, I remember responding with an excuse something along the line of "I just can't help it." And to some degree that was the truth. I just couldn't stop myself from fidgeting around in my desk and playing with my pencils, etc. There was just something inside of me that led me to keep doing it. We can probably all relate, to some degree, with this excuse. We would probably all agree that my disobedience was not justified by my excuse.

But when it comes to proclaiming God's saving word despite opposition, this may be the best excuse ever. That was the case with Peter and John as they explained why they continued to proclaim Jesus Christ and His resurrection in Jerusalem even after they had been told to stop. They said: "We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20).

In the fourth chapter of Acts we find Peter and John before the Sanhedrin because they had healed a man in the name of Jesus. They are being told to stop preaching in the name of Jesus. Peter responds for the both of them as he says "we just can't help it." His response reminds us that because of the faith that the Holy Spirit works in our hearts, we all have the same excuse for speaking God's saving word, especially in times when it might not be popular.

Peter and John were filled to overflowing with the love of Christ to the point where "we just can't hold it back." So are we. Even if we wanted to, we cannot but speak the things that we have seen and heard. The love of Christ compels us to proclaim the Good News!

Saturday February 16

2 Kings 6:17 And Elisha prayed, "Open his eyes, Lord, so that he may see." Then the Lord opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

IT IS BETTER TO TAKE REFUGE IN THE LORD THAN TO TRUST IN PRINCES

When the Syrian armies besieged Dothan in order to capture Elisha, the Prophet did not need to see the angel armies to know the LORD was protecting him -- but his servant did. Martin Luther, as a called servant of the LORD in the ministry of the Word, knew that despite the very real threat of the armies of those who opposed the Reformation and the Gospel, his security was in the hands of God, not the arms of men. The Reformer sought to open the eyes of Elector Frederick the Wise, his prince and concerned protector, to this in a letter of March 5, 1522.

Frederick was stunned to hear of Luther's planned return from the Wartburg the first week of March 1522. Wittenberg was in turmoil with troubled people in the churches and violence in the streets. Authorities in other cities considered armed intervention. To the Prince, Luther's return seemed to be bad timing and dangerous for the Reformer. Frederick sent a swift rider with a message for Luther, urging him to stay safe in Wartburg.

At the same time, knowing Luther, the Elector sent an escort to meet the Reformer along the way. Luther quickly sent a response to Frederick's letter. He told the Prince he should not feel responsible if any ill should befall him. If Luther was arrested by imperial agents and killed, the Elector was in no way to blame. As for the escort Frederick had arranged, Luther wrote: "I am going to Wittenberg under a far higher protection than the Elector's. I have no intention of asking Your Electoral Grace for protection. Indeed, I think I shall protect Your Electoral Grace more than you are able to protect me. If I thought Your Electoral Grace could and would protect me, I should not go. The sword ought not and cannot help a matter of this kind. He who believes the most, can protect the most. And since I have the impression that Your Electoral Grace is still quite weak in faith, I can by no means regard Your Electoral Grace as the man to protect and save me."

Martin Luther's faith was not mere words. By the grace of God he lived what he believed. Since Christ had paid with His blood for Luther's greatest need -- right-standing with God -- and had given him eternal life, Luther saw earthly troubles, even his own death, as only temporary difficulties. We have the same Savior and the same Word of promise. May God strengthen us each in faith in Him and in living that faith.

Friday February 15

John 8:31-32 Jesus said, "If you hold to my word, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT

When Martin Luther secretly traveled to Wittenberg from the safety of the Castle Wartburg, he went a bearded knight under the name "Junker Jorg." As "Knight George" he had a sword strapped to his waist. When he saw how the common people of Wittenberg were being pushed this way and that because they did not have Bibles to read or hearts grounded in Jesus the Savior, he went back to the Wartburg determined to put a different sword in their hands-- the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.

There were a limited number of Bibles available to the the people of Germany at that time, often simply a single one per church, and it was in Latin, the language of the learned, not of ordinary people.

Luther also had a limited number of books available in his little study high on the Wartburg's castle wall. But while he surely had a Latin Bible at hand, the Reformer translated the New Testament from the original Greek. He put it in a German that could be read and understood throughout the provinces of his native land. What a gift God gave thousands through this New Testament Luther brought to life in just eleven weeks before he returned to Wittenberg for good.

Martin Luther was 37 years old and intimately familiar in the Greek New Testament when he crafted his translation in the seclusion of the Wartburg. God has also tasked you and me and every believer in Christ with bringing the message of the New Testament to people in our land. To do this we need to be intimately familiar with the Word of forgiveness and life we are called to share. Therefore, let us each this day renew our commitment to walk in the Word we have in our own language.

To this help us, Heavenly Father.

Tuesday December 18

Philippians 4:4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

WHERE'S THE JOY?

Have you noticed how much time is spent in "searching" at this time of year? We search through the Sunday ads, online catalogs, and the aisles of the mall for just the right gifts for the people on our list. We dig through closets and garages for lights and other decorations. We page through cookbooks for favorite Christmas recipes.

However, what people are searching for most of all is joy. It's an elusive thing. Lasting joy is not going to be found in a store or package under the tree. Genuine joy does not come from a recipe or a visit with Santa or some unique holiday experience or activity. It is not going to be found in squeezing as much as you possibly can into your schedule over the next couple weeks.

According to some, it's a matter of will: "I just decided to be joyful." But true joy can't be commanded or forced on a person. It's the response of a grateful, happy heart. There is only one source of real, permanent joy. Paul writes: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4).

People, presents, parties, and our own accomplishments may provide a brief flicker of happiness, but only Jesus, the Light of the world sparks an enduring flame of gratitude in the heart. He alone came with unconditional love for sinners. We don't have to earn His gifts. We couldn't even if we tried. He alone came to do everything necessary to free us from fear and death by taking the punishment we deserve upon Himself. He comes still today in His Word assuring us of His continued love and presence in our lives. He promises that He will never leave or forsake us. His plans are to prosper, not to harm us. He tells us that He will soon return and take us home with Him. Though we can't even see into tomorrow, He tells us not to worry, for nothing can separate us from His love.

Wednesday December 19

John 12:15 "Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!"

JOY TO THE WORLD, THE LORD IS COME. LET EARTH RECEIVE HER KING.

Kings of old were absolute rulers. What they said was law and enforced immediately. They were thought of, and rightly so, as divinely ordained to rule. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God (Romans 13:1). An earthly king could be a great blessing or the worst nightmare imaginable, even as world leaders today. You know the saying: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men." We've seen how corrupt and immoral our own country's leaders can be. We praise God for His grace in sending the Holy Child to be our King who rules with perfect love and forgiveness.

Jesus our King rules in a very special way. He rules over all and everything is His, but He is unlike any earthly king or ruler. Our King did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). Our King was born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons (Galatians 4:4-5). Our King gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people (Titus 2:14). Our King, unlike worldly rulers, has kept His Word, redeeming us from sin and death! He rules in our hearts and in the hearts of all who trust in Him. He is a loving and merciful King. Jesus rules by grace through His eternal and infallible Word! Through the Word the Spirit strengthens and preserves us in the true Christian faith; the faith that trusts in Jesus alone for forgiveness, life, and salvation! Jesus is our life, our joy, our strength, our all! Christmas, for us, is a wondrous time of year. It focuses our hearts on our King's miraculous grace. It shows us His love and mercy. In Christ our Savior, every Christmas is merry!

Thursday February 14

Romans 14:8, 13 If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord ... make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother.

THE SHEPHERD'S HEART

When by their actions some of the Christians in Rome put the faith of their weaker brothers in jeopardy, the Apostle Paul, by inspiration of the Spirit, wrote to them about it. For Paul, "living for Christ" meant showing a Christ-like love for believers both weak and strong. The great Good Shepherd gives His under-shepherds a heart like His own.

While Martin Luther lived hidden away in the Wartburg, he kept in close touch by letter with the teachers and pastors some 170 miles distant in Wittenberg. The people of that city were especially on his heart. A month after he was secreted in the castle fortress he dedicated an exposition of Psalm 37 to "the poor little flock of Christ at Wittenberg." When, in the months that followed, some of the church leaders in Wittenberg made changes in liturgy, the Lord's Supper, the marriage of priests, and other things without instructing the common people, they led many to fear they were doing wrong. Men like Karlstadt did not stop to think that making such changes without carefully explaining the Word of God behind their actions confused and vexed simple Christians who were bewildered by what was happening in their church.

Luther's heart went out to those people whose tender consciences were trampled on. He counseled leaders in Wittenberg to slow down and take the time to show the people the Gospel foundation for the changes being initiated. Better the strong wait in love for the weak to catch up, than that the faith of some be damaged or destroyed. When his letters did not bring about the concern for the weak Luther felt for "Christ's poor little flock," the Reformer put in an unexpected personal appearance in Wittenberg. In early Dec. 1521, bearded and in the garb of a knight (complete with sword), he covered 170 miles on horseback, some of it through territory controlled by his enemies, to settle things down by speaking up for the simple Christians he had preached to just eight months prior.

The Bible describes Christians as people whom the Father makes more and more in the likeness of Jesus. When we think and love like our Lord Jesus, we will see our fellow believers as He does. As sheep for whom the Good Shepherd laid down His life. As sheep in need of a shepherd's care. As sheep about whom we care.

Wednesday February 13

Acts 23:23-24 Then he [the commander] called two of his centurions and ordered them, "Get ready a detachment of two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at nine tonight. Provide horses for Paul so that he may be taken safely to Governor Felix."

KIDNAPPED!

While Paul was in the protective custody of the Commander of the Roman garrison in Jerusalem, a plot to murder the Apostle was uncovered. The Roman Commander took his responsibility seriously, especially since Paul was a Roman citizen, and used his troops to move Paul swiftly to safety under the cover of darkness.

Some 14 centuries later in Germany, Frederick the Wise of Saxony took extraordinary steps to see to the safety of a monk who, as a citizen and professor at the Prince's university, was under his protection. After Martin Luther took his stand on the Word of God at the Diet in the city of Worms, Emperor Charles V declared him an outlaw. Anyone killing Luther would thus not be committing murder, but carrying out the Emperor's will. Prince Frederick was not going to let that happen.

As Luther traveled by horse-cart through the Thuringian forest near Eisenach, three armed knights came out of the woods and forcibly carried him off. Like Paul, Luther was placed on a waiting mount and miles later, under cover of darkness, brought into the safety of a massive fortress-- Wartburg Castle.

In both of these cases God used men in positions of government authority to protect a messenger of the Gospel of Christ. In both cases Jesus fulfilled the promise He made when he sent Christ-believers everywhere out into the world with the message of forgiveness and life in Jesus' name.

"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

This same promise Jesus has made to you and me. What He did for the Apostle Paul and Martin Luther Jesus will do for us. Christ may not use armed troops, kidnapping or night-time horse-rides, but as we take the Gospel to sinners in need, God may well use people in authority to protect us. After all, He put them there-- and it's His Gospel message.

Thursday December 20

Luke 2:7 ... she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger ...

TRACE WE THE BABE, WHO HATH RETRIEVED OUR LOSS, FROM HIS POOR MANGER TO HIS BITTER CROSS

We focus our eyes on a Newborn and his parents. The precious Child is sleeping peacefully. His parents are sitting close by watching over Him. From outward appearances He seems like a normal Jewish baby boy. There wouldn't appear to be anything special about Him, even though He is of royal blood-- a direct descendant of King David. But far greater than His royal heritage is that this Child is the eternally blessed God who came to save fallen mankind. Precious few knew that this was the birth of the King of kings, but that's the Christmas Miracle!

His parent's humble circumstances made it necessary that His first bed be a feeding trough. His royal vestments were mere strips of cheap cloth. The Baby is sleeping peacefully even though all mankind's hopes and dreams rest on His tiny shoulders. He is the Messiah that the Word of God had long promised. Unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given! The Father gives His Son for mankind's redemption. In perfect love-- holy, pure, and unconditional-- the promised Savior has arrived, the Word become flesh.

When we think of our Savior this time of year we are certainly reminded of the Christ Child's manger. Jesus, mankind's Redeemer, rested in a feeding trough. In our manger scenes that's invariably a wooden feed trough. And in the wood of His manger we can see His coming cross. The manger and the cross are perfect examples the Christmas Miracle. Love so great that it led God the Son to take on human flesh and place Himself under the subjection of the Law. For the world that's a lot to see in one lowly Child, but for us it's the Christmas Miracle fulfilled! We have peace with God through the forgiveness of sins. Jesus' work of redemption is our eternal Christmas gift! Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!

Friday December 21

Luke 2:11 ... unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

HE LEFT HIS THRONE TO SAVE US!

We all have wonderful memories of Christmases past and they have taught us lessons about life and salvation-- lessons only Christians can understand! Think back when you were young, how you just couldn't wait for Christmas to get here. Remember the excitement, the anticipation, and finally the joy of those special gifts just for you. We may have looked at those gifts a hundred times as they sat beautifully wrapped under the tree trying to guess what they were and hoping they were what we thought.

Since then we've experienced the joy of giving gifts. We can't wait for others to open them, wanting them to be surprised, excited! We so hope they will treasure what we gave them. Gifts we give to others often convey feelings or emotions that can be hard to express. They show the love and gratitude we have for them. As we've grown older I'm sure we've found more joy in giving gifts than receiving them!

Like you, I remember watching as my children and grandchildren opened their gifts. The joy they show, the thankfulness they express, is more than just emotion over a "thing," it's also an expression of their love. The love and they show is greater than any gift they could have given to us!

Those feelings might help us understand in some small way what our Savior felt that first Christmas, when He showed His love and joy in such an incomparable way. He Who is Christmas showed us how much we mean to Him in giving Himself to us.

As you and I hope our gifts are treasured by our loved ones, how much more doesn't Jesus hope all will treasure His gift. His gift couldn't be bought with any amount. It couldn't be found under a tree. Rather His ultimate gift was on a tree! His cross at Calvary was certainly a Christmas tree of sorts, but the only decoration hanging from it was mankind's Redeemer, freely giving His life as a gift to all! For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us!

The gift was given in perfect love, tailored exactly to each individual's needs. Hopefully you will never know how it feels to give a gift in love only to see it hated and not wanted, but Jesus does! His Gift of peace and life eternal many will stand in line to exchange!

Tuesday February 12

Matthew 17:5 While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

THE ONE THING WE NEED ISN'T A THING

Peter was talking: "Lord, it is good to be here. If you wish, I will put up three tents--one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." Of course, Peter didn't know what he was saying, and probably did not mean to put Jesus on the same level with Moses and Elijah, just as we do not always know what we are doing when we go to church as just another job, or another form of entertainment.

In one way Jesus *was* like Moses, for Moses had promised in Deuteronomy: "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him" (18:15).

But while Peter was still speaking a cloud suddenly enveloped them, and a voice was speaking: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." And echoing Moses in Deuteronomy: "Listen to him!" As if to say, "You don't need three tents. This one (my Son, whom I love) is all you need. He is not just another Moses or another of the prophets. He is the one who came to take your place. I sent Him from heaven to be tempted in all ways as you are, but without ever falling into the trap. He lived the perfect life for which Adam and Eve were created, and He alone in the history of the world is by Himself truly fit to be glorified in His body and also in His human nature to be translated to the heavenly realms."

Monday February 11

John 8:31-32 If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

SMART OR FOOLISH?

Do you ever question your own judgment? Do you look back on something you said or did and wonder, "Why?" Chances are it seemed like a good idea at the time. It seemed like a good use of time to put oil in a pan to heat up on the stove while you just stepped out the back door for a moment. But then you came back to a pan in flames. It seemed like a great idea to put off homework, enjoy a sunny afternoon, and watch a movie; that is, until the next day in class. Why not squeeze just one more activity into the weekend? It sounds good until you're totally exhausted and still have things to do.

Our own judgment at times is questionable, and especially so in spiritual matters. To human reason it seems like a good idea to figure out one's own path to God. If something looks good and feels good, then it must be good. If the people around me accept a certain lifestyle, then it must be OK. If I do my best, then God will be happy with me. It seems smart to say and do what will make life here on earth as comfortable as possible. After all, it's my life, so who knows better than I do what's right for me?

The problem is that our thinking and perceptions are warped by sin. Because of that, what seems smart is really foolish, what appears good to our natural reason is deadly to our souls. So how can we know what is truly wise in the big picture? We don't have to wonder. We don't have to trust our own instincts or those of friends, experts, scientists, or philosophers. Jesus says, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32). He prayed to the Father: "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17).

The truth is that the only way to God is through Jesus, who gives us His perfect righteousness and took our sins to the cross. The only life pleasing to Him is the one lived by faith which looks to the Word as a "lamp to our feet and a light for our path." Test your judgment and decisions with the unfailing, eternally reliable Word from God Himself.

Saturday December 22

CHRISTMAS COMES AGAIN!

Angel voices in the night,
Eyes that sparkle with delight,
Gifts and golden candlelight--
Christmas comes again!

Shepherds run to David's town,
Wise men cause a king to frown,
God's own Son to earth come down--
Christmas comes again!

Sinners kneeling in the dust,
Find a Savior they can trust,
Live and die for them He must--
Christmas comes again!

Peace, forgiveness, love and joy,
Find in Mary's baby boy,
Gone the fears which now annoy--
Christmas comes again!

Hallelujah! Sing today!
Flute and reed and trumpet play,
Lift your voices now and say--
Christmas comes again!

-- From the "Lutheran Spokesman"

Monday December 24

Luke 1:30-31 Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus.

A GREAT AND MIGHTY WONDER!

On the first Christmas there were no decorated trees or houses, no special lights, no people hustling around Bethlehem searching for that last minute gift. But there was a special event that took place, almost unnoticed, that changed the world forever. An event that had been longed for since the Fall-- the fulfillment of God's grace to mankind, the birth of our Savior in that most humble of delivery rooms! In our day all the lights decorating all the streets and homes throughout the world that shine so brightly in the night cannot even begin to compare to the Light of Life that was born on that first Christmas.

Imagine how Mary must have felt when she was told by Gabriel that she would be the mother of the promised Messiah! A mighty and holy angel, who stands before the face of God, appears to her announcing that she would be the mother of the Savior, the Redeemer of mankind.

Mary realized the honor she was given. She was a woman who understood her own sinfulness and trusted God's promise to send the Christ to be her Savior. She had faithfully waited and looked for the coming of the promised Messiah and now she was told that she would be His mother!

Mary was humbled and shaken by the wondrous blessing given her. She would conceive by the power of God the Holy Spirit! In this most glorious and merciful act. God would become man to save mankind. God's undeserved love for our world of sinners gave to us a Savior from sin.

In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins (1 John 4:10).

All that Mary saw and heard must have been truly overwhelming, but we see faith in Mary's heart-- thankful praise and humble rejoicing for the gift given by God to our lost and fallen world. Mary, like us, had her problems and her sinful nature to deal with, but in Spirit-worked faith she gave us a wondrous example of living faith, placing her Savior first. As we once more celebrate the day of our Savior's birth let us follow Mary's example in celebrating the Christ Child with faith, humility, and joy! Have A Mary Christmas!

Saturday February 9

Matthew 17:1-4 Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here ..."

GOOD PLACES TO STAY--AND TO GO

There are circumstances ("good places") in which we, like Peter, find ourselves wanting to remain. We may think of a particularly uplifting worship service, or at the feet of Christian teachers, or in private meditation. It is good to be in that safe harbor, being strengthened through the gospel of Christ. However, It would be a selfish attitude only to receive God's Word and never share it. Being in such a "safe" situation may be good for us personally, but it does not help those who are in desperate need of God's Word, which illuminates our sin and casts a spotlight on Jesus as our Savior.

We are witnesses, just as Peter, James, and John were. In his second epistle Peter recalled the transfiguration of Jesus, and then added, "We also have the prophetic word made more sure, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (2 Peter 3:18). Enjoy that Word of God as you bask in Jesus' glory and are fed by Him in His Word! At the same time realize that it is also good to go out and illuminate others with that same glory of Jesus revealed in Holy Scripture. Jesus shows us the way--in the fact that He left comfort and glory aside for the love of lost souls!

Tis good, Lord, to be here.
Yet we may not remain;
But since Thou bidst us leave the mount,
Come with us to the plain.
(The Lutheran Hymnal, 135:5)

Friday February 8

Matthew 17:1-9 After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters--one for You, one for Moses and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased. Listen to Him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," He said. "Don't be afraid." When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, "Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

DON'T TELL ANYONE, UNTIL ...

You've probably been to a surprise party. The careful planning, the big secret, the anticipation and excitement, and finally the big surprise. We can understand why guests are specifically told not to tell anyone about the surprise until the day finally comes. Why would we want to ruin it?

But what about Jesus? Why did He tell Peter, James and John not to tell anyone what they'd seen or heard on top of that mountain? Why did He not want them to share that they'd witnessed Him in His glory, transfigured before their very eyes as the one and only Son of God? The answer is actually pretty simple. Jesus needed to be able to get to Jerusalem. He needed to avoid the massive crowds now at this time. He was so close to completing His earthly mission. He was resolutely heading for Jerusalem. He was about to be innocently arrested, tried, and condemned. He was about to crush the head of Satan in taking the burden of our sins on the cross, just as He the LORD had promised 4000 years earlier to Adam and Eve in the garden (Genesis 3:15). He was about to destroy death forever in His resurrection and bring life and immortality to light through this gospel--good news (2 Timothy 1:10)!

Jesus told His disciples not to tell anyone what they had seen and heard until He had risen from the dead. But now, Christ has risen from the dead! What He has revealed to us through His Word we are called to share! Don't tell anyone? No! Tell everyone, until our dear Jesus returns to call us home!

Tuesday December 25

Luke 2:12-13 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel ...

HEAVENLY CHILD

When a child is born in one of our families, we let others know about the joyful event. We send out cards or we get on the telephone as quickly as we can. But Jesus' birth was announced unlike the birth of any other. When He was born, a great company of angels appeared in the sky saying, "Glory to God in the highest."

How did Jesus rate a heavenly chorus? Actually, one could quite expect such messengers, for this Baby was from heaven itself. Hadn't the angel Gabriel told Mary months earlier that her son would be great and would be called the Son of the Most High? The heavenly announcement at Christ's birth puts an exclamation mark to this that Jesus is truly "God of God, Light of Light."

Yet the shepherds found more when they went to the manger. They did not discover a bright shining spirit-being in Mary's arms, but they found a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. Jesus looked like a baby, made noise like a baby, and had needs like a baby. Nothing of the Lord's outward appearance would have led his visitors to know that this human was any different than any other.

Thus in the angelic announcement and in the manger bed we find this mystery: Jesus fully divine and fully human. Two natures are here brought together in an amazing, miraculous way.

"We believe, teach, and confess that the Son of God, although from eternity He has been a particular, distinct, entire divine person, and thus, with the Father and the Holy Ghost, true, essential, perfect God, nevertheless, in the fullness of time assumed also human nature into the unity of His person, not in such a way that there now are two persons or two Christs, but that Christ Jesus is now in one person at the same time true, eternal God, born of the Father from eternity, and a true man, born of the Virgin Mary" (Formula of Concord).

Wednesday December 26

Matthew 2:11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.

GIFTS FROM THE HEART

"It's the thought that counts." We hear that phrase when it comes to gift-giving, don't we? The gift does not always have to be expensive or extravagant in order to be appreciated. The mother enjoys the scribbled drawing her three year old gave to her more than a Monet, for it was given from a thoughtful and loving heart.

On the other hand, a large gift can seem empty and worthless if the receiver knows it was given grudgingly or out of compulsion.

When the Magi came to worship Jesus, they brought three gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh. Clearly, they were extravagant gifts fit for a king. Were they given from hearts which trusted in the Savior, or were the wise men merely seeking to draw attention to themselves through such a great pilgrimage and offering?

Consider what they did first when they entered the house: they bowed down and worshiped Jesus. Only after that did they present their treasures. Their hearts were so filled with true knowledge and joy concerning the Christ that they could not but pour out their prayers of thanksgiving to the Christmas Child before doing anything else. Then the gifts of love, the further fruits of their faith, followed from their treasury! One can give without loving, but cannot love without giving.

What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give Him: give my heart.
(Christina Rossetti, 1872)

Thursday February 7

Matthew 17:1-7 After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters--one for You, one for Moses and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased. Listen to Him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," He said. "Don't be afraid."

DON'T BE AFRAID

The Super Bowl adds no value to your salvation and eternal life. But the transfiguration of Jesus does. You don't want to miss the BIG SHOW-- Jesus Christ revealed as the God-man. Not only revealed here towards the end of His Gospel mission, but at its beginning on the banks of the Jordan River, and throughout His earthly mission as He showed His divine nature in both His miraculous words and actions!

After the Super Bowl, whether or not you even watched it or care about it, we all go back to our regular lives. Quite the opposite of the Big Show we see with Jesus' disciples. But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," He said. "Don't be afraid." When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, "Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead" (Matthew 17:7-9).

It is only natural that the disciples, as sinful men, should be terrified at the sight and sound of God's voice from heaven. But as Moses and Elijah disappeared from sight, Jesus calmed their fears just as He does with any fears of our own. He is our Savior, our Brother, our greatest Friend. The transfiguration is so much more than Jesus "showing off" His power and glory, but rather He is showing off His amazing love for you and me in coming to this world. He came for you. He came to rescue you from your sin. He came to conquer death once and for all! He came as our Immanuel, "God with us." He came to touch us with His Word and remind us even in the face of death, "Don't be afraid."

Wednesday February 6

Matthew 17:1-4 After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters--one for You, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

IT IS GOOD FOR US TO BE HERE

Have you even tried to look at the combination of snow and the brightness of the sun? It usually gives me a very painful headache. In the book of Exodus we read Moses had gone up on the top of Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments from the LORD. But the LORD only allowed Moses while in the cleft of a rock to see His back, and not His face or full glory. The Gospel of Mark gives us another impressive description of Jesus' transfiguration when he says that His garments were "shining, exceedingly white, like snow, such as no launderer on earth can whiten them." The brightness of Jesus' garments alone would have been enough to kill them if it were God's will. It is no wonder and no surprise that in the midst of all the excitement and emotion of this miraculous event that Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters--one for You, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

Think of Peter, James, and John. They had front row seats to what was happening. Just as quickly as Jesus' had been transfigured, "... there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus." Certainly two Old Testament "all-stars" had just come into view. Questions arise like: How did the disciples know it was Moses and Elijah? They lived hundreds of years before them. How did Moses and Elijah appear there with Jesus even though they hadn't lived on the earth for such a long time? Both Moses and Elijah were taken into heaven in two very unique ways. God had buried Moses, and God had taken Elijah by a chariot of fire! Many questions, one answer. Don't make your God too small! In other words, what He tells us has happened, He is certainly able to perform! He keeps His promises.

Recognize that when we sit with Jesus and His Word, we see through the eyes of faith what we will see in our flesh (Job 19) when Jesus returns to take us home to heaven! "I was glad when they said to me, let us go into the house of the LORD!" (Psalm 122:1). And then let us say with those first disciples also, "It is good, Lord Jesus, for us to be here!"

Thursday December 27

Luke 2:17 When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child.

SPREADING THE WORD

The shepherds saw an amazing display from heaven in their fields on Christmas night. The sky was filled with a host of angels and the brightness of glory. When they hurried to Bethlehem, however, they did not find the same scene. The sign there was a baby wrapped in cheap cloth and lying where animals fed.

There wasn't much to see at Jesus' birthplace. No angel chorus, plain, ordinary surroundings, a young couple looking like they could be any young couple, a family who couldn't find room anywhere else, just like many others that night no doubt had difficulty locating shelter.

So the shepherds didn't talk about what they saw. What was so great about that? They talked about "what had been told them about this child." And there was a lot that was great about that! They spread the word that this Baby was the Savior, Christ the Lord. This was the Child who had come to open the eyes of the blind and unstop the ears of the deaf. This was the Child who would cause the lame to leap like the deer and He would take away the sins of the people. This was the Messiah to deliver them even from death.

We weren't there to see Jesus' birth. We didn't see the manger and the strips of cloth with our own eyes, but we have heard the word concerning this Child, just as the shepherds heard. This is what we proclaim. This is the message that is scattered to the four winds-- to the north, south, east, and west: "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11).

Friday December 28

Luke 2:34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

HE WAS WOUNDED FOR OUR TRANSGRESSIONS

We look at our young children sometimes and wonder what they will be when they grow up. Will she be an art collector or a police officer? Will he be a writer or a business owner? There are so many gifts God gives that can be used in so many different ways.

Perhaps Mary was asked that question when Jesus was young. "What do you think your son will be?" Would she have said, "Human sacrifice"? Simeon told her that the Child would be "a sign that will be spoken against" and that He would "cause the falling and rising of many in Israel." It was prophesied correctly that the Christ would have a turbulent earthly life, finally leading to great sorrow for mother Mary as she gazed upon Him at Calvary.

Yet this is the reason for His birth. This is the reason the angels can sing "on earth peace" -- because Jesus has come in human flesh to offer Himself as the perfect sacrifice for sin on behalf of all other humans. He was born only so that He could be wounded for our transgressions, pierced for our iniquities, and raised again for our justification.

What brought Thee to the manger,
O Christ-child sweet and dear?
Thy love for me, a stranger--
Oh, be Thou ever near!
O Lord, how great is this Thy love
That reaches down from heaven above,
Thy love for us, by sin defiled,
The made Thee, God, a child!
(The Lutheran Hymnal, 89:3)

Tuesday February 5

Matthew 17:1-2 After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light.

DON'T MISS THE BIG SHOW

The National Football League does not make preaching on Sundays any easier. Watching football on a Sunday afternoon not only often makes someone's day, but it often makes their whole week as they eagerly anticipate that day. The disciples Jesus took up the high mountain had no idea what they were about to witness. It wouldn't just change their day, it would continue to transform their lives!

We generally know the city in which the Super bowl is going to take place maybe 3 or 4 years before it happens. However, the events from Matthew chapter seventeen reveal a much bigger "show" than the Super bowl. In verse one it says, "After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves." The uncertainty of an exact location shouldn't be one that upsets us in any way. What we do know about the location is important, for it was somewhere on that high mountain that the Transfiguration of Jesus happened. The one and only Almighty, Creator LORD was visibly revealing the radiance of His perfect holiness, righteousness, and divine nature. What a sight for sinful man to see!

It is important to be able to try to picture and fathom what exactly happened on that mountain. We might compare it for a moment to the question that professional athletes are so often asked, "What was it like to play in the Super bowl, World Series, or the Olympics." But in the history of the world there has never been a single event for any individual that is more impressive, more amazing, and more important than the few descriptive words recorded which took place on that mountain! "There [Jesus] was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light."

As you walk through your day and week, remember and realize we will get to see Jesus, our perfect Lord and Savior from our sins, in His full glory! Because of Jesus' work here on earth, we too will spend eternity with Him! You don't want to miss that for the world!

Monday February 4

Romans 8:1 Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

GUILT OR GRACE?

Are you a multi-tasker? Are your eyes barely open in the morning before your feet hit the floor running? Do the hours fly by because you have so much to do? But do you ever pause to think about why you're doing all those things?

You go to school, do your chores around the house, and spend the evening on homework for the next day. You spend a minimum of eight hours at work, another hour for the commute, and then there are emails to answer. You make beds, do the laundry, prepare meals, drop the kids off at school, and stay in touch with out of town family.

Why? Does "why" even matter, as long as things get done? It does matter. Motives are important. "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). Do you find yourself doing things because "otherwise I'll feel guilty"? Guilt can be a powerful motivator. We don't want to disappoint others. We don't want to get in trouble. We don't want to make God angry. But guilt wears a person down and takes the joy out of life. How can you be content and happy with guilt on your heart?

You don't have to live with guilt. There is a better way. We don't even have to get rid of it ourselves. We couldn't, regardless of how hard we tried. It was because of our guilt that Jesus came into the world. The Father has such an intense love for all of us that He was willing to send His Son and to punish Him for our guilt. "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). Guilt is gone, and in its place the Holy Spirit fills us with the peace and joy of faith. And that is the best motivator of all for all the things you do! Let's live today by grace, not guilt.

Saturday December 29

1 John 3:8b The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.

THIS LITTLE BABE

"This little Babe, so few days old,
Has come rifle Satan's fold.
All hell doth at his presence quake
Tho' he Himself with cold doth shake.
For in this weak unarmed wise
The gates of hell he will surprise."

The sixteenth century poet Robert Southwell got it exactly right, didn't he? Jesus Christ appeared as a gentle Babe in order to destroy the devil's work!

Here was an angel who was not singing "Glory to God in the highest" on Christmas night. For the One had now come who would undo everything he was trying to do. Satan's goal of destroying the souls of men would be ruined by that tiny Child.

The devil points his accusing finger at you and me, bringing to our attention our darkest sins, seeking to drown us in despair or turn us inward to self-righteousness. But his accusations are thrown down by the Christ-child who carries on Himself those very sins and pleads our case before His Father in heaven.

Satan raises the ugly specter of death, the wages of sin, before our eyes. And yet from the cave of Jesus' birth at Bethlehem we can already see through the shadow to another cave -- this one empty, with the stone rolled away.

Finally, the tempter dangles his seductions with craft and cunning, but they hold not the power over us they once did. We can turn to the manger and say, "My King has come! Him will I follow!"

What harm can sin and death then do?
The true God now abides with you.
Let hell and Satan rage and chafe,
Christ is your Brother-- ye are safe.
(The Lutheran Hymnal, 103:4)

Monday December 31

Psalm 118:1 O give thanks unto the Lord.

THANK YOU

When I was a youngster, in the week or two after December 25th people would ask me, "What did you get for Christmas?" My mother asked me, "Have you written your thank-yous yet?" In this age of e-mail, cell phones, and instant communication, is the written thank-you note for a gift becoming a thing of the past? Good manners aside, real gratitude is neither a matter of culture or family custom, and thanks uncommunicated is something short of real thankfulness.

This, of course, is especially true where God's gifts are concerned. Don't you find each year's Christmas gifts to be another set of emphatic reminders that nothing can compare with the original Gift of the heavenly Father to us - His own dear Son?

Even if we follow the lead of so many in our country and start celebrating Christmas before the 25th, we still find ourselves with a "not-enough-time" problem. The period between Christmas Eve and Epiphany (January 6), the traditional "Twelve Days of Christmas," are truly not enough time to review the deep meaning of God-made-man and to render any kind of satisfactory thanks to the Lord.

But Christmas is no time for feeling guilty. The Christ-child not only forgives our appreciation failures, He extends our time-to-give-thanks through all eternity.

In the meantime, let us do the best we can in the here and now. When we have opportunity to show our thankfulness for His redeeming love in what we say and do, may the Savior never find us unaccounted for. May He never ask regarding us: "Where are the nine?" (Luke 17:17).

Were this Child for us not born,
We should all be lost, forlorn,
No true hope possessing.
Dear Lord Jesus, thanks to Thee
Now and through eternity.

Saturday February 2

Matthew 18:10 Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven.

GOD'S ANGELS

Your guardian angel(s) has carried out many missions in your life, and so has mine. An elderly gentleman has been known to relate one such experience he had as a teenager. It seems that he and his younger brother had missed the morning school bus, so Dad let them use the family Plymouth to get to the local Lutheran high school. It was still dark on that rainy November morning when the angel got his assignment to intervene at the junction of the town road with the county trunk that would take them south into the city. Our young driver came to a full stop at the intersection, looked left and right, saw no headlights, shifted into first to cross the north-bound lane, intending then to hang a left to go south. At that moment the steering wheel was so forcibly torn from the driver's grip and the car was directed into such a very sharp left turn that they didn't get as far as the south-bound lane at all, but had been turned into the wrong lane (OH! NO!). Our young man, struggling with all his strength, was utterly unable to get that perverse steering wheel to straighten out . . . until - - WHOOSH - - a car traveling above the speed limit with no headlights and no horn of warning sizzled through the intersection on the south-bound lane and disappeared in the spray. "Did you see that guy coming?" "Nope." "Neither did I." What had prevented a horrendous collision right in the middle of that intersection? What saved the two boys plus whoever was in that speeding car? Just an angel taking control of the steering wheel for one or two seconds to leave a little passing space on the highway. They drove the rest of the way to school in awed silence, each realizing that the near miss had been no accident at all. They had learned first-hand something very wonderful about guardian angels. I know. I was there.

-- From the "Lutheran Spokesman"

Friday February 1

Mark 9:9-10 Now as they came down from the mountain, He commanded them that they should tell no one the things they had seen, till the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept this word to themselves, questioning what the rising from the dead meant.

DON'T TELL ANYONE?

It's especially difficult for young children to keep quiet, especially during the Christmas season. If they shop with their parents they are likely to suddenly, upon returning home, blurt out the secret contents of the shopping bag. They sometimes have to be told: "Don't tell anyone. Button up your lip and throw away the key!"

However, when we read that Jesus told his disciples to keep quiet about what they saw on the Mount of Transfiguration (at least for the time being), we may wonder why. Why did Jesus tell the demons He cast out to be quiet and not reveal that He was the Holy One of God? Why did He tell many of those He healed to keep quiet and tell no one? He encouraged them to give thanks to God by offering the required sacrifices of thanksgiving, but why keep quiet?

After Jesus suffered and rose again from the dead, the silence would be broken forevermore. After the resurrection Jesus further equipped them over 40 days to clearly reveal that the One they crucified was not merely a great teacher, a great man-- but God's Son. Thus that death was sufficient payment for every human sin, past, present and future. Then the things they saw on the Mount of Transfiguration would be reported as further proof that He is the Son of God.

The time to keep quiet is long past. As Jesus' disciples, you are called to reveal who Jesus really is: God's Son. Let the Spirit of God do the heavy lifting and open human eyes and hearts to believe the message and to see how tremendous that sacrifice really was. Let him teach them through the Word that His death wasn't merely an example of human injustice, but ultimately of God's divine justice. He will also move them to open their mouths and proclaim what was once the secret of God's eternal counsel.

Let's think on this today, and take these words with us (1 Peter 3:15): "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear."

Tuesday January 1

Luke 2:21 And when eight days were completed for the circumcision of the Child, His name was called JESUS, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb.

HIS NAME IS JESUS

When God tells people to do something, He is very specific. When, beginning with Abraham, God told Old Testament Israel to practice circumcision as a religious rite, He told them exactly when (eighth day) and why (sign of the covenant). When God sent word that His incarnate Son was to be named "Jesus," He told both Mary and Joseph. The naming of the Child was primarily Joseph's responsibility, but this Child's name was so significant that God spelled it out in two angelic announcements.

Today is the eighth Day of Christmas, the only "Day of Christmas" specifically named in the Scriptures. On the eighth day of the life of the Son of God among us, the Lord's instruction regarding both circumcision and the Child's name were carried out by His foster-father Joseph.

The custom of naming a male child on the day of his circumcision was no doubt meaningful for devout Jews, but in the case of Jesus the significance is both striking and unparalleled. God's covenant with Abraham was to culminate in the "Seed of the Woman" through whom "all nations of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:3).

Here is that Child. Every other circumcision symbolized the human need to be cleansed of sin down to the very source-point of our existence. (Sinfulness is inherited.) This Child's circumcision is not about His need for cleansing, but ours. The covenant-God is Himself placed under the covenant agreement He made centuries before-- in order to bring to fulfillment the promise of cleansing that lay at the heart of that covenant-- in order "to save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

Considering this, one would almost think that devout folk like Joseph and Mary would have settled on the name of "Jesus" ("Jehovah saves") on their own. But then we remember that it was, after all, a father's prerogative to name his son-- and He did.

Jesus! Name of priceless worth To the fallen sons of earth,
For the promise that it gave, "Jesus shall His people save."

Wednesday January 2

John 4:34 Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work."

FROM START TO COMPLETENESS

In Scripture, the number ten is a number often repeated, and some say the number of completeness. We have 10 Commandments, 10 Tables of Showbread, 10 lampstands, and 10 lavers used in the Temple of Jehovah. Jesus told parables about 10 Virgins, 10 Silver coins and 10 Talents. There are other "tens" mentioned in the Bible. We might argue about whether the number itself is meaningful and represents completeness.

But as we draw closer and closer to the dawn of Epiphany, we remember Jesus' purpose in appearing was to fulfill the plan of salvation, to complete the work given him by the Father. It will be a few days before people stop talking about their New Year's resolutions. It will be a few more and many of their resolutions will be completely forgotten. Thank our gracious God that it was different with Jesus. Even at age 12, Jesus knew His purpose and was focused on being about the Father's business. As an adult He said: "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work."

He didn't just say it. He completed the work given Him. It was a little more than 20 years after his first recorded words (at age 12) that Jesus went the way of the cross as planned. Then when seeing all things complete, He cried out: "It is finished!" All barriers removed, all sins forgiven, all guilt removed, forever. The work of salvation is complete.

We don't often follow through on our promises, whether made to God or men. It's a good thing God doesn't deal with us based upon our works or faithfulness! We are often found to be unfaithful.

But the Lord Jesus was faithful from start to finish, from start to completeness. He was faithful, obedient, perfect in order that we might be declared not guilty by faith in His completed work.

Naught have I, O Christ, to offer Naught but Thee, my highest good.
Naught have I, O Lord, to proffer But Thy crimson-colored blood.
Thy death on the cross hath Death wholly defeated
And thereby my righteousness fully completed;
Salvation's white raiments I there did obtain,
And in them in glory with Thee I shall reign.
(The Lutheran Hymnal, 366:6)

Thursday January 31

John 12:32-33 "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself." This He said, signifying by what death He would die.

LIFTED UP

Aren't we getting ahead of ourselves? We've not yet begun the Lenten Season and we're already looking past the cross? We look both back and forward.

We know that Jesus was nailed to the cross and lifted up on the hill called Calvary. We also know that he was lifted up from death and exalted. He ascended victoriously to heaven where he sits at the right hand of God, in the highest position of honor and authority.

Yet, even as we see Him lifted up, we can't help but look back to the wilderness near Mount Hor. It was there that God's rescued people of Israel complained against God, accusing Him of desiring to bring evil upon them. So the Lord allowed serpents to bite His wayward and thankless people and some died (Numbers 21:1-6). Others were moved to repentance.

God then commanded Moses to make a fiery serpent and lift it up on a pole. He promised that those who looking upon that sight (believing the promise) would not die. Thus did Moses lift up the bronze serpent over a dying camp of Israelites and by God's grace they were saved from and despite their sin.

Likewise, God allowed His one and only Son to be nailed to and lifted upon a cross for a dying world of sinners. He promised and still promises that those who see the Son and believe on Him will not perish everlasting, but will have eternal life.

Thus today we point people to the cross of Christ, so that seeing-- and by the work of the Spirit in their hearts, believing-- they may be drawn to Him and rescued. When we hear Jesus speak of His being lifted up, we can't help but remember the familiar words of John's Gospel, so let's also take these words with us today (John 3:14-16): "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

Wednesday January 30

John 12:23-24 But Jesus answered them, saying, "The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified. Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain."

THE HOUR HAS COME

It is evident that God ordered human history in order to carry out our redemption, our rescue. First, Holy Scripture reports that Jesus was born at the perfect time (Galatians 4:4-5) or "in the fullness of time." Then, during Jesus earthly ministry, on more than one occasion His enemies tried to lay hands on Him to hurt and kill Him, but time and again it is reported that they were unsuccessful because "his hour had not yet come" (cf. John 7:6, 30; 8:20). Therefore we pause when we hear the Savior Himself say: "The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified."

How will Jesus be glorified? Even as God was glorified through Jesus life and ministry, so God would be glorified also in His death: "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain."

Whether young or old, farmers or city folk, we all understand what Jesus is talking about. Unless a seed is planted in the ground, it remains alone. One doesn't open a seed packet to find bunches of ripe fruit. It is only when the seed is planted in the soil to germinate and grow that it produces fruit. But Jesus isn't really giving a lesson on gardening. He's comparing Himself to that seed.

Even as the seed must be planted, so Jesus had to suffer and die. If Jesus had not presented Himself as our substitute in life and in death, then at best He would stand out as a single perfect man acceptable to God, and no savior of many.

But Jesus did suffer and die, and through the message of His death and resurrection the Holy Spirit has raised up countless children of God among whom are we. Only Jesus could, by His dying, produce abundant fruit. He is the Savior and He is still glorified today when the Gospel is proclaimed and sinners are converted (John 16:14).

Let's think on this today, and take these words with us (1 Peter 2): "Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious."

Thursday January 3

Genesis 50:19-21 Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive. Now therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones." And he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

ELEVENTH SON AND THE ETERNAL SON

I am the oldest of five children. While only a few years separate me from my closest siblings, there is a barrier of years between my youngest brother and myself. Even though he is married and has been blessed with children, I can't help but still think of him as that little kid at home with Mom and Dad. Imagine what it was like for Reuben, Jacob's oldest son, and Joseph-- his eleventh!

While he was the 11th of Jacob's sons, Joseph was a favorite. It was also promised that Joseph would have prominence over the others. Something that older brothers don't like to hear. Joseph's brothers rejected him and nearly put him to death. They sold their own brother into slavery-- into a life of toil and sorrow. One would think Joseph would have a large grudge to bear, a powerful need to get even. However, the eleventh son did not bear a grudge against his brothers, but was forgiving and mindful of the plan of God to provide for their lives through his misfortune.

How can we not think of another son of Jacob? He is not the eleventh, but the one and only eternal Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth. He came to this broken-down world as the apple of His father's eye. When baptized, the Father declared from the heavens: "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." He was rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. He willingly laid down His life for all his enemies, "never grudging for the lost ones that tremendous sacrifice." This was all part of the Father's merciful plan to provide for our eternal welfare through His misfortune.

On this eleventh day of Christmas, we look back on Jacob's eleventh son, Joseph. We note how he did not bear a grudge, and ourselves ask the Lord to help us to be "kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave us." Moreover, we look forward to the life that is ours through God's eternal Son, Jesus. Whatever difficult circumstances this day brings, we know that our gracious father will work it all for our good, even as he did for Jacob's eleventh son, Joseph.

Friday January 4

Acts 1:8 "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

TWELVE TRIBES, TWELVE DISCIPLES, TWELVE YEARS

So we come to the twelfth day of Christmas. I hope none of you have received 12 partridges in 12 pear trees by this date. The number 12 is also an often-repeated number in Scripture. Perhaps the first "12" that comes to mind is the 12 sons of Jacob (Israel). These "12" became the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. So can you remember all their names? I would guess that most would stumble to remember all twelve. It would be good to remember the one tribe not allotted land, the one with whom all the rest shared because the sons of Levi were to be concerned with the priesthood and the things of God. It would be good to remember the tribe of Judah, from which the Lord God promised the Savior would come to save all mankind-- through a once-for-all sacrifice.

We might also remember the 12 disciples, those 12 men chosen by the Lord Jesus to follow Him and be prepared by Him to be His witnesses. Can we remember all their names? I would think we'd have a better chance than remembering the 12 sons of Jacob. It would be good for us to remember that we are also disciples, followers of Jesus. We are to be His witnesses in our homes, at work, and abroad. We gather to Him each day and week to hear His Word and be equipped to serve Him and witness His name to the world.

We might also think of the 12-year-old Jesus, who went up to Jerusalem with Mary and Joseph for the Passover celebration. He stayed behind to listen to the teachers and ask them questions. How did Mary and Joseph react to this? They were amazed, relieved, and perhaps even a bit reproachful. Do we encourage our children to make the hearing and learning of God's Word the first priority in their lives? Are we just as proud of their apprehension of spiritual truth as we are of their earthly accomplishments? God help us in the new year to set them a good example, and help them to see that service to our God is a glorious opportunity, not a drudgery.

May God use each one of us today to witness to His saving name.

Tuesday January 29

Luke 9:43-44 And they were all amazed at the majesty of God. But while everyone marveled at all the things which Jesus did, He said to His disciples, "Let these words sink down into your ears, for the Son of Man is about to be betrayed into the hands of men."

AMAZING BEYOND MEASURE

Why were the people amazed? If we back up a few verses then we find what caused the people to be amazed at the majesty (the greatness) of God. A man brought his only son to Jesus because he was possessed by a demon. As the boy was brought to Jesus, He rebuked and cast out the demon. It was an impressive event. Today we might say that it 'blew the people's minds.' They credited God with the miracle, seeing Jesus as an instrument in God's hand. If we could ask them how they would define greatness, don't you think they'd simply point to the boy? Who of us would disagree? What Jesus did was worthy of wonderment, evidence of the greatness of God.

Greater yet was the work that Jesus was about to complete on Calvary. Since they needed to see the bigger picture, He turned their thoughts away from what he had done to what would be done to Him. There is no question that in casting out the demon, Jesus did a great thing. Yet when he laid down his life for us all, what He accomplished far outshines any healing or miracle. He made the one payment that atoned for every human sin. He suffered and satisfied God's ages-long anger over sin. He made it possible for sinners like us to become Children of God and heirs of eternal life.

Yet how many people today think of His death as a great thing? When asked about great things Jesus accomplished, how many wouldn't rather point to the feeding of the 5000 or the raising of Lazarus? Yet, Jesus is seated at the right hand of God, exalted to the highest place of honor and glory because He went to Calvary and laid down his life as the Father's plan prescribed. He came to save our souls from sin and death.

Let's think on this today, and take these words with us (John 10:17-18): "Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father."

Monday January 28

Matthew 11:28 Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

IN OVER YOUR HEAD?

"This will be simple," I thought. "I can handle it," I told myself as I pulled the new car stereo system out of its packaging and looked over the wiring diagram. A couple of hours later, with the car dashboard opened up and a confusing array of disconnected wires of various colors dangling down, I realized I was definitely in over my head. I knew I didn't have the knowledge and skill to complete the job. About that time an electrician friend from down the street came by, saw my predicament, stepped in and took over. Within a half hour he had my mess cleaned up and the stereo installed and working perfectly. What a relief!

What a relief it is when we're in over our head to have someone step in and take over. That's just what Jesus did. We were in over our head with sin. God's law is clear and concise: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law" (Galatians 3:10). David confessed what we all know: "My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear" (Psalm 38:4). Jesus did not come merely to say, "Here's what you need to do to be right with God. Follow my example." We couldn't do it. As people born dead in sin, it's beyond our capability to be holy. Jesus came to step in, take over, and keep God's law flawlessly in our stead. He came to step in, take over, and offer Himself as the atoning sacrifice for all sin.

In over your head today? Are you facing a problem or confusion for which you don't have the answer? Do you have a need which You can't fulfill, a burden you can't shoulder, guilt you don't know what to do with? Jesus still comes to step in and take over. Look to His Word. He promises: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). What a relief!

Saturday January 5

Matthew 2:2 For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.

FOLLOW THAT STAR

Over the centuries that have passed since the Wise Men made that epic journey to seek out and worship the Savior of all the world, there has been much speculation about that star. Was it an alignment of planets? Probably not. How would that lead them to the home where Jesus was? Was it a special star prepared by God for this purpose? In one way or another it was prepared by God, and it was used by Him to lead these first pilgrims from the Gentile nations to the infant Savior's presence that they might worship Him.

Can we follow that star? That wondrous star served its purpose. It focused the attention of the Gentile nations upon another even more glorious and far more spectacular Star. Jesus tells us plainly in Revelation: "I am . . . the Bright and Morning Star" (22:16). That is the Star which the Wise Men sought out. We have been brought to the brightness of this Star by the calling of the Holy Spirit. Even as God guided and directed the travels of the Wise Men through their earthly pilgrimage that they might bow the knee before the Christchild, so also God has directed our lives that He might lead us to know the glory of our Savior's birth. We have seen the glory of the true Star of Bethlehem, the glory of salvation for all the peoples of the earth. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined" (Isaiah 9:2).

May we "Follow That Star" all our days until we reach the eternal glory which He shall reveal to us in heaven.

-- From the "Lutheran Spokesman"

Monday January 7

Matthew 2:9-10 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

OUR GUIDING STAR

The wise men were led to Jesus by a miraculous star. Not only did this special star get them started on their journey from the east, but later on it actually led them to the very house where Jesus was.

It took no less a miracle to lead us into Jesus' presence so we could enjoy life as one of His dear children. For once we were enemies of God as the apostle says, "You were dead in your transgressions and sins ... we were by nature objects of wrath" (Ephesians 2:1, 3). How could we come to Him? How could we spend a moment in His company? By our own strength, we could not, but God made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions. He forgave our sin. He warmed our cold hearts to trust His mercy.

We were led to Christ not by a star in the sky, but by the bright light of His word. It served as a lamp to our feet and a light for our path, guiding us in the way of peace. The gospel of Jesus is our star--the message of salvation and eternal life drawing us to Him. May the Holy Spirit ever lead us by that great, miraculous light!

As with gladness men of old
Did the guiding star behold;
As with joy they hailed its light,
Leading onward, beaming bright,
So, most gracious Lord, may we
Evermore be led by Thee!
(The Lutheran Hymnal, 127:1)

Saturday January 26

Hebrews 11:1 Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

AN UNSHRINKABLE FAITH

If you could choose any one thing in the entire universe that would make 2018 a happy new year for you, what would it be? For a lot of folks the answer is this simple: "Just let the Sweepstakes van pull into my driveway at the end of this month. Yes, with that kind of money--millions of dollars at my disposal, nothing in the year ahead could get me down." Others might say, "If only I were feeling better and could do the things I used to do . . ." "If only I owned my own home; if only we had a different car; if only I were promoted at work; if only . . ." -- on and on the list could go. Maybe finances are especially tight at the moment and maybe you have been living with excruciating pain. Perhaps a new home or car would help, but none of those things can provide what we need to overcome the unforeseen troubles lurking in the future. What can?

Consider the prayer expressed in Hymn No. 396 in The Lutheran Hymnal:
Oh, for a faith that will not shrink Tho' pressed by many a foe;
That will not tremble on the brink Of poverty or woe.

What each of us needs, really needs, is an unshrinkable faith. Just what is "unshrinkable faith"?

"Faith," Scripture teaches, "is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). Faith is the conviction that what we believe is true even though we cannot see it with our eyes. This distinction is worth remembering, because what we see with our eyes is sometimes just the opposite of what we believe. God's sure, powerful Word is both the cause and the basis for a faith that will not shrink. The Bible reveals that God is the God of all power who does literally anything. He is also the God of all grace, who has redeemed us from our sins through the life, death, and resurrection of His own Son Jesus.

Lord, give us such a faith as this; And then, whate'er may come,
We'll taste e'en now the hallowed bliss, Of an eternal home.

-- From the "Lutheran Spokesman"

Friday January 25

John 1:44-45 Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote--Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked.

FROM SKEPTIC TO BELIEVER, BY THE POWER OF THE WORD

It's true, Nathanael was a more than little bit skeptical at first. He wondered how anything good, anybody important (the world's Savior, really?) could arise from such an insignificant, out of the way village of northern Galilee, Nazareth. No way! How can it be?

We may be tempted, in moments of weakness, to ask similar questions: what good could come from sharing the message of the crucified and risen Savior with a friend? How can inviting people to read their Bibles accomplish anything good or positive for them in their lives? Will Scripture really serve as a lamp for their feet? How can the labors of our hands, we who are weak mortals, we who are members of a little congregation or a tiny synod, accomplish anything worthwhile for the kingdom of God?

But just as Jesus used His Word to enable a cynical Nathanael to become a devoted disciple, someone who believed that the greatest Good, the best Friend he would ever know, did indeed come from Nazareth ... so He does for us. The Savior uses His Word to chase away our doubts, dispel our skepticism, to enable us to believe: "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:10-11). "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16). "The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes" (Psalm 19:8). What an encouragement for our work as missionaries of Christ!

Oh, make Your Church, dear Savior, A lamp of burnished gold
To bear before the nations Your true light as of old!
O teach Your wand'ring pilgrims By this their path to trace
Till, clouds and darkness ended They see You face to face!
(Lutheran Service Book, 523:3)

Tuesday January 8

Psalm 107:1-2, 4-7 Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever! Let the redeemed of the LORD say so. Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to a city to dwell in; hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them. Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way till they reached a city to dwell in.

REDEMPTION REVEALED TO WANDERERS IN THE DESERT

If you're a North American Lutheran, you're probably familiar with the Common Table Prayer: "Come Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let these gifts to us be blessed." Oftentimes the words of Psalm 107:1 are tacked on to the end as a way of returning thanks after the meal. This is not just a casual observance of God's goodness, rather it is said in faithful response to God's encouragement in Psalm 107:2, "Let the redeemed of the LORD say so," that He is indeed good and that His mercy (or steadfast love) does indeed endure forever!

As sinners living in a sinful world, we can be assured that at various times in our lives we will be faced with all kinds of difficult, sometimes tragic circumstances. Yet, God promises us that His redemption has been revealed for all people at all times of our lives! Perhaps you feel as though you have been wandering in a desert— unable to find your way, unable to get your footing in your present situation, or unable to quench some thirst you desire in your life.

When your soul faints within you, cry out to the LORD! Without fail, God delivers wanderers in the desert from their distress! It's His specialty. When all the world was wandering in the desert of sin, God sent His Son. He revealed the world's redemption in the Babe of Bethlehem. As the shepherds were led to the manger in Bethlehem by the straight way of God's Word via an angel, so we too are led by the straight way of God's Word to the promises of Christ crucified for all. There is no desert from which God cannot deliver His people. We have a heavenly city awaiting our dwelling.

Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!

Wednesday January 9

Psalm 107:1-2, 10-14 Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever! Let the redeemed of the LORD say so. Some sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, prisoners in affliction and in iron, for they had rebelled against the words of God, and spurned the counsel of the Most High. So he bowed their hearts down with hard labor; they fell down, with none to help. Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and burst their bonds apart.

REDEMPTION REVEALED TO THOSE IN DARKNESS AND PRISON

Have you ever been on one of those guided tours of a number of caves around our country, like Mammoth Cave, Carlsbad Caverns, or Niagara Cave? Usually, at some point during the tour, the guides will turn out the lights and you cannot see anything, not even your hand in front of your face. It is a frightening feeling!

So much of wrongdoing, or evil, is committed in the darkness of night or in a dimly lit room. The devil is the ruler of darkness. It is his domain. He lives to drag sinners down with him. All too often we fall to his temptations and find ourselves stumbling around in the darkness of sin, rebelling against the words of God and spurning the counsel of the Most High.

The Apostle John writes: "In [Jesus] was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:4-5). When all the world sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, God revealed our redemption! He sent the light of the world to rescue lost sinners from the darkness-- to free us all from the slavery of sin.

So often in our lives, we find ourselves failing God. But we can rejoice, because God promises that He will never fail us! When your heart is bowed down with hard labor; when you fall down with none to help, cry out to the Lord! Without fail, God delivers those in darkness and prison from their distress!

Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!

Thursday January 24

John 1:45-46 Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote-- Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked. "Come and see," said Philip.

INVITE OTHERS TO COME AND SEE

It's worth noting the approach Philip used in witnessing to his friend Nathanael about the Savior. Notice, he didn't try to argue points of doctrine with Nathanael or try to win him over to the Lord by using logical reasonings. He simply extended an invitation to his friend to "come and see" Jesus, trusting that the Holy Spirit would use the words of the Savior which Nathanael would hear to produce the desired effect in his heart.

This is a helpful tip for us to keep in mind in our witnessing efforts. When we share the Gospel with friends and acquaintances, let us be encouraged to simply lay the truths of Scripture upon their hearts, especially the central truth of the Lamb of God who takes away the world's sin. Let us invite others to "come and see" Jesus by reading their Bibles and by joining us in hearing His Word preached at church.

Then let us step back and allow the Spirit to work, knowing that what Isaiah the prophet predicted would happen WILL happen (according to the Lord's timetable and His heavenly wisdom): "Gentiles shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your rising" (Isaiah 60:3), People will be brought into the Church through faith in Jesus' name. "The multitude of camels shall cover your land, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come; they shall bring gold and incense, and they shall proclaim the praises of the Lord" (Isaiah 61:2-3). Many will be led by the Gospel to trust in Him as their Savior and to worship Him joyfully.

Wednesday January 23

John 1:40-44 Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus ... The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me." Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote--Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

THE GOOD NEWS THAT GIVES LIFE

This is the delightful story of Andrew, Peter, Philip and Nathanael (four who got to see Jesus with their physical eyes, but most importantly with their faith-eyes). The evangelist John records: 1) how Andrew told his brother Peter about Jesus, and Peter became a believer ... 2) how Jesus shared the Gospel with Philip, and Philip became a follower of Christ, and 3) how Philip shared the message of Jesus with his friend Nathanael, who became a believer too.

Something that should catch our attention in these verses is the power the Word possesses to change skeptics and unbelievers into believing children of God. Still today the Spirit of God uses the simple message of our God who so loved the world that He gave His Son to give His life to atone for our sins and then rise from the dead ... to instill saving faith in hearts. We need never doubt that, just as He used this Message to bless us with faith-vision, He will do the same as we share it with others in our circle of life and our church-wide mission endeavors. He will graciously bless countless souls with vision to behold Jesus as the holy Lamb of God who gave Himself for them that He might redeem them from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, eager for good works. He'll confer on them the remarkable ability to discern what no eye has seen, no ear has heard, what no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him.

I hear the Savior calling! He changes hearts for me.
From door to door I witness To share my Savior's plea;
Yet nothing can be added, No word on bended knee,
Beyond the simple gospel-- My Savior calls for me!
(Worship Supplement 2000, 770:4)

Thursday January 10

Psalm 107:1-2, 17-20 Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever! Let the redeemed of the LORD say so. Some were fools through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities suffered affliction; they loathed any kind of food, and they drew near to the gates of death. Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He sent out his word and healed them, and delivered them from their destruction.

REDEMPTION REVEALED TO THE FOOLISH

There's an old proverb that says, "The difference between genius and stupidity is that genius has its limits."

We are all fools to some extent. The Apostle Paul writes: "Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise" (1 Corinthians 3:18). Foolish people sin frequently and greatly. Oftentimes, foolish sins result in terrible consequences. Harsh words can hurt relationships. Domestic violence can wreck families. Drug abuse can destroy lives.

It seems true that there is no limit to the foolish things that people do. Yet, even the souls of the fools have been paid for by the precious blood of Christ. God reveals redemption to all people-- even the foolish. And thank God that He does! God answers the repentant fool's cry just as much as anyone else's. God delivers the foolish from their distress.

He sent out His Word Incarnate, Jesus Christ, to heal the world from the foolishness of their sin. Christ revealed His love for us fools in everything he ever did. From His sinless life to His guiltless death to His miraculous return to life! The LORD delivered from distress. He always delivers. It's His specialty. In our sin, we were simple fools stumbling toward the gates of death. But Jesus rescued us. He brought death to death so that we might live eternally. His Words of promise continue to heal us even today.

When you find yourself being foolish, cry out to the LORD in your trouble. He will without fail deliver you with the promises of His Word, His precious Gospel message which is the power of God unto salvation! Thank God that our deliverance is not based on our often-misplaced attention and devotion! Our deliverance from sin and death is not based on how much we love God, but on how much He loves us! 1 John 4:10: "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins."

Friday January 11

Psalm 107:1-2, 23-29 Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever! Let the redeemed of the LORD say so. Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the great waters; they saw the deeds of the LORD, his wondrous works in the deep. For he commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea. They mounted up to heaven; they went down to the depths; their courage melted away in their evil plight; they reeled and staggered like drunken men and were at their wits' end. Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed.

REDEMPTION REVEALED TO THOSE IN A STORMY SEA

There are a few things that we are promised in life and one of them is storms. We are going to have rough waters; we are going to face rogue winds as we sail the seas of life. That is one of the things life guarantees us. Some people think that just because they have God in their life or go to church, things will go smoother for them. But Jesus affirms to us in John 16:33, "In the world you will have tribulation." You are going to face storms.

Thankfully, the LORD delivers those caught in a stormy sea. When all the world was being tossed about in the storms of sin, the LORD revealed redemption by sending Jesus Christ, the Wavecalmer, to bring peace to a tumultuous realm. He gave us the Messiah, who commanded the storm on the Sea of Galilee to "'Be still!' And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm" (Mark 4:39). He commissioned the Stormstopper, who encourages us in the second half of John 16:33, "Take heart; I have overcome the world." The great storm of sin and death has been overcome by the life, death, and resurrection of the Savior.

Thankfully, the LORD delivers those caught in a stormy sea. It's His specialty. Perhaps you've been caught in a storm lately. Maybe a storm of workplace drama, a storm of family turmoil, or a storm of heartbreaking tragedy. The LORD has been calming the stormy lives of His people for thousands of years, and He is not about to stop now. When you reel and stagger against the winds and waves of this sinful existence; when you are down in the depths of misery and your courage melts away; when you are at your wit's end-- Cry to the LORD! Look to His soothing Word to calm you and calm the waves. He delivers us from our distresses!

Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!

Tuesday January 22

Psalm 19:8 The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes.

CALLED TO SEE . . . AND SHARE

The story is told of a little girl lying gravely ill in bed. Her parents (who had brought her up to know Jesus as her Savior) were standing beside her, holding her hand and stroking her hair. She'd been sick with a high fever for many days, drifting in and out of consciousness. The doctors had prepared her parents for "the worst." Suddenly the little girl opened her eyes wide and said in a soft but clear voice: "Mommy, Daddy, do you see the angels?" Then she closed her eyes for the last time and passed away. It was as if she knew (and wanted her parents to know): Jesus had sent His angels to usher her soul into the joys of His heavenly presence.

The story may only be legend but reminds us of a real, important truth: the ultimate desire of every Christian is to be with Jesus and see Him in the fullness of His majesty. We all want to be ushered one day by His angels into the mansions He's gone to prepare, that we might live at God's right hand in the place of perfect rest, complete joy, and unending pleasure.

For us to experience this blessing of all blessings it's necessary that we first of all see Jesus during the time of our life on earth. See Him not with our physical eyes (which only a few living on earth years ago were able to do) but with our faith-eyes. We need to have the ability (Spirit-given) to see Jesus as our Messiah, the only Name under heaven given among men by which we are saved. What a high calling Jesus has given us-- we whom the Spirit has already blessed with faith-eyes to behold Him as our Savior-- to invite others to come and see Him too. May we always remember that it is the Word of Christ that possesses the power to give people such faith-eyes and to keep their faith-vision clear and bright until life's end.

I hear the Savior calling! The gospel comes to me.
My eyes once closed in blindness Are opened now to see
That I myself was helpless To live eternally,
But, dying, Christ did save me, And now He calls for me!

I hear the Savior calling! He gives this charge to me:
To serve the best I'm able, Whate'er the call may be.
Thus hand in hand with others Who share the gospel key
We spread the gospel tidings-- My Savior calls for me!
(Worship Supplement 2000, 770:1, 3)

Monday January 21

Psalm 139:16-17 All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!

HAPPILY EVER AFTER?

"...And they all lived happily ever after." Who doesn't like a happy ending to a fairly tale, a novel, or the latest movie release? Yet most people will also quickly add a disclaimer: "That would never happen. It's just a story. Things never work out like that in real life."

The evidence would seem to support the conclusion. Does "happily ever after" describe yesterday or this past week for you? No matter how carefully we plan and anticipate possible scenarios in order to have our days work out as we would like, there is always something that gets in the way. When was your last "perfect" day? How can we have any confidence at all then in a happy ending?

If it depended on us, the only thing we could count on is making a mess of things. Sin gets in the way. We certainly see that in the record of King David's life in the Old Testament. Still, David was confident of a happy ending. He wrote: "All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!" (Psalm 139:16-17). In spite of his sins, David knew that God loved him and was directing each day to bring about a happy ending which would really be the beginning of eternal joy in heaven. Because the Lord loved David, He confronted him with his sin and called him to repentance. He administered painful discipline as a caring Father toward his wayward child and then assured him of His forgiveness.

Thank the Lord that He does the same for you and me. He doesn't let us wander off on our own toward certain disaster. Through His Word He points out our sin and its consequences. It's painful. Who wants to hear that they have broken every commandment of God and deserve eternal punishment? But God's intention is one of pure love. He doesn't want anyone to perish, but all to come to repentance and rejoice that Jesus has taken away the sin of the world.

Read Psalm 139. It tells us that we are not aimlessly wandering through another day without direction or purpose. All the days ordained for us are already written in His book of life, including the ending: "Happily ever after with the Lord!"

Saturday January 12

Luke 2:29-32 [Simeon said:] "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, According to Your word; For my eyes have seen Your salvation Which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, A light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, And the glory of Your people Israel."

A CHILD OF HOPE TO HOLD AND SHARE

After waiting for a lifetime to see the fulfillment of the Lord's promises, Simeon was now ready to leave this world whenever the Lord might call him. The Spirit within him testified that the Child in his arms was the Lord's Christ. For the tiny infant voice that arose from the swaddling clothes belonged to the almighty God who would one day pay the full price for our salvation, crying out in triumph: "It is finished!"

When Simeon sang of Jesus as a "light to lighten the Gentiles," he was referring to all the people who are still in need of a personal encounter with the Child of Hope through the Word of the Gospel. And that's where YOU come in. Have you been blessed to see in the Christchild your Savior from sin? Has the light of His Gospel reached your eyes and shown you a clear path to eternal life? Has the message of forgiveness through His death for you on the cross touched you so that you now HOLD the Child of Hope in your heart? Then consider carefully your assignment, from God Himself, to carry the torch of the Gospel to others: "So the Lord has commanded us: 'I have set you as a light to the Gentiles, that you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth'" (Acts 13:47). This saving Gospel is a message that the Lord wants to shine in the heart of your neighbor, your co-worker, your friend; and YOU are the best person to SHARE with them what the Child of Hope did for them and for all.

-- Adapted from the "Lutheran Spokesman"

Monday January 14

Isaiah 60:1 Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.

CRAVING THE LIGHT?

Are you craving the light? When I walk into our kitchen I turn on all the overhead lights plus the counter task lights just for the brightness. If you could, would you fly off today for the sunshine of Florida? This is the time of year when cold, winter-shortened days begin to wear on many of us. We crave light to lift our spirits and boost our energy. Our bodies need the light.

Our souls need light every bit as much. The difference, however, is that by nature we don't crave spiritual light at all. Jesus told Nicodemus, "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). Left to ourselves we would stay in the darkness of sin and unbelief not knowing or caring about the light.

But God in His divine mercy didn't just walk away to leave us suffer the darkness of eternal death. He sent His Son to be our light. Jesus says, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). The gospel calls us out of the darkness and hopelessness of sin into the bright, warm sunshine of forgiveness and peace with God.

The Word works within us a craving for the light of Jesus and then satisfies the craving with the message that everything necessary for our salvation has been accomplished. "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine" (Isaiah 43:1). What is truly amazing about the Word is that the more we hear, read, and meditate on it to satisfy our souls' needs, the greater our craving for more of the Word becomes, which leads us back again to the Lord for even more blessings! Try it and find out for yourself.

That's what the Epiphany season is really all about--Jesus shining out as the Light of the world and our being drawn to Him to satisfy the deepest longings of our soul for peace with God and a place in His kingdom.

Saturday January 19

1 John 1:3 That which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.

JESUS MAKES A POWERFUL IMPRESSION!

They say that a good product will sell itself. You can tell by the way people talk. If they like a new product, they not only use it for themselves. They tell their friends. They recommend the product to others. Likewise, when people are satisfied with their doctor or their mechanic or their barber, they spread the word, especially when the subject comes up in conversation.

We could say that Jesus Christ has the same effect on His believers. He truly makes a powerful impression. Through the revelation of Scripture, the Christian knows the power that Jesus has. The Christian has experienced the blessings of having Christ as his all-sufficient Savior from sin. The believer (namely you and me) knows that his sins are forgiven through the blood atonement of his Lord. On that solid basis he is confident of his place in heaven. To borrow a commercial expression of our day-- the Christian is "sold" on Jesus. He understands what Christ has done for him and is willing to share his "recommendation" with the people in his life. Through the power of the Gospel God gives us the inner conviction not only to trust in Christ, but also to confess His name before the world.

Don't be surprised to see that Christianity has spread all over the earth. Don't be surprised to find that the Bible is the most published book of all time. The name of Jesus and the message of His Word have echoed in the hearts and mouths of Christians down through the ages. It's all part of the Master's plan. He continues to make a powerful impression on all who are His own.

-- From the "Lutheran Spokesman"

Friday January 18

Matthew 2:1-2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi, from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east, and have come to worship him."

WE? THREE? KINGS?

Henry Hopkins' carol "We Three Kings of Orient Are" chronicling the visit of the Wise Men, has perpetuated some of the legends that grew up around the Magi. As we pastors often explain, the Bible doesn't tell us how many Magi there were and we don't know their names, nationality, ethnicity, etc. And they almost certainly weren't kings.

But while we spend considerable time setting the record straight with respect to these matters, the fact is, in his 1857 carol Hopkins doesn't draw our attention chiefly to the Wise Men, but to the King they came to worship. And he uses the gifts the Magi brought to place before even the most casual of carolers exactly who this Child of Bethlehem is and what He will accomplish through His life and death and resurrection.

Gold befits a King "Born on Bethlehem's plain ... ceasing never over us all to reign." Already in Old Testament times smoldering frankincense sent fragrant smoke heavenward. To bring this expensive aromatic to Jesus recognized the Christ-Child as "God most high" and worthy of "Pray'r and praising" and worship by all.

And when the poet deals with the gift of myrrh He focuses our worship on the purpose for which our King was born, for myrrh was commonly used with aloes in anointing the dead for burial (John 19:39). This Child is come for "Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying" and to be "Sealed in the stone-cold tomb."

But just as Jesus' birth is only the beginning, so also His death.

"Glorious now behold Him arise
King and God and Sacrifice
Alleluia, Alleluia ..."

That still leaves the the first question mark in the title of this devotion-- the one after the "WE". The most important one. Do we join the Magi in worshiping and honoring the Savior-- from the heart in word and action?

Tuesday January 15

Matthew 2:1-2 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?"

KING AND SACRIFICE AND SAVIOR

When the Wise Men came to Jerusalem looking for the King of the Jews, they came from a country far to the East of Israel. They were, as far as we know, the first Gentiles to receive Jesus as the promised Savior. This is significant for us using these devotions, not just because most of us are also Gentiles, but because we also are included among those Scripture describes when it says "all have sinned" (Romans 3:23). We rejoice with the Magi because Jesus is born to be the Savior from sin for Jews and Gentiles alike.

The Wise Men did not miss by much when they came to Jerusalem seeking the newborn Messiah-King. What's 4-5 miles when you've come hundreds! Besides, while Bethlehem was the city of His birth, Jerusalem would be the site of much of His ministry . . . and the city of His death. More than that, Jerusalem was the center of the divinely prescribed worship of God's Old Testament people, for here was the Temple with its sacrifices and ceremonies. And its very center was the Holy of Holies or Most Holy Place, that inner chamber that once held the Ark of the Covenant, the lid of which was the Mercy Seat of God.

When the Wise Men knelt before the Christ Child, no Gentile could have come anywhere near the Most Holy Place. No Jew either, for that matter, but only the High Priest. But the day would come when the Child of Bethlehem would in His maturity open the way to God for Jew and Gentile alike. When that happened, when Jesus died to set all sinners right with God, the hand of God reached out and tore from top to bottom that curtain which symbolically separated us from the LORD.

When we daily come to Jesus for assurance of forgiveness, as He urges us to in the Lord's Prayer, we come to the Mercy Seat of God. For the blood of the Old Testament sacrifices pictured in advance how atonement for all sin would be made by the shed blood of the Lamb of God. Let us not only continually come to Christ for this forgiveness, but continually look for opportunities to show others the Way to God in Christ.

"He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2).

Wednesday January 16

Matthew 2:1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem

THE FATHER SENT HIM ANYWAY

How many of you parents would intentionally send a child of yours into a dangerous situation? "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion" (Luke 11:11-12)? Yet your Heavenly Father sent His Son into the world during very dangerous times.

The Scriptures tell us that King Herod was ruling Judea while Jesus was a baby. You will find that Herod the Great was one of the most cruel leaders who ever lived. His life's "highlights" included the execution of wife and sons. Before he died, he arrested several influential citizens in Jerusalem and gave orders that at the moment of his death they too should be executed. He wanted the city to mourn at his passing instead of celebrating in the streets.

This was the political climate in which Jesus, Mary, and Joseph lived. The Heavenly Father didn't wait until things "calmed down" before sending the Savior to dwell with men. Instead, Jesus spent His early years in one of the most violent eras the world has known.

Does this mean our Heavenly Father was a bad father? No, it means that He loved you so much that He did not spare His only Son, but sent Him to save you even though He knew the dangers would be great. Like parents might allow their children to go to war because they love their country, so your good God sends His own dear Child into battle to reveal His love for you.

He spoke to His beloved Son:
'Tis time to have compassion
Then go, bright Jewel of My crown, And bring to man salvation;
From sin and sorrow set him free,
Slay bitter death for him that he May live with Thee forever.
(The Lutheran Hymnal, 387:5)

Thursday January 17

John 1:1-2 In the beginning was the Word ... He was in the beginning with God.

SING WE NOW (AND FOREVER) OF CHRISTMAS

Christmas songs still in the air at your house? They are at mine. My collection of Christmas music is just too big. Doesn't bother me. Epiphany is really part of the Christmas season. Besides, eternity is not long enough for us redeemed sinners to finish singing the praises of the one eternal God who came into human flesh to set us free from sin and death. So Epiphany follows Christmas and we keep on "unwrapping" the first and greatest Christmas present-- the gift of God's own Son. And each year we again find anew that the Gift is more wonderful than we imagined possible.

John's Gospel was written with such an "unwrapping" in mind (cp. John 20:31) and so opens with a statement that fairly takes our breath away. John calls Jesus "the Word" -- a very special name, and he writes that the Word was in the beginning. Our simple minds cannot begin to grasp what the inspired Evangelist here says with the simplest of words.

Jesus was in the beginning-- present, existing, active. Before there was a universe, Jesus was. And He always was. Before there was ever a beginning Jesus was already there, existing from the limitless stretches of eternity before time itself existed. There has never been a moment without Jesus. Before He took on human flesh, before the manger, before Jesus was born, He had already been.

Think of what this means. The One who comes as your Savior; the One who stands by your side and says, "Come to me you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest;" the One who reaches out and takes you by the hand and says, "Be of good cheer. Your sins are forgiven. I will never leave you."-- He has been there, has seen all your trials and troubles. He knows the origin of sin, its ravages and its pain. He knows its effect. He knows what is to be done about it, and He has done it. Because He was there.