




ADVENT DEVOTIONS

The Coming of Christ:
Promise Made, Promise Kept

A gift to you from
MARTIN LUTHER COLLEGE





*Please receive this
devotion booklet as
a gift from the
Martin Luther College
campus family.*

*We pray that our Lord
would strengthen your
faith as you ponder
his Advent promises.*



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DECEMBER 1

“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” (Genesis 3:15)

The Answer to Guilt

Where do guilty feelings come from? Would guilt go away if there were never any rules to break? If there were no laws and no policemen and no judges, would people stop feeling guilty? If parents never asked children to do anything, would kids never feel guilty again? If everybody were free to do whatever they wanted, would people forget what guilt feels like?

People don't feel guilty because of the rules they break. People feel guilty because God is holy, and people are not. The details of Adam and Eve's fall into sin (Genesis 3:1-13) show us why every person alive feels guilty about sin. God is holy, and he doesn't put up with anything less than holiness.

But listen again to God's promise in Genesis 3:15. God didn't announce to Adam and Eve what they would have to do to take away their own guilty feelings. Instead he promised a descendant, a Savior who would take away their guilt forever. That coming Savior would make them just as holy as they had been before they disobeyed God's command. That Savior would make everyone holy before God. That Savior would crush the devil's head, reversing the damage Satan had done. We thank God for taking all our guilt away.

1. Where does guilt come from, and how do we deal with our guilt?
2. How can we help those who still feel guilty?



Dear God, though we are sinful, you have forgiven us in Jesus. He took away our guilt and made us holy before you. We thank you for your goodness! Amen.

DECEMBER 2

“I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” (Genesis 12:3)

The Lord’s Promise to Abraham

“Don’t worry. I’ve got your back.” This phrase is often used to reassure those who are afraid of what lies ahead: the big brother who sees his little brother scared of the bully at school, the dad who helps his child learn to ride a bike, a teenager who sees her friend crying over school drama, the coworker scared he will lose his job because of an overly demanding boss.

Abraham was worried about the future too. God had just told him to leave his home and travel until God said, “This is your new home.” Yet his heavenly Father reminded Abraham, “I’ve got your back.” God had a plan for Abraham, and through Abraham’s descendent Jesus he would fulfill his plan to save the world.

The unknown future is a frightening place for us. What troubles will be ahead? Yet we know God’s got our back. As we prepare for Christmas, we are reminded of many joys, sorrows, celebrations, and letdowns that the holiday season can bring. Don’t let these get in the way of our true celebration of our Savior’s birth. Our Lord will continue to be by our side in the future just as he has in the past. Through the birth of a baby named Jesus, he defeated death, the devil, and our sinfulness. We are part of God’s plan. No temptation or trial will we face alone because we have a heavenly Father who’s got our back.

1. What are some things that make you nervous or scared about the future? What Bible promises can comfort you during these times?
2. Discuss some times when God’s protection and care were apparent to you in your life.

Dear heavenly Father, though we face trials and are scared of the unknown, strengthen us in your promises. Keep us close to you as we remember and celebrate your plan of salvation for us, beginning with the birth of your Son, Jesus. Thank you for your promise and fulfillment of salvation. As we travel into the unknown each day, help us to trust and rely on your promises. Amen.



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DECEMBER 3

“The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his.” (Genesis 49:10)

A Ruler from the Tribe of Judah

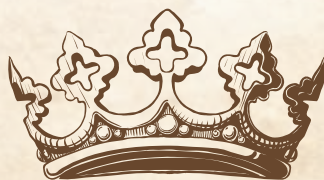
When this prophecy was spoken, the name Israel referred to a man, not a nation, and the name Judah referred not to a tribe but to one of Israel’s sons. As Israel blessed his sons, he named Judah as the lucky one chosen by God to be an ancestor of Jesus.

Looking at the next several hundred years, the Israelites lives’ were complicated and messy, both because the Israelites lived in a sinful world and because the Israelites themselves were sinfully weak in following God’s laws. After years of oppressive slavery in Egypt, the Israelites wandered the wilderness for many years. Later the Israelites were captured by other nations, and God’s chosen people were ruled by unbelievers who sometimes prohibited them from worshiping the true God. The special line of Judah, the holder of the precious future “scepter,” all but disappeared. Yet through all this mess, God maintained the line of Judah, the sinful but chosen ancestor of Jesus, and, when Jesus was born, God fulfilled his promise exactly as he said he would.

The current state of the world, and the sin we see in our hearts, can look so messy and bleak that we might start to worry. The Christmas story reminds us, though, that we have nothing to worry about. As we look forward to the Christmas manger, we can also look back to God’s promise that the “scepter will not depart from Judah.” God is still reigning and controlling the world for the good of believers, and he will continue to do so until he returns and takes his believers to heaven.

1. What other stories in the Bible show God’s power to fulfill his promises?
2. How does the knowledge of God’s continuing reign help us in challenging times?

King Jesus, forgive me for at times following other kings. Reclaim the throne of my heart. Reign over me today and forever. Amen.



DECEMBER 4

“The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him.”
(Deuteronomy 18:15)

A Prophet Like Moses Will Come

It happened again, as it had happened many times before. I had given my students directions for an important assignment. Immediately a hand went up, and a student asked the dreaded question: “So, what do we have to do?”

My immediate thought was, “Didn’t I just explain this 30 seconds ago?”

Have you experienced this with your own children, family, friends, or coworkers? Have you ever found yourself asking the words: “Are you even listening to me?”

Can you imagine how Moses felt every time the Israelites didn’t listen to him and God’s commands? How many times did he have to tell them to stop worshipping false idols, stop complaining, stop mistrusting the Lord? Couldn’t they just follow directions?

How many times have we been like the Israelites, not listening to the Lord? How many times aren’t we like children, asking, “So, what do we have to do?” when God has already told us. But instead of turning away from us in frustration, God sent us a teacher whose word we needed most of all. He sent a prophet like Moses but better than Moses—his very own Son, Jesus. We listen to Jesus because our very souls and eternal life are at stake. The ultimate Prophet, Jesus, tells us, “Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life” (John 5:24). Are you listening to Jesus?

1. What are some different ways we can be a good listener to our loved ones?
2. How are our lives changed when we listen to Jesus’ promises?

Dear Lord, forgive me when I fail to listen to your commands and promises. I never have to demand to be heard by you, for you always listen to my heart. You are a God of love and forgiveness. Please help me to be a more loving listener to you and to the people in my life, and forgive me when I stumble. Amen.



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DECEMBER 5

“When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.” (2 Samuel 7:12-13)

Great David's Greater Son

Take an inventory of all your blessings. Open your refrigerator; there's no more room! But there's something even greater . . . Look in your closet and see how the Lord has clothed you! But there's something even greater . . . Scroll through your contacts and count all the people God has put in your life. But there's something even greater . . . Later this month when you get together with family and friends, consider how generously God has blessed you. But there's something even greater . . .

When David was granted rest from battle, he paused and took an inventory of all his blessings. He had gone from shepherd boy to king of God's people. He went from pasture to palace. The Lord's generosity humbled David so that he wanted to do something great for God. He wanted to build him a temple. But God had in mind something even greater . . .

The greatest blessing of David's life, and of your life too, wasn't his success. It wasn't his house and all the stuff in it. It wasn't even his loyal friends and family. It was something even greater . . . It was a son. It was the Son. For God's greatest blessing David looked forward—and we look back—to Jesus, the Son of God who took on our flesh so he could rescue us by his blood. It doesn't get any greater than that!

1. Why is it so comforting that Jesus, who is true God, became flesh and blood?
2. How can you use the many blessings God has given you to give thanks for the greatest blessing of a Savior?

Gracious Lord, as great as my sins are, your mercy and love are far greater. Forgive me for the times I lose focus on what is really important. In the many gifts and the busy times I enjoy this season, let me not lose sight of your Son, Jesus Christ, who became a man to set me free from sin and give me the gift of eternal life. Amen.

DECEMBER 6

Lift up your heads, you gates; lift them up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is he, this King of glory? The LORD Almighty—he is the King of glory. (Psalm 24:9-10)

The King of Glory Will Come

It seems we are always waiting for something. When young, maybe it's a break from school or a birthday. As adults, we wait for payday or the weekend or a trip we have planned. When single, you might be waiting for that special someone. Once married, maybe you wait for children or grandchildren. When a soldier is away at war, loved ones may tie a yellow ribbon around a tree or hang one in a window as a sign of their waiting.

While waiting, with great intensity David exclaimed, "Lift up your heads!" David longed to see the temple built to his mighty God, and he longed to see the Messiah arrive. He did not live to see either. Still, joy filled him in anticipation of the promised King.

We have seen David's prophetic words fulfilled in the glorification of Christ. Christ rose from the grave, ascended into heaven, and now reigns from his throne on high. The doors of heaven not only opened wide for the King of Glory to enter in, but these doors have remained forever open to all who trust in Jesus as their Lord and Savior. This is something to get excited about. This is something to write hymns of praise about!

In a way, it's like waiting for our victorious conqueror to return. We are confident that Christ won all battles and is returning. As we observe Christmas festivities, we also lift our heads and look to the eternal celebration when we will be reunited with our victorious Savior King.

Maybe tie a yellow ribbon somewhere to remind yourself that you are waiting and your King is coming back for you.

1. Do you have a hard time waiting for things?
2. How does the knowledge that Jesus keeps his promises help you hang onto faith while you wait for him?

The King of Glory comes; the nation rejoices. Open the gates before him; lift up your voices. He conquered sin and death; he truly has risen, and he will share with us his heavenly kingdom. (from CW 363:1,4)



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DECEMBER 7

*The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind:
“You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.”
(Psalm 110:4)*

The Messiah Will Serve as a Priest for God’s People

I understand why some people find it hard to believe in God. It’s a terrifying thought. A holy, perfect God who loathes sin? A God who expects perfection? That’s frightening. When I look at my life, I know that I deserve no mercy. Scripture tells me clearly what I do deserve: “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23).

Job also understood this. Although God commended his righteousness, Job still knew he was a sinner, and so he cried out, “If only there were someone to mediate between us . . . someone to remove God’s rod from me, so that his terror would frighten me no more” (Job 9:33,34).

Thanks be to God there is! Psalm 110 refers to one who is “a priest forever.” The work of the Aaronic priests reminded Israel of the price of their sin. The final, lasting payment would only—could only—be made by a greater priest. Jesus, our Great High Priest, sacrificed himself on the cross. And his work did not end there! “Because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely . . . because he always lives to intercede” (Hebrews 7:24-25).

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Great High Priest, we cannot forget the sins we have committed. But we also trust with Job, “You will cover over my sin” (Job 14:17).

1. Why is it so important to remember that we are all sinners and we are all equally offered God’s free grace?
2. When you think of Jesus as your priest, what does that mean to you?

Chief of sinners though I be, Jesus shed his blood for me, died that I might live on high, lived that I might never die! As the branch is to the vine, I am his, and he is mine. Amen. (CW 385:1)

DECEMBER 8

In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." (Isaiah 2:2-3a)

The Mountain of the Lord's House Will Be Established

Where do rivers flow? I'm no geologist, but I know that water follows gravity's pull. Rivers flow downhill until they reach the ocean. It's illogical and unprecedented that a river would ever flow against gravity's pull. Yet you and I *will* see a river flowing uphill. Come with me to Isaiah chapter two.

PART 1 – THE MOUNTAIN: *"the mountain of the LORD'S temple"*

Could that be the Temple Mount in Jerusalem? I don't think so. The Holy Spirit makes it pretty clear that Solomon's gorgeous temple was just a rough, imperfect rendition of the temple of heaven where we will dwell with our eternal Father for eternity.

PART 2 – THE RIVER: *"and all the nations will stream to it"*

Rivers don't flow uphill. But here we see the illogical and unprecedented grace of our LORD. We don't get to the LORD's temple by following the gravity of society. We don't get to the LORD's temple through humanity's religions. We get there through redemption—the sinless One buys back the sinful ones with 33 years of perfect living, dying, and rising. This is so illogical and so unprecedented and so absolutely essential that it merits sharing with *"all the nations."* For a foreshadowing of this phenomenon, please savor Revelation 7: "A great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language" are seen "standing before the throne and before the Lamb" and crying out in a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

PART 3 – THE WALK: *"He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths."*

1. How's your walk going? Are you learning from the LORD? What are three things you can do this week to dig deeper into Scripture?
2. Are you walking to the mountain alone or in the company of others for support? When you see confused people walking in circles away from the mountain, do you reach out to them?

Dear LORD, Thank you for establishing your temple in heaven and inviting me to join you there! The fact that you have chosen me to be in your family is so illogical and unprecedented—may this news excite me every time I hear it. May I be completely humbled by this grace and yet so confident that I am loved by my Father. Help me listen to your wisdom and walk in your truth and point others to your holy mountain. Amen.



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DECEMBER 9

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:14)

The Messiah Will Be Born of a Virgin

“Do you believe in signs from the universe?” a popular sitcom from the 2000s poses. The question gives pause even to many self-professed scientific minds. Human beings yearn for signs; some even beg for them. Chance meetings, dreams, and traffic accidents leave people eager to interpret life’s events as somehow guiding them toward an intended future. Meanwhile, the psychic boutique down the street appears to have the means to increase its advertising budget once again.

One nation *was* blessed with an abundance of legitimate signs, those from the *maker* of the universe. From a staff-turned-snake to a river of blood to a parting sea, Israel beheld miracle after miracle from the almighty Lord. Each marvel accentuated his presence and his saving purpose like a gigantic exclamation point. God backed his agenda with food from the sky, crumbling walls, and armies of angels.

Indeed, Israel’s history is full of God’s wonders. But none compare to the quiet sign of a young virgin from Nazareth, suddenly with child by miraculous means. Seven hundred years before that time, an unbelieving king of Judah refused God’s unconditional offer of a sign, only to be presented with the undeserved prophecy of that unscientific birth—the child to be called Immanuel (which means God with us)—a sign for which none would ask, yet God would not keep to himself.

1. Why is the name “Immanuel” such a significant name for Christ?
2. Think of an Old Testament miracle. How did it ultimately serve to advance God’s purpose of salvation?

Dear heavenly Father, draw our hearts to your precious truth this Advent season. As we ponder the wonder of Christ’s birth, embolden us to speak that truth which you would not keep to yourself. Oh, come, Immanuel. Amen.

DECEMBER 10

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6)

Your Names for the Messiah

Names have meaning. In Korean, ‘eun’ means grace and ‘seo’ means words, so my name (Eunseo) could mean “words of grace.”

In my language, *군사부일체* means king, teacher, and father are one (like a trinity). It emphasizes that these persons have authority in society and that father, teacher, and king offer the same merciful grace.

In Isaiah’s prophecy, although the Messiah is given four names, he is only one.

He is our **Wonderful Counselor**. He himself is a wonder, and he solves for us things we cannot solve or explain. He counsels us through troubles, overcoming them by his strength. He guides us with his wisdom.

Since we are weak, we cannot stand against troubles on our own. But **Mighty God** supports us. There is nothing he cannot do. He does miracles that are impossible to be explained by human science or power.

The Messiah is also called **Everlasting Father**. What does that mean in reference to Jesus, God the Son? The term “father” is being used like the Korean term I mentioned. He is father in the sense of king and leader over us. And his leadership never ends. Jesus lives forever and leads us to life in heaven. Jesus is with us always, in life and in death.

And this same Jesus is the **Prince of Peace**. “He will reign . . . with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever” (Isaiah 9:7). Imagine no wars, no strife, no disasters. With Jesus’ kingdom, it’s not imaginary. His government is real. When Jesus rules our hearts, peace comes to us.

Jesus has many names—and every name is true. He is love itself, King of kings, our Savior. Through him we have victory over evil.

1. What names that God reveals for himself in the Bible have the most meaning for you?
2. Explain why these names are meaningful to you.

Jesus, you are everything to us. Keep our faith focused on you always, trusting your wisdom, your power, and your leadership. Bring peace to our hearts. Amen.



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DECEMBER 11

A prophecy against Dumah: Someone calls to me from Seir, "Watchman, what is left of the night? Watchman, what is left of the night?" The watchman replies, "Morning is coming, but also the night." (Isaiah 21:11-12a)

When Will This Night of Suffering End?

Dr. Seuss has a wonderful book I've been reading quite a bit to my 3-year-old. It's titled *Oh, the Places You'll Go*. After describing the ups and downs of life, our poet writes, "All alone! Whether you like it or not / alone is something you'll be quite a lot!"

From a young age, we find out that this life is often short, nasty, and brutish, as the philosopher Thomas Hobbes described it. Left on our own, in our sins, we feel quite alone in our pains and hardships, counting the hours until the loneliness and aching are ended by brief experiences of joy, simply to go back to the quiet, lonely pains of life. Sometimes a person in hardship cries out, "When will this all be over? What waits for me when the long night of my suffering ends?" If that person is separated from Christ, the answer is always, "More night."

Isaiah, in response to unbelieving Edomites wondering when their night of suffering will end, answers, "Morning is coming, but also the night." For those without the gospel, night will always come again.

How different will be the brilliance of Jesus as he rises like the sun when he returns, giving believers an eternal, never-ending day in heaven, when our loneliness and sorrows will finally be over. Can you feel the "Son" on your face even now?

1. Isaiah describes what life is like when you're an unbeliever: an endless cycle of painful nights. Can you think of a Bible passage that describes the opposite, eternal life through Jesus as endless joyful days?
2. Who in your life needs to hear that, through Christ, there's more to life than an endless cycle of painful nights?

Heavenly Father, it often feels as if life is a cycle of one problem ending just to have another begin. Help me hold on to your promise that, through your blood, an end to suffering is coming. Fill me with joy as I look forward to the day when your glory will be all the sunlight I need as I begin to live with you forever. Amen.

DECEMBER 12

The LORD says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." (Isaiah 49:6)

The Messiah Will Be a Light for the Gentiles

As you listen to Isaiah's words, does the phrase "too small" jump out at you? Isaiah says it is "too small" for the Savior to simply bring back the straying people of Israel. Too small? How is that task in any way "small"? The Old Testament is filled with accounts of people who refused to turn to their God for help. The entire book of Judges is a jarring example. Generation after generation turned away from their only hope and deliverer—and experienced again and again the harmful repercussions of such moves. Israel's heart seemed too hard to crack.

And yet here the Father, through Isaiah, proclaims this task too small. His Son could do so much more. He could—and would—save the Gentiles too.

If turning the hearts of a determined nation of sinners is too small for Jesus, then what is "too small" for us? The Son himself proclaims, "Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these" (John 14:12). The full meaning of that verse is overwhelming. We will do greater works than Jesus did on earth? His Spirit must truly be powerful.

If this is the promise Jesus makes, then let us have no fear. It is too small a thing to keep the gospel inside our little corner of Gentiles here in our own church body. God can work greater things than just getting by in our congregations. He desires that through the gift of his Son, his "salvation may reach the ends of the earth."

1. What evidence do you see of God turning your determined heart away from sin like the nation of Israel?
2. In what ways could your congregation or you personally be focusing on work that is too small?

Our Strength and Shield, we pray that you shine your light in us and across the world. Light a fire in our souls that cannot be put out. Remove the fear from our hearts, and open our eyes to the work that you are able to do through us. Amen.





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DECEMBER 13

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. (Isaiah 61:1-3a)

The Messiah Will Proclaim the Year of the Lord's Favor

You find yourself overwhelmed. You borrowed your father's car to run a short errand. You stopped paying attention for just a moment and . . . it doesn't look good. Worse than the cuts and scrapes and the damage to the car is anticipating that phone call to your father. You know it's your fault, and any anger you'll soon face will be just what you deserve. The thought of it makes you sick with guilt. The only relief you could possibly find would be to hear from your father himself that it's okay, that all is forgiven.

On a much larger scale, we face a similar situation when it comes to sin and our relationship with God. We have strayed. We have violated his law. As far as our actions go, we are on our way to one terrifying confrontation with our Creator. Or we would be, if it weren't for the commitment of love our Father has for us, and the Redeemer whose birth we look forward to during Advent. Isaiah's words, written long before the first Christmas, spoke of Jesus as the one to fulfill God's promises to us. He proclaimed good news to us, the poor. The Lord's favor—his forgiveness and compassion—belong to us through faith in him. Because he subjected himself to affliction, imprisonment, and death, we no longer have to fear death or remain burdened by guilt. Christ proclaimed the year of the Lord's favor two millennia ago, and he does so for us today as well.

1. What does it mean to be spiritually poor, brokenhearted, and held captive by sin, and how does faith in Jesus change that?
2. How are the words of these verses fulfilled in Jesus?

Almighty Father, you gave us—powerless and corrupted sinners—a hope and a future through the baby whose birth we remember at Christmas. Keep us faithful to you and give us joy in remembering your favor for us and the freedom we have in Christ. Help us always to trust and praise you because of your great love for us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

DECEMBER 14

“The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteous Savior.”
(Jeremiah 23:5-6)

A Righteous Branch from David's Seed

For ten weeks, I taught history and American government classes in Miami. Before long, it struck me that many of my Venezuelan students put unshakable trust in America and its ideals.

They had good reason to. No, I'm not trying to make a political statement, but read this: Kidnappings are a matter of routine in Venezuela, averaging 46 per day, and it's estimated that 20 percent are actually carried out by the police. Actual numbers, though, are hard to come by since the majority of kidnappings are never reported. It wasn't uncommon for multiple students in my classroom to recount harrowing encounters with professional kidnapers.

Upon her return from a visit home to Venezuela, one of my students described a political poster she'd seen spouting some vague message about hope. “Hope?” she asked. “Hope for what?”

While many Americans sleep relatively peacefully at night, daily occurrences remind us that all is not right with the world. Tiny body parts are sold for profit. Inner-city homicide rates skyrocket. Fires ravage the West Coast.

Who can make things right?

We sit in a bleak waiting room, but not without hope. Here we quiet our hearts and wait for the King who brings true justice and peace. In a world where hope is elusive, his arrival as our Savior has brought us real hope.

1. In what ways has Christ given you hope in the face of this world's dangers?
2. What about Christ's second coming do you most look forward to?

Lord Jesus, we thank you for restoring our relationship with you. In these days, it is easy for us to look at everything falling apart around us and doubt your power and love. Help us to wait patiently as you work all events according to your good will. Remind us of the perfect home that awaits us, and grant us peace as we continue to serve you. Amen.



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DECEMBER 15

“Shout and be glad, Daughter Zion. For I am coming, and I will live among you,” declares the LORD. “Many nations will be joined with the LORD in that day and will become my people. I will live among you and you will know that the LORD Almighty has sent me to you.” (Zechariah 2:10-11)

Sing and Rejoice, O Daughter of Zion

Imagine this: The newly elected president of the United States has just made a declaration that he will be coming to your hometown in the near future. He will not only be in your town, but will be living among you, not cooped up in a fancy mansion on the outskirts of town. He will be accessible to the community, not only mingling with the upper-class citizens of your town, but also with the people who eat from the food shelf or struggle to keep a job.

Around 520 B.C., the Israelites were expecting an even more prestigious and honorable guest. The prophet Zechariah told the Israelites that the God whom they believed in, without seeing, would become visible and live among them. The Israelites were hearing another promise of the coming Messiah, their rescuer, and had every reason to be filled with hope and gladness—no matter what their earthly situation at the time. Their Savior was coming to live among them, bringing salvation for all people. Wouldn't that make *you* want to shout and be glad?

1. Although God does not live among us in human form anymore, what are some ways that you can see him in your life today?
2. How can you “shout and be glad” for God's great gifts to you?

O Savior, we are more than blessed to have had you come and live among us on earth. Now you rule from heaven, from your unseen eternal throne, and provide us with your presence everywhere and with your gifts of love each and every day. As we prepare for your future coming, fill us with hope and gladness through you. Amen.



DECEMBER 16

“I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty. (Malachi 3:1)

The First Advent Season

The intertestamental period, the time between the writing of the Old and New Testaments, must have been an interesting time in which to live. The Greek Empire gave way to the Romans. There was much political upheaval. After the ministry of the prophet Malachi, God had stopped speaking directly to his chosen people.

Among their faults, the people of Israel had forgotten the words the LORD spoke through Malachi. But after 400 years of silence, our loving Lord kept his promise, with the least likeliest of couples: Zechariah and Elizabeth. She was barren, and “both were well along in years” (Luke 1:18). Through a miraculous birth, John the Baptist arrived, and his ministry fulfilled the prophecy of Malachi, “I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me.”

Unfortunately, many in Israel anticipated a different sort of savior. They were looking for a king to restore the kingdom of Israel to earthly power.

While the current times are also filled with political upheaval, and it may seem that the world has stopped listening to what the LORD has said, may we be like John, and be that “voice calling in the desert” with the gospel message. For we know Jesus as the Christ, the long-promised Savior from sin. As we celebrate this Advent season, we can again look forward to his coming, just as the faithful in Israel anticipated the Messiah’s arrival during that first Advent season.

1. How are we similar and different from the people of the intertestamental period?
2. In what ways does the Lord speak to you, and how do you respond?

Dear Heavenly Father, be with me today as I wait to celebrate the coming of your Son, the long-promised Savior from sin. May your Holy Spirit be with me, that I may be a “light unto the world” so others may believe, and no longer walk in darkness but live in your light. Amen.



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DECEMBER 17

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Matthew 3:1-2)

Is It Near Yet?

Near is an adverb or adjective used in relation to time or distance, and people use that term in many different ways. We say phrases like "dinner is drawing near" or "that cat keeps coming near me" or even "Christmas is nearly here." However, the use of *near* is completely subjective in the mind of the person speaking and of the person receiving the message.

Growing up I would ask to open my presents before Christmas. My mother would say, "Not yet, darling. Christmas is nearly here." In the mind of my mother, "near" was December 1 and onward. "Near" for me was when the first present showed up under the tree.

As John was baptizing on the Jordan River, what did "near" mean to him? Did John consider "near" being when his cousin Jesus would begin his ministry of saving souls and forgiving sins? How did the people of Israel, hearing John's message, understand "near"? God had come near to his people in the person of Jesus.

Jesus is near and dear to our hearts because his kingdom is present within us. His kingdom is near right now because his providential hand is with you and me every minute of every day in every place on earth and in every situation.

1. How has Jesus demonstrated his "nearness" to you today?
2. How can you apply John's words—"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near"—to your life of sanctification?

Heavenly Father, thank you for drawing me near to you. Let me never doubt your presence. You are not an absent God but my merciful and loving king who rules in my life for my eternal good. With all the saints on earth and hosts of heaven, I cry out "Come, Lord Jesus, come!" Amen.

DECEMBER 18

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Matthew 11:28-29)

Come to Me

The opening scene of the classic Christmas movie *It's a Wonderful Life* takes place on Christmas Eve 1945. A depressed George Bailey is standing on a bridge, contemplating taking his own life. The burdens of the world have caught up to him and have driven him to the edge. Instead of being at home celebrating the season with his wife and children, George is teetering on the edge, about to succumb to the weight of this sinful world.

There are times when we are like George Bailey. We live in a sinful world that often throws situations our way that can be too big for us to handle alone. Like George, we sometimes lose sight of the best message of Christmas, which is rest for our souls that can only be found in Christ Jesus.

The “weary and burdened” nature of life Jesus spoke about was the hurts, the frustrations, and the hardness of life that weigh us down as direct and indirect results of living as sinners in a sinful world. He promises that if we bring our problems to him in prayer, he will provide the solution.

What George Bailey’s daughter kept playing on the piano is the message we need most of all: “Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.” Jesus—and only Jesus—provides the comfort and rest our souls need.

1. What troubles or difficulties are you struggling with during this holiday season?
2. Do you know anyone who could use some comfort in Jesus this Christmas? How might you reach out to them?

Heavenly Father, when life becomes too much for us, lead us to come to you in prayer and lay our burdens at your feet. Grant us the peace that comes from your Son’s birth and the comfort he promised us in his Word. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.



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DECEMBER 19

“But in those days, following that distress, ‘the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’ At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.”
(Mark 13:24-27)

The Son of Man Will Come with Power and Glory

The world pushes its Christmas on us. Lists! Gifts to give, parties to attend, things to buy, goodies to make, decorations, cards, who is visiting whom, and when, and for how long? Do all you possibly can to make sure everyone is as happy as possible! Christmas is coming!

Christians push the world’s Christmas aside. During these weeks we remember that God came to this world long ago to live among humans. Our joy is deeper, though, because he will come again! It won’t be a silent night when he comes the second time. It will be a horrifying time for those who do not know Jesus, but for his people who are still on earth it will be an awesome sight—Jesus’ great power and glory will be on display for all to see, and he will be gathering his people from all corners of the earth. This time the angels’ message of peace will only be for those whose hearts, by grace, are already his.

The world’s Christmas looks for the perfect gift—the perfect decorations—the perfect experience of wonder—the perfect act of charity to warm the hearts of others. But we Christians are looking for Jesus. We are looking for him to come as he promised he would.

1. In what way could your Christmas celebrations be a representation or reminder of Christ’s second coming?
2. How could you talk about Christ’s second coming with those who are focused on “the world’s Christmas”?

Lord Jesus, it is good to remember and celebrate your first coming to earth to live among us. Thank you for humbling yourself to be born as a lowly human baby so that you could live perfectly in my place and die for my imperfections. As I commemorate your birth, keep your second coming on my mind as well. Help me to be always ready to see you in glory. Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

DECEMBER 20

After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." (John 6:14)

The Prophet Who Is to Come

Life comes with tough situations. Unemployment. Cancer. Bankruptcy. Death. In the heat of the moment, we often forget to turn to our Lord for guidance. We expect Jesus to be our on-demand problem solver. When he's not, we move on and look for some real answers.

There's no doubt that the 5,000 at the foot of the mountain were facing life's hard times. After Jesus fed them, they were ready to name him the Prophet to come. Yet where were those 5,000 while Jesus hung on the cross? Like us, they moved on when they realized Jesus wasn't their on-demand bread king and problem solver.

This Advent season we take refuge in this truth: Jesus our Prophet is not just another one of today's problem solvers. He is the ultimate problem solver. By his life, death, and resurrection he bridged the gap between God and us. Our Prophet defeated sin and death. He secured our entrance into eternity. In this life we are hard pressed by the effects of sin. Yet by God's grace we are able to continue rejoicing. Our Prophet completed his work. The eternal life, glory, and joy he won awaits us.

1. Think back to a difficult time when you felt weak and consider where the guidance of our Prophet was apparent.
2. How does reflecting on God's hand in past trials help us for the present and future?

Almighty Lord, you direct all things in creation. Fill our hearts with joy as we anticipate the birth of our Prophet. Carry out your will in our lives. Give us strength to endure trials. Give us faith that lifts our eyes to the work of our Prophet and all that he has won for us. Amen.



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DECEMBER 21

For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation. (2 Corinthians 6:2)

Now Is the Day of Salvation

Christmas will soon be here. As a child, I was always excited for Christmas. It meant a new dress for the children's service and, of course, presents. As I have gotten older, Christmas remains a time of excitement but for different reasons. I still get a new dress for Christmas Eve, but now I look forward more to the time spent with family and friends.

The season of Advent is all about anticipation, the preparation for the birth of the promised Messiah. The apostle Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians pointed to the promise of the Messiah that the prophet Isaiah shared. Isaiah pointed out that God's Servant, Jesus, would be sent into the world to accomplish the Father's work of saving all people from their sins. Advent, therefore, looks ahead not only to the birth of Christ, but also to his saving work on Good Friday and his victory on Easter Sunday.

The apostle Paul was declaring that the Old Testament prophecies about Jesus have been fulfilled. God's favor has been shown to us through Jesus' perfect life, death, and resurrection to save all people. The day of salvation is now—we have been released from the captivity of sin and the devil, and we can rejoice in the forgiveness of sins and life in heaven with our Savior. Now we anticipate Jesus' return to this earth to take us home to be with him.

This Christmas, do not anticipate just the presents and the time spent with family, anticipate the wonderful Easter message and share the good news of our salvation with others—now!

1. What things about Christmas fill you with anticipation?
2. How can you share the good news of Jesus today?

Dear Savior, we praise and thank you for becoming a man to live the perfect life we could not, for dying the death we deserved, and for rising again to assure us of life in heaven. In this busy time of year, help us to remember what Christmas is all about. Lead us to find anticipation in the certainty of heaven, and use us to share the good news with others that we meet. Amen.

DECEMBER 22

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. (1 Timothy 1:15)

A Savior for the Worst Sinners

“At church, would you rather sit next to a visitor who had received a speeding ticket or who was a recently released felon?” That’s a rather jarring question for many of us as we evaluate ourselves. Society gives levels to crimes, such as misdemeanor and felony. Unfortunately, our sinful natures like to do the same. We try to build ourselves up and convince ourselves that we are pretty good (or at least better than most).

Sometimes we need to ask ourselves, “Does God assign levels to sins?” Even to think of it that way misses the point of God’s law. A single sin damns a person to hell. We are all equal in that respect. God’s law reminds us that our comparison isn’t between us and others but rather between us and God. We will never measure up. We all must say with Paul, “I am the worst.”

But all of us “worst sinners” have a trustworthy assurance from God: “Christ came into the world to save sinners.” God looked at this sin-ridden world and said, “Yes, you are the worst, but I love you. Here is my Son.” Through Christ’s sacrifice, we are a new creation. No longer slaves to sin but children of God: forgiven and blameless in God’s sight. Together let us share this message throughout all creation: “We are all the worst of sinners, but God didn’t leave us. In fact, he saved us.”

1. When do you feel most tempted to compare yourself to others?
2. How can you show love rather than judgment in such situations?

Dear Lord, I thank you and praise you for the gift of your Son, Jesus. Please forgive me for those times when I act in judgment rather than love. Please help me to remember that I am equal to everyone around me when I am tempted to consider myself better. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.



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DECEMBER 23

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." Revelation 21:2-4

The New Jerusalem

Being human is hard. Being alive is hard. Things in everyday life force us to long for something better in the end. A long day at work, losing your best friend, a loved one being ill—all sorts of things make us long for some sort of relief or deliverance.

This summer I had to deal with the passing of my grandmother. As anyone who has lost anything in life knows, it is not easy to deal with the loss of someone you cherished and loved so dearly. One of the most comforting things for me was that she knew with great certainty that she was going to the new Jerusalem to be with her God. Knowing that God keeps his promises, that he did in fact deliver her from her suffering, makes it easier to say, "Till we meet again."

God promised a Savior, and on Christmas day a Savior was born—born to deliver us, to ensure that all our suffering would be no more, to give us a new Jerusalem, a heavenly home. Jesus is our security throughout life as we endure and persevere, because we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. We look forward because he has taken care of the past, and though we suffer now, we know that the future is life eternal with God in glory.

1. What are some examples of God taking care of his people in the Bible?
2. What are some ways God takes care of us in our everyday lives?

Heavenly Father, as we go through our busy, challenging lives, help us remember to find strength in your Word. When things get especially hard, help us remember the promise of a time to come when we will be rejoicing in heaven. Keep our hope constant in Jesus. Amen.

DECEMBER 24

He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. (Revelation 22:20)

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus

I was watching the final film in my favorite movie series. The movie was awesome, well produced. But I wanted it to slow down. What I had waited such a long time to see would soon be over.



Our lives on this earth get away from us. As youngsters, we long to be considered grown-ups and experience life to the fullest. But before long, our days move too quickly. Years become decades, and we want to hit the brakes. We want it to slow down because we aspire to do more in life. Or we want life to slow down because of the shortcomings we have. We know we eventually will meet our Maker, the God who demands holiness and perfection.

Thankfully, our God is also loving and giving. He sent his Son to be perfection for us. Because of God's gift of grace in Jesus, we can say these words at meal times and at all times in hope: "Come, Lord Jesus." This is not an end but a new beginning. The last words in the Bible remind us of the end but also of a new beginning.

Perhaps you have read the Bible from cover to cover. It's over . . . now what? With your favorite movie series on Blu-ray, you can watch over and over again—and each time find something you didn't see before. So, reread the living, breathing Word of your Lord and Savior! Be confident that you are forgiven and that the Lord is coming again to take you to be with him in paradise.

1. What stories in the Bible do you enjoy hearing again and again?
2. How will your outlook on life become less anxious if you keep your focus on Jesus and his return?

Come, Lord Jesus! Be our guest at our tables, in our homes, in our lives—every day. And keep us hopeful and eager as we wait for your return and the beginning of eternal life with you. Amen.



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DECEMBER 25

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life and that life was the light of all mankind. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1-4, 14)

The Word Became Flesh

Parents thrill when their infant responds to their smiles and songs with gurgles and giggles. Soon the babe mimics their words with her own sounds and vocalizations. What joy! There is awareness and alertness to the presence of the people who love this child most. Then words are formed, few at first and sometimes unclear. And joy continues to fill the parents as their child seeks to respond to this relationship of love.

Among all God's creatures, only humans have been gifted with meaningful language. We can nurture our relationships as words couple with hugs to convey thoughts and feelings, express tears and fears, echo laughter or longing. Language provides opportunity for true soul-to-soul talk, bringing two together in understanding.

More than that, our Lord God gives language because he seeks to communicate with us, his children. He communicates through his Word.

Today we kneel in awe at a babe who is also called "the Word." Do you understand this unique name for Jesus?

The Word became flesh that we might be alert and aware of the One who has loved us with an everlasting love. The Word became flesh to reveal the heart of the Savior God. As true God and true man in one, Jesus clearly communicates the will of the Almighty and so opens the closed mind of sinful humans. The Word became flesh to show us a life lived in perfect conformity to the Father's will, in contrast to our own lives, which vindicates Scripture's "all have fallen short of the glory of God." The Word became flesh to demonstrate God's love for the world—a love that led the Word to become a Substitute for all: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in him."

The Word is a name for the Savior that underscores God's intense desire for you to know—to know the fullness of his grace in the person



of his only begotten Son. Cherish this relationship God has established through Jesus by listening to the Word made flesh through his inspired written Word.

Listen and be alert. Be aware of the presence of the One who loves you most of all.

*Jesus, guard and guide your members;
 Make us children of your grace;
 Hear our prayers in every place.
 Fan to life faith's glowing embers;
 Give all Christians far and near
 Holy peace, a glad new year. (CW 45:4)*



A Note on the Authors

The authors of these devotions are current students at Martin Luther College, as well as pastors, teachers, staff ministers, and lay leaders who have studied at MLC. They hail from Florida to California, from Canada to St. Lucia to Korea.

The authors were selected and edited by Rev. David Sellnow, MLC professor of theology and history. Professor Sellnow worked with these students in his writing-intensive theology course and/or his continuing education course in devotional writing. Professor Sellnow himself writes and edits for various WELS publications.

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