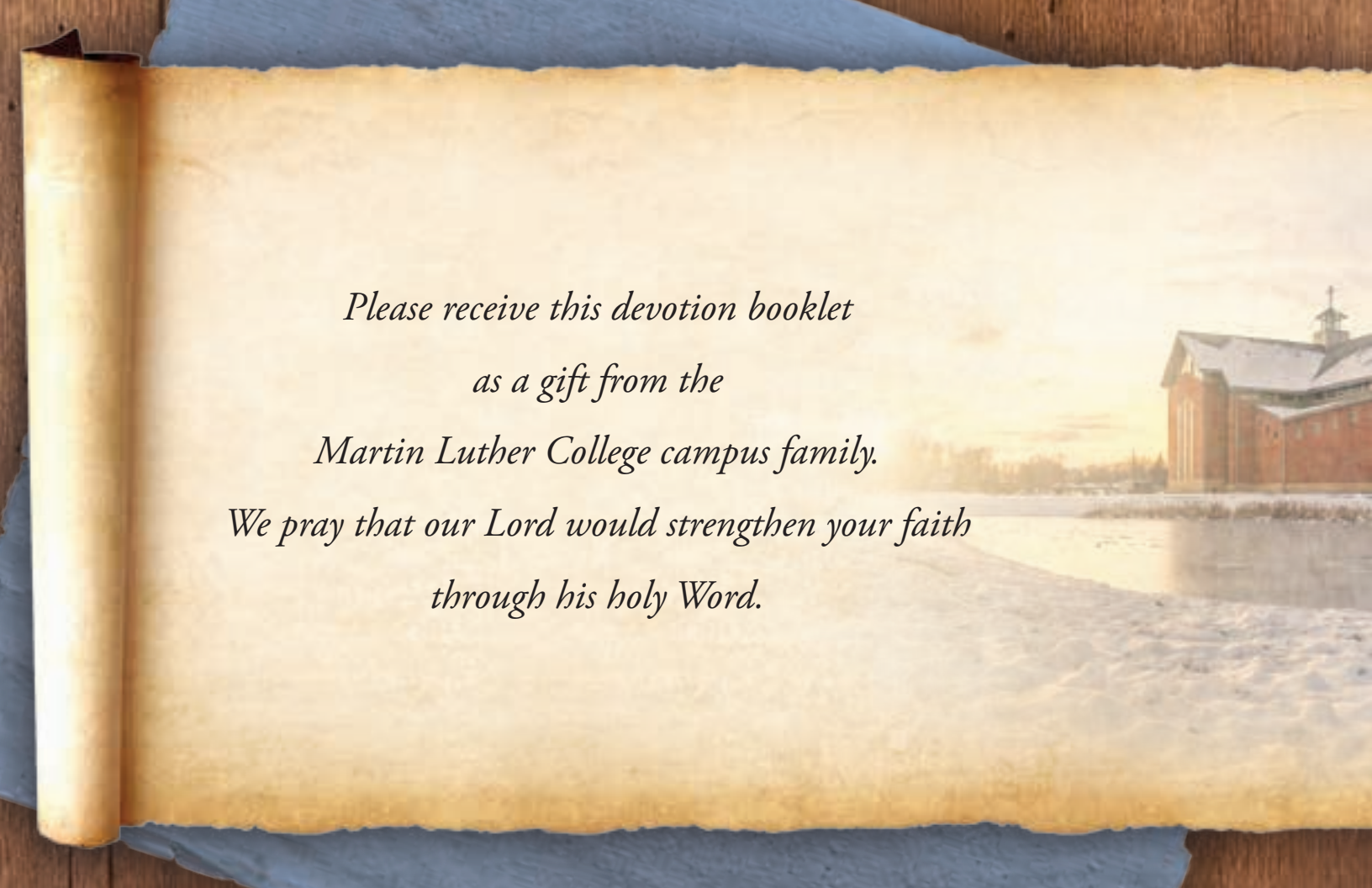


ADVENT DEVOTIONS

*Isaiah had
foretold it...*



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A Sign of Our Savior

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)

What do you want for Christmas? I'm never quite sure how to answer that question. On one hand, I usually have no idea what to ask for. On the other hand, I don't want to know what I'm getting. If I did, the anticipation of opening Christmas gifts might be lost.

In Isaiah 7, wicked King Ahaz of Judah was being attacked by foreign armies. To demonstrate that he was with Judah, the Lord spoke to Ahaz. "Ask the Lord your God for a sign," he said (Isaiah 7:10-11). Astonishingly, Ahaz refused God's generous offer. Instead of trusting in God to save him, Ahaz arrogantly tried his own way to rescue himself. In doing so, he rejected God as his Savior.

While it's easy for us to scoff at Ahaz throwing away this opportunity, first let's take a look at the person in the mirror. You and I have rejected God by trying our

own ideas to save ourselves from the devil's evil armies. Arrogantly we imagine that heaven can be ours because we've behaved well enough. We place our love and trust in a multitude of things besides God. Because of our sins, we deserve eternal death.

Not wanting anyone to perish, our gracious God said, "I'll give you a sign and tell you what you need."

Through Isaiah, he gives the sign: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." These words of God draw an arrow connecting the Old Testament to the New and highlight God's eternal plan to save us from our sin and death. The promise was made that the offspring of a woman would crush the devil's power (Genesis 3:15); however, no ordinary birth would suffice. The son must be conceived and born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14), and so the arrow points directly to Mary as the virgin mother (Matthew 1:23-24). This unlikely sign points unmistakably to our greatest gift from God, our Savior from sin.

December 1

As miraculous as this sign is, the greater miracle is God giving us what we needed. The name Immanuel means “God with us.” God, whom the heavens cannot contain, wrapped himself in human flesh. Not just touching mankind, but actually becoming a man in order to suffer, die, and rise for us, to save us from our sins. The fullness of the deity lives in bodily form so that, in Christ, we are made alive with Christ (Colossians 2:9,13).

What do you want for Christmas? Thanks be to God that we don’t have to answer this question alone. In mercy, God decided what we needed. Then he gave it to us. This eternal gift is already ours, but the anticipation of our heavenly celebration will not fade.

God of our salvation, we praise you for keeping your ancient promises and sending your Son, Immanuel, to free us from sin, death, and the devil. As we celebrate your first coming at your birth, keep us ever mindful and filled with anticipation for your second coming, when you will return to take us to be with you in heaven. Amen.

Rev. Matthew Rothe (MLC '11, WLS '16) serves a new mission in Fredericksburg, Virginia.



Believing the Unbelievable

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). (Matthew 1:22-23)

Find your nearest nativity scene. Fix your eyes on Joseph. What's on his mind as he sees his Jesus for the very first time? His smile is relaxed, yet bursting with joy. His eyes are gentle, yet filled with awe. His heart is humbled, yet overflowing with hope.

Now hit "rewind." Go back nine months. What's on his mind as he hears for the very first time that Mary is pregnant? His smile is nonexistent. His eyes are watery. His heart is broken. The shocking news seemed unbelievable, but it was true: "[Mary] was found to be with child," and Joseph knew he was not the father! Logically this meant one thing: his fiancée was unfaithful. So Joseph made a difficult decision. As a righteous man, he wouldn't disgrace her publicly; Joseph would divorce Mary secretly. But God had different plans.

The angelic announcement seemed unbelievable, but it was true: "What is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." A virgin giving birth to the Son of God? None of this made sense. The circumstances of Christmas, however, remind us: "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" (1 Corinthians 1:20). God's rescue plan for mankind was being fulfilled.

The fulfillment of Isaiah's (7:14) prophecy seemed unbelievable, but it was true. "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means 'God with us')." The almighty, eternal God would be born a human? Why would the holy God desire to live with sinners? Didn't the all-knowing God see that his life would lead to horrific death on a cross? This contradicts human reason!

How did Joseph believe the unbelievable? Was it the angel's explanation? Prophecy fulfilled? Perhaps witnessing the virgin birth? No. The same Holy Spirit that conceived Christ also created believing faith in Joseph, and this same Holy Spirit creates faith in our hearts today.

December 2

This is not the story of a carpenter's broken heart restored. This is the story of God's broken heart restored. This is the story of Immanuel come to free his own from Satan's tyranny. This is the story of Immanuel come to open wide our heavenly home (CW 23). This is the story of God with us, so we can be with him forever. Illogical? Humanly speaking, yes. "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18).

From Immanuel's virgin birth to his glorious death and resurrection, people will laugh as we confess Christ as Lord and Savior. Let them. The Christmas story and Christian faith might seem unbelievable, but they are true. We have God's Word. It is by faith we believe.

Holy Spirit, we thank you for your saving work of bringing us to faith in the Christ Child. Bless the proclamation of your Word as we share the joyous message of Christmas with others. Work in the hearts of all those who do not yet believe in Jesus as their Savior, that they may be filled with peace and joy in him. Amen.

Rev. Matthew Rothe (MLC '11, WLS '16) serves a new mission in Fredericksburg, Virginia.



The Savior Would Be a Light

Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. (Isaiah 9:1-2)

It is the season of darkness in the northern hemisphere, with the sun absent for the majority of each day. Throughout history this ominous seasonal darkness has evoked fear. The pre-Christian inhabitants of North America believed that the fleeting sunlight was their sun-god fleeing from them. How difficult it must have been to wait and not lose hope, wondering whether their distant, fleeing god would return to bring light, life, and warmth.

The shortening of daylight and prolonged darkness do not have the same power to evoke such fears in us who have warm houses, grocery stores full of food, and a sovereign God who is with us and behind the grand design of days, seasons, and celestial bodies. As a recent transplant

to a warmer climate, this time of year actually evokes a nostalgia for the cold, dark days of my youth, spent huddled cozily in a warm house with hot coffee, a good book, card games, and the delicious smells of warm food, cooking in the kitchen, filling a house full of loved ones.

Even so, darkness and night still have the power to evoke fear. Rather than nostalgia, darkness still represents evil, chaos, loneliness, despair, and death. We fear what we cannot see and what we do not want to see. Breaking news not seen coming, not desired, still breaks hearts.

The prophet Isaiah was called to give some breaking news—heart-breaking news—to the people of Jerusalem and Judah. Isaiah shared the dark reality of their apocalyptic near-future. The land that God had promised to his chosen ones would be attacked and taken. The chosen nation would no longer be an autonomous nation. And God's chosen people would be scattered and left to “look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom . . . and will be thrust into utter darkness” (Isaiah 8:22).

December 3

Yet Isaiah also called on the people of Jerusalem and Judah to look past that fearful, gloomy future, past centuries and generations to come, and past their familiar land. He called on them to look with sure hope to the north, to Galilee, where a great light would one day dawn. In Galilee, the Savior would come to shine through the evil, chaos, loneliness, despair, and death of this dark world.

Centuries later, that great light did come to conquer darkness. We do not have an absent, distant, or fleeing God. We have the Son who entered this dark world to bring light, life, and warmth to all our dark days and seasons. When we do see gloom and distress, we do not lose hope. The light of Jesus points our eyes to the skies, as we wait for our bright future in heaven.

Lord God, may the light of your Son shine on all my days and in all my ways. Amen.

*Rev. Brian Wrobel (MLC '10, WLS '14) serves at
Zion-Gainesville, Florida.*

A Light in Darkness

When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee. Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali—to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.” (Matthew 4:12-16)

The Welsh poet W.H. Davies posed the question, “What is this life if, full of care, we have no time to stand and stare?” How often the significant escapes our notice because we are too preoccupied with the insignificant! That could be the case with even the great light of whom Isaiah prophesied. How significant is the Light of the world entering and walking this world for all lost in darkness, but how quickly even that can be overshadowed by the insignificant.

It was no different while the Light of the world was walking in this world. After those in Judea did not see the significance in Jesus and opposed him, Jesus continued

his public ministry in his homeland of Galilee to fulfill Isaiah’s prophecy. There, many first saw the light of our Savior, including the first disciples. But not everyone in Galilee stopped to stand and stare at the Light of the world there either. Rather than noticing the wonderment of a great light, they noticed he was an insignificant local carpenter’s son from Nazareth, a brother, a relative, a fellow Galilean. Sadly, for many, the wonderment was lost.

Have you ever felt a similar loss of wonderment? Maybe the wonder of light is lost when you consider that light can be deconstructed into properties of intensity, wavelength, particles, and speed, or that light is emitted and absorbed by photons. Maybe a rainbow is not such a marvel when you consider that it can be explained by water particles and light refraction. Maybe the light of fireflies at night loses its mystique and romanticism when you find out it is simply a chemical reaction. Maybe your experiences from living in this darkened world leave you disappointed and disenchanted with Jesus—the great Light that has dawned yet is so rarely seen in our lives shadowed by sin and death. Maybe.

December 4

Maybe it is time to stand and stare this Advent season. All the explanations of light have not begun to approach erasing the miracle of light. So it is also with our Savior Jesus. The light of our Savior can be ignored and overlooked, but cannot be explained away. Stop to stand and stare at his light, at the Word made flesh. Stand and stare at the Author, the Bringer, and the Source of light, yet the son of a carpenter from Nazareth. Take time to stand and stare at what your God has done for you. For you he perfectly lived, innocently died, and gloriously rose, so that when you start to feel disappointed and disenchanted in this dark world, you can always see his great light. Isaiah's prophesy is not just fulfilled in Jesus or in Galilee, but in you, as you see your Savior. Do not pass over the significance of that miracle. Reflect on it. Reflect it to others still lost in darkness.

Jesus, help me never to lose the wonderment of what you have done for me. Be my light in this dark world. Use my life to point others to your light, so that they too may see. Amen.

*Rev. Brian Wrobel (MLC '10, WLS '14) serves at
Zion-Gainesville, Florida.*



What's in a Name?

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)

What's in a name? That which we call a rose . . . by any other name would smell as sweet.

Juliet Capulet, a main character of Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*, uttered that line, perhaps in frustration. She was in love with Romeo (last name Montague), and the Capulet and Montague families deeply hated each other. So it was difficult for Romeo and Juliet to be together, even though they loved each other. But Juliet thought names shouldn't mean anything—because if someone calls a rose a tulip, or a daffodil, it's still a rose, right? Juliet thought, "Romeo's name means nothing. I love him and he loves me—*that's* what matters!"

No matter what Juliet thought, her last name and Romeo's last name mattered. The names mattered because of what they stood for—two families whose hatred for each other ultimately caused Romeo and Juliet both to die.

The prophet Isaiah wrote down names for a child who would be coming in the future, and the names he wrote down matter a great deal! They matter because they told the Old Testament Israelites important information about the Savior, the Savior who had been promised to them in the past and who would be coming in the future. And those names also tell us about the promised Savior who has already come and completed his work of saving us! They tell us who he is and what he does.

He's the Wonderful Counselor. Your friends and your family can give you advice and counsel, but it won't always be helpful. The Wonderful Counselor always gives you what you need, because he knows you even better than you know yourself.

He's the Mighty God, who has the power necessary to save you from your sins. A human being can't decide to save the world from its sins—a human being doesn't have that power. The Mighty God does.

He's the Everlasting Father, who does what no earthly father can ever do—guard and protect you perfectly. Forever.

December 5

He's the Prince of Peace, who gives you *shalom*—perfect peace between you and God. And the peace you and I have with God allows us to be at peace in all other aspects of life. If we have God, we have all we need. Asaph wrote in Psalm 73:25, “Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.”

The names Isaiah prophesied would mean nothing to us if Isaiah hadn't written the first half of our verse for today. *To us* a child is born, *to us* a son is given. To you. And to me. Praise God for names that matter, names that show us a Savior who came *for us*.

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for sending your Son for us. Help me understand and believe that who Jesus is and what he does—it is all for me. Amen.

Rev. Nathan Loersch (MLC '11, WLS '15) serves at Shepherd of the Lakes-Fenton, Michigan.



The Word Has Come

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 1:14)

When I was a kid, our family moved a couple times, and each time we moved, it was because of my dad's job. He took a job in a new town, and we had to move to that town so he could do his job.

If you grew up in a military family, chances are good you may have moved around quite a bit, because often, military families will move every few years. Why? Because the military member has a job to do, and the job requires that he or she move to a new place. Uprooting and moving a family is no small task—it's a big deal! If you're committed to making the effort to move, it shows you're committed to the new job you'll have at your new home.

Jesus, whom the gospel writer John calls *the Word*, had a job to do too. It didn't require Jesus to move 50 or 100 miles away, or even across the country. It required him to move from heaven to earth, a distance we can't measure with miles or even light-years.

If you've lived in a certain house for a number of years, it can be difficult to leave. Jesus had lived in heaven for a long time—for the roughly 4,000 years the world had existed, and *forever* before that. If leaving your home is difficult after only a few years, imagine the difficulty of leaving your *eternal* home!

But Jesus willingly left heaven and moved his residence to earth, all because of you. He took a cosmic journey because his job required it. His job was to show the world what truth and true grace are—to package all the glory of God in a little baby who would grow up and give his life in order to give you eternal life. Quite a job, huh? The Word did that job because he wanted you to see the glory of God forever in heaven. Jesus made his home with us on earth for a time, so that our home with him in heaven is *not* just for a time, but *forever*.

Jesus is the Word that God used to tell the world, "I love you. Jesus is the one who is most precious to me, and I am giving him to you. I am giving him up for you. Because I want *you* to be with me too." Jesus was sent

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by the Father in order to bring us to the Father. As John said, we have already seen Jesus' glory. But when we are in our heavenly home, we will see his glory like never before. Come, Lord Jesus!

Heavenly Father, thank you for sending your Son, Jesus, as your Word of love to me. Through him you show me undeserved love and the truth of your love for me. Guide me through this Advent season as I seek to grow closer to you through the Word, who is full of grace and truth.

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The Savior Will Be the Branch From Jesse's Line

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. (Isaiah 11:1)

The summer after my freshman year at MLC, I worked for a landscaping company, performing tasks like trimming, mowing, spreading mulch, and hauling stone. Of all the tough, sometimes tedious tasks I performed that summer, I'll never forget one particular day's labor. My boss led me to the backyard of a customer's house, handed me an axe, and directed me to chop out a large stump that was sitting in the middle of the yard. I spent most of that day hacking away at the stump, slivers of wood flying into the air as my hands blistered and my back ached. I always wondered why my boss didn't just rent a stump grinder and save me a ton of work (maybe so I could write this devotion!), but I never wondered why the customers wanted the stump removed from their yard. It was dead, an eyesore, a nuisance that contributed nothing to their property but hazard. Stumps are removed because the most worthwhile part of a stump, the tree, has been cut away. The vitality is gone.

That's probably what most thought about the people of Israel after the powerful Assyrian and Babylonian empires had left God's people not much more than a lifeless stump. Their vitality was gone. Their leaders were dead or carried off into exile, their cities destroyed, the best parts of King David's powerful dynasty cut down.

As the prophet Isaiah proclaimed to the people of Judah, the axe was coming. They were being cut down because they'd fallen away from God. Enemy armies would carry them off as a wake-up call to turn them from their wickedness and unbelief, to rouse them from their spiritual slumber.

Yet God wouldn't leave them lifeless and hopeless. Isaiah also relayed God's promise here that from this lifeless stump would come the one who would give eternal life! From his people who'd been carried off into exile would return a remnant who would continue the line of the Savior that had been promised through Adam, Abraham, Jacob, Jesse, and David.

December 7

From Jesse had risen a shoot, a shepherd from Bethlehem named David, whom no one but God expected would be a king. God blessed his people through David; however, an even greater shoot would come up from the lifeless stump of Jesse. In Jesus, an unassuming baby born in a stable in Bethlehem, God was going to bring the greatest blessing for his people. From that root would rise up a branch, a branch that would one day die on a tree to forgive the sins of God's rebellious people. This stump was not dead, as much as it may have looked like it. A shoot would rise, that they might have life. That we might have life.

Dearest Lord, like the people of Judah, our sins should certainly have left us cut off from you, hopeless and despairing. Yet as you promised, from the stump of Jesse would come a Savior who would free us from our sins and unite us with you. We praise you for the shoot of Jesse, our Savior and our King. Amen.

Rev. Troy Schreiner (MLC '10, WLS '14) serves at Mount Olive-Appleton, Wisconsin.



Gabriel Explains That the Savior Will Be a King

"The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." (Luke 1:32b-33)

One of my favorite pieces of poetry is "Ozymandias" by Percy Bysshe Shelley. The poem describes a barren desert with nothing but miles of sand. The only thing to interrupt that landscape was the ruins of an old statue of a once mighty king. On the pedestal of that formerly towering statue read the inscription, "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!" Certainly the powerful ruler Ozymandias assumed that because of his great power, his amazing accomplishments and mighty kingdom would last until the end of time. However, like every kingdom throughout the course of history, one-time glory and power usually end up broken down into ruins, covered over by the sands of time until they are only a distant memory. No kingdom lasts forever.

Except for one. As the angel Gabriel told Mary, the child she would bear would rule over a kingdom that would never end. If you were to picture that kind of king, you'd probably think of someone living in an extravagant palace, the commander of a vast and powerful army, born into a wealthy and influential family, ruthless and willing to do anything to get ahead.

This eternal king, however, would be the complete opposite of whom we'd expect. He didn't live in a huge palace. He was born in a stable. He wasn't the commander of thousands of troops. He led 12 ordinary men who were more apt to flee than to fight. His family wasn't wealthy or influential. His mother was a virgin, and his earthly father was an everyday carpenter from a podunk town. He wasn't willing to do anything to get himself ahead. He was willing to sacrifice everything to make himself last and put everyone else first.

Jesus is an unexpected king because, as he told Pontius Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36).

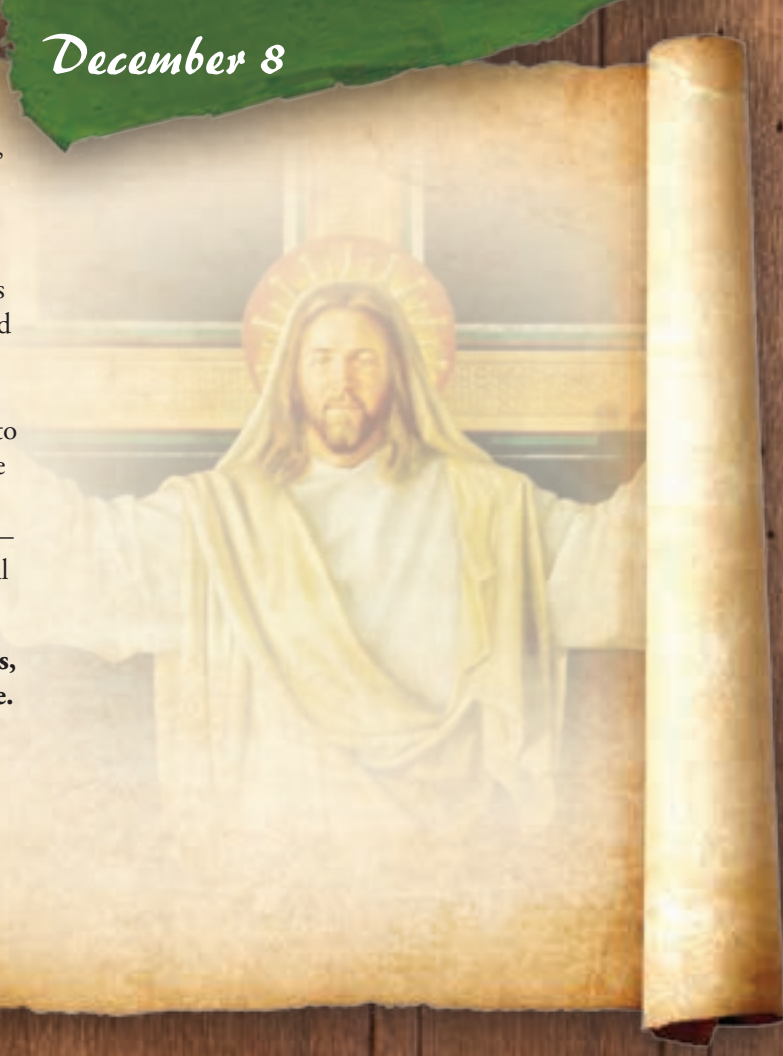
December 8

Jesus' kingdom is not a kingdom of earthly or political power. Jesus' kingdom is one of "righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17).

That makes Jesus different from every other king, but it makes Jesus the king we needed. The baby that Gabriel promised to Mary would set us free from our greatest enemies: Satan, death, and our sinful nature, which made it impossible for us to be subjects of Christ's eternal kingdom. He was born not to sit on an earthly throne, but to sit on his heavenly throne, surrounded by the praise of innumerable angels and victorious saints. He was born that—through his perfection, his substitutionary death, and his glorious resurrection—you and I might be part of that number gathered around the eternal throne of our king.

Dear Lord, we so often get distracted by other things in our lives, things that we think will give us power or comfort or confidence. During this Advent season, help us keep our eyes on Jesus, our King. It's only through his sacrifice and through faith in him that we can be a part of his eternal spiritual kingdom. Give us the strength of spirit to keep him as our one and only king throughout our lives. Amen.

Rev. Troy Schreiner (MLC '10, WLS '14) serves at Mount Olive-Appleton, Wisconsin.



The Savior Will Bring a Promised Blessing

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. (Isaiah 40:1-2)

They had gotten themselves into quite a predicament. They had become complacent, at best, toward his goodness and favor. They had taken for granted his grace-filled promises. They had forgotten about his call to love, serve, and obey him before anyone and everything else. And in spite of warning after warning after warning, they chose to remain faithless to their faithful God.

And so, through Isaiah, God's judgment was foretold to his chosen people: Destruction was coming for their disobedience; punishment for their waywardness; pain, sorrow, and loss for their faithlessness. They had brought this judgment upon themselves.

Yet God never would, and never could, forsake his chosen people. God had a solution to his people's problem. Even

before the punishment would be doled out, he used Isaiah to proclaim his faithful love that would act on their behalf.

In tender words of comfort, God speaks to his people. Their hard service of living under the sentence for their complacency toward him would come to an end. Their sins of disobedience and faithlessness would all be paid for, every one of them. Instead of receiving retribution for their sins, they would receive a double portion of relief, rest, and assurance of peace—not punishment.

But it would be, and could be, nothing that they would do. It would be nothing on their part that would bring them comfort or peace or relief. It would be nothing they could ever contrive or carry out. It would have to be God's solution.

And his solution wasn't to just forget about the punishment and let it slide. It wasn't to give them another shot to get it right the second time. His solution was to place it all upon someone else. Someone else who would

December 9

willingly do their hard service for them and finish it. Someone else who would perfectly pay for their sins. Someone else who would bring blessing upon blessing instead of punishment. It was God himself who would do it, and he uses words that proclaim that it's as good as done. Because with a faithful God, when he speaks, it must be and will be done.

And it was done, just as Isaiah had foretold it. Because that someone else did come, and he took not only the hard service, sins, and punishment of his Old Testament people upon himself, but that of an entire world of sinners like you and me.

And so it still brings believers great comfort centuries later, as our God speaks tenderly to sinners like us. Comfort, comfort for us, his people. Comfort that someone else took our place so we could have peace.

Gracious God, forgive us for our disobedience, faithlessness, and complacency toward you and your Word. We look to the perfect Savior you sent into the world who took our punishment and paid for our sin, so that we might have the comfort of being called your people. Amen.

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serves at Mt. Lebanon-Milwaukee, Wisconsin.*



God Has Come to His People

His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them."
(Luke 1:67-68)

Isaiah had foretold it, and no one should have known it better than the likes of a priest such as Zechariah. The prophet Isaiah foretold that someone would come to prepare the way for the promised Savior, the Savior who would take on the hard service, sins, and punishment of all people (Isaiah 40:3ff). The words of the angel should have been familiar to Zechariah. And yet in disbelief he challenged the angel: it just *couldn't* be right that this forerunner was coming to prepare the way for the Savior, and that he, Zechariah, would be the forerunner's father.

So silence was Zechariah's sentence for the next nine months, not one single word uttered from his mouth. And without time spent talking, he had much time to listen, and to scour the scrolls, and to read and be reminded of the wonderful promises that were foretold through men like Isaiah: That the forerunner (his soon-to-be son!) would pave the way for the One who

would come to complete the work that was direly and eternally needed.

In those nine months, Zechariah became so convinced and so overwhelmed by what was about to happen that, when his tongue was divinely loosened, the first words out of his mouth were not focused on himself, his wife, or even his newborn, Savior-forerunning son. They were focused on his faithful God and on the long-promised Savior who was now coming into the world: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them." Isaiah had foretold this One would come. Now he was about to arrive, and Zechariah was overjoyed.

And this would be no ordinary human who was coming. Since sinners cannot approach the holy God, he would have to come to them. Zechariah joyfully and rightly proclaims that God himself was coming to his own people. And he wasn't coming to show us sinners how to live and be good, but to actually be good, perfectly good, in our place. He wasn't coming to teach us how to avoid punishment, but to take our punishment upon himself.

December 10

He wasn't coming to coerce people into following him with empty promises of earthly glory. He was coming to purchase a people for himself—with his own innocent blood as the price of redemption—so they might have the grace-filled promise of heavenly, eternal glory. He was coming to be that Someone who would willingly do their hard service for them and finish it. To be that Someone who would perfectly pay for their sins. To be that Someone who would bring blessing upon blessing instead of punishment. Just as Isaiah had foretold it.

And for that, the first words out of our mouths are joyful praises as well. Because God has come to his people and has redeemed them. We are his right now and forever!

Faithful God, we thank you for keeping your promises foretold through prophets like Isaiah. We praise you that it was you yourself who came to us and redeemed us, because anything less would not have been enough to purchase our salvation. Now strengthen us to live for you, as we look forward to the final redemption that is ours through Jesus our Savior. Amen.

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The Savior Will Bring a Call to Repentance

"In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken." A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever." (Isaiah 40:3-8)

Have you set up your Christmas tree yet? Are the lights around the house twinkling for the neighborhood to see? What about your Christmas guests? Is the house cleaned and ready for their arrival? Meals planned and groceries bought?

Christmas is a wonderful time to be with family and friends around. Feeling ill-prepared?

Though the secular notion of Christmas encourages us to make preparations, the *Christian* season of Advent does so even more. We're reminded to prepare our hearts for a guest. And that guest is Jesus. But is your heart ready? Evaluate your life to find out.

When you do so, what do you notice? Are there mountains of sin in your heart, blocking the way of the Lord? Are there valleys of darkness, impossible to escape? Are the paths of your thinking crooked? Is the ground in your soul rough and impossible to travel? It becomes very clear the terrain of our hearts, minds, and souls isn't prepared for Jesus.

And although the way to get ready for Christmas guests is to buckle down and get the house cleaned, that's not going to work as we prepare for Jesus. Hard work on our part can never clean out our sins. Just like the grass of the field withers and dies, so will we inevitably wilt under our sins. But the Word of God, the message of the Savior, shows us true preparations.

The background of the entire page is a parchment scroll with a torn, irregular edge. The scroll is unrolled from the right side, where a wooden handle is visible. The parchment has a warm, yellowish-brown tone. In the top right corner, there is a blue, torn-edge header. The background image behind the parchment is a landscape of rolling hills and mountains under a clear blue sky. The hills are covered in dry, yellowish grass. The mountains in the distance are more rugged and have some snow or light-colored rock. The overall scene is peaceful and scenic.

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As the Savior comes to our hearts, he brings with him a call to repentance. Our efforts to rid our lives of sin fail every time. But Jesus has a message that relieves our spiritual exhaustion and fear. His call to repentance reminds us of all the hard work *he's* done to make our heart his home. Jesus' sacrifice cleans out all our sins. Jesus' blood is strong enough to scrub away any sinful stain. His grace sweeps *every* sin out the door. The power of Christ's resurrection and gospel promise whips our hearts into order. The proclamation "He is risen" is enough to take out all the trash from our hearts. And when he says, "It is finished," he *means* it.

That flood of redemption filled the valleys, knocked down the mountains, smoothed the rugged paths, and washed out all our sins. So we learn to listen to his call to repentance. This isn't a call to frantically make up for our sins before he comes again. It's a call to listen to the eternal Word of God. It's a call to turn over every sinful stain to Jesus. It's a call to leave all the preparations to the Savior. He'll never get exhausted from forgiving and restoring you in his love.

Lord, my heart is filled with more sin than I can ever know. Left to myself, I would never be prepared for you. Thank you for all you've done to remove those sins and prepare my heart for your second coming. Keep me in your Word, that I hear again and again your message of repentance and salvation. Amen.

Rev. Joel Voss (MLC '08, WLS '12) serves at Faith-Lancaster and St. Paul-Platteville, Wisconsin.

A Voice in the Wilderness

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God’s salvation.”

(Luke 3:1-6)

Caesar, Pilate, Herod, Philip, and Lysanias—Gentile heathen politicians. Annas and Caiaphas—Jewish religious leaders. Two different worlds forced to live together. This wasn’t how the Jews wanted it to be. But it had been their reality for quite a while. In the meantime they waited for the Messiah. Many dreamed of him as some glorious figure, coming to rescue them from the Romans.

Imagine how startling then was the voice they heard proclaiming this Messiah. John—a strange man, in a strange place, preaching a strange message. Nobody expected this kind of messenger for the Messiah. Messengers for kings weren’t supposed to wear camel hair, live in the wild, and eat grasshoppers. But that wasn’t the point. The Lord did not want his people to focus on the messenger, but on his message. John’s voice called out from an unlikely place. But that didn’t change the truth of what he was saying. What he said came from God.

So the problem with their dreamed-up Messiah was that God never promised some national hero. Back in Isaiah 40 he prophesied this message from John. This was a message about *God’s* salvation. Those who waited for the Messiah promised in Scripture recognized this. This was a voice God had been giving them for centuries.

What do you dream about? What do you wish the Lord would do for you? Often we’re tempted to wish that Jesus would show up and make our lives as pleasant and easy as we can imagine. But that’s not how God’s voice cries out to us. He chooses to use such lowly means as words on a

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page. His voice cries out from the Bible. He chooses to speak powerful and comforting words of salvation through ordinary men and women.

Listen to those gospel messengers God puts in your life. Turn to his Word, that you would recognize the truth of their message. Humble your heart to learn from your Savior. Then *be* the voice that cries out with the truth.

This time of year, many people are dreaming about peace on earth. And they're dismayed and depressed when it doesn't come. Be the voice proclaiming the peace *Jesus* gives in his Word. You don't need to be a great messenger to do that. You just need the Word of God. Humble yourself under God's Word and hold up Jesus as the great Savior from sin that he is. Be the voice that tells others, "Jesus is greater." He's greater than your angst, greater than your fears, greater than anything that would threaten to take you away from him.

That message doesn't require a loud voice. It just requires God's Word. And you know what that Word does: "All mankind will see God's salvation."

Jesus, remind me that the greatest thing I have to look forward to is heaven, which you have won for me. Guard me from seeing you as anything less than the Savior of the world. Remain in my heart and use my lips to speak your Word, that many more come to know who you really are. Amen.

Rev. Joel Voss (MLC '08, WLS '12) serves at Faith-Lancaster and St. Paul-Platteville, Wisconsin.

The Savior Will Come With Divine Power

You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. (Isaiah 40:9-10)

Is there a place that means a lot to you? Maybe it's the restaurant where your husband proposed to you. Maybe it's the hospital where your first child was born. A place that, whenever you pass it or see it or remember it, brings a flood of emotion over you. That's the kind of reaction God has whenever he thinks of Jerusalem. When he thinks of his Holy Hill, he can't help but be moved in his heart with love and joy.

Jerusalem is the City of David, the king whom the Bible calls "a man after God's own heart" (Acts 13:22). This is the city where David brought the Ark of the Covenant and his son Solomon built a magnificent temple to house it. Zion was the mountain on which God himself dwelt among his people. This is the city from which God

governed his people, protected them, and bestowed on them his grace. In the Old Testament, Zion and Jerusalem were the physical dwelling place of our God. Beginning with the pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night as he led the Israelites out of Egypt, God ruled his people with a divine power that was evident to every Israelite. God's divine power brought peace to the City of God, even during times of unrest and war, a peace that lasted longer than any one king's reign.

Jerusalem proclaimed this good news of peace with God to all the nations surrounding it. Jerusalem was God's beacon of light in a sin-darkened world. God's mighty arm and sovereign power demonstrated that he was with his people throughout history. Here in Isaiah 40, the Lord is encouraging his people once again to proclaim that great message of hope, peace, and comfort from the mountaintops. Zion would once again be that special place in God's heart, because the Lord would victoriously return to his City on a Hill.

Normally, the Lord's divine power is something to be feared, but it is also what brings the strength of his

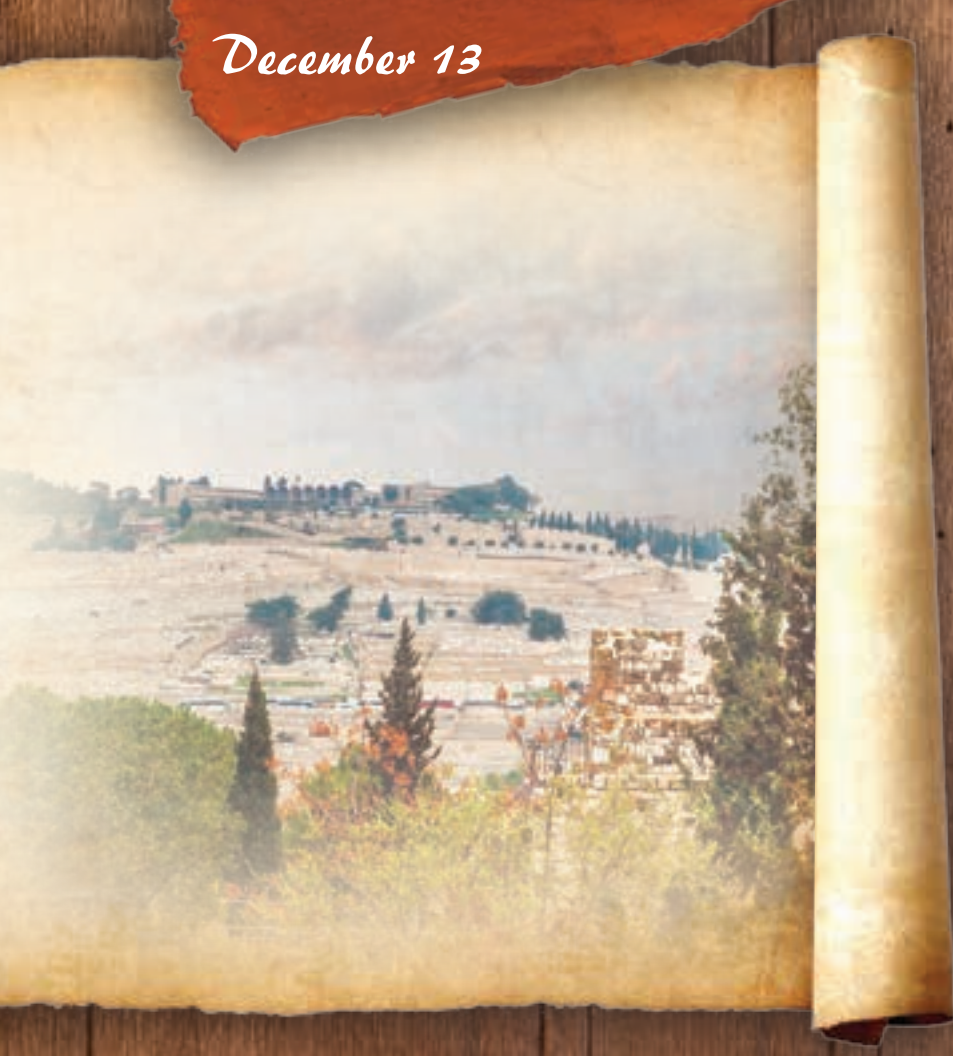
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comfort and the foundation of Jerusalem's joy. The Savior's divine power is not something for the people of God to fear, but something for them to rejoice in and proclaim loudly to the ends of the earth. The Lord's divine power to save his people is the single greatest piece of good news in the entire world!

Let us rejoice in that divine power. Let us shout that good news from the mountaintops. Lift up your voice with a shout, and do not be afraid! For the Lord is coming with his divine power to save his people! Let Zion and Jerusalem sing for joy at the coming of their Savior!

Sovereign Lord, use me to shout your gospel out loud every day, and to not be afraid. Thank you for showing me your divine power and for saving your people. As we eagerly await the celebration of your Son's birth, keep our hearts focused on your salvation and your peace. Amen.

Rev. Ben Reichel (MLC '10, WLS '14) serves a home mission in Fulshear, Texas.



A Horn of Salvation

He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. (Luke 1:69-75)

Growing up, I'm sure you were just like me and believed that your dad was the strongest person in the world. Maybe you even got into verbal sparring matches with the neighborhood kids which inevitably ended with the words, "Yeah, well, my dad could beat up your dad!" When we were younger, we thought our fathers were indestructible. They were the strongest men in the world to us.

And to a certain extent, that was true! But as we grew older, we grew stronger ourselves, and we started to realize that the man who raised us wasn't really the strongest man in the world. We still look up to him, love him, and

respect him as our father, but we have a healthier view of a man who is sinful and frail, just like we are.

Our heavenly Father has no such weaknesses or frailties. He does not age like we human beings do. He is eternal, immortal, all-powerful, and almighty. The Bible is filled from cover to cover with examples of his divine power and majesty. And yet there is no clearer example of his divine power and majesty than in his ability to keep the greatest Promise ever given. This promise started way back in the Garden of Eden as a vague, nondescript sentence: "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."

Perhaps the clearest prophecies of the Savior in the Old Testament are found in the book of Isaiah. Especially in chapter 40, Isaiah paints a picture of a conquering hero who would bring peace and comfort to God's people. Isaiah was given a special glimpse of what the Savior would look like, but all of God's prophets looked forward to the coming Messiah, the "horn of salvation" which was promised to the house of David for centuries.

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Here in Luke chapter 1, we hear Zechariah's song of praise to God because he knew that God had finally fulfilled his promise. There was no more waiting, no more expectation, no more wishing, hoping, or wondering. God had fulfilled the greatest promise he made to his people. His holy covenant, the oath he had sworn by himself to bring everlasting peace between him and a sin-filled world, was now being realized. That baby in the manger would provide the ultimate rescue for God's people. The Son of God would allow God's people to live in safety, freedom, and peace all the days of their lives, as they served God in righteousness and holiness forever. Praise be to God for his horn of salvation and for fulfilling all of his promises!

Almighty God, your grace is shown most clearly in your promises. Your mighty arm fulfilled all those promises, and now we rejoice in the peace your horn of salvation brings. You have rescued us from all our enemies. Help us live every day in righteousness and holiness as we await your Son's glorious and triumphant return. Amen.

Rev. Ben Reichel (MLC '10, WLS '14) serves a home mission in Fulshear, Texas.



The Savior Will Shepherd God's People

He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young. (Isaiah 40:11)

They are the image of vulnerability: a newborn lamb who has not yet mastered the art of walking and its ewe, tired from giving birth. If a beast were to come at this moment, death is certain for each. But the shepherd will not allow it. He nestles the newborn lamb in his arms, holding it close to his heart in the loose folds of his cloak. He shields it from the night's frost as he gently leads the rest of his sheep. He is ready to sacrifice life and limb at any threat of danger. He is willing to do all of this for *animals*. He is exactly what his flock needs. He is the image of sacrificial love.

It's the image of how much God loves you.

How is our God *not* above such imagery? No other god has ever looked like this. No other god has ever been perfectly supreme yet immersed in the mundane. No other god has ever loved a lesser being enough to sacrifice everything. No other god has ever longed to nestle and

soothe helpless sinners. It is an unbelievable image. Yet it is the exact image the Bible uses for you. Your God longs to be close to *you*. He wants to be the Shepherd for lowly sheep.

What is it that you want these holidays? One thing most people long for during the holidays is closeness. Through the entire year we look forward to this time—right now—so that we can be reunited with family and spend time with friends. But deep in the recesses of our mind is another reality: this will not last. Family will come and go. Our friends will return to their normal lives. As the years pass, loved ones will disappear from the holiday table. And what holiday gathering will be as perfect as it was in our dreams? We long for peaceful, perfect closeness, but sin will not allow it. It is the beast that is ready to pounce at any moment.

This is why he came.

What the world fails to give through its empty portrait of Christmas, God gave to us when he sent his Son into the world. When we fail to find perfectly satisfying

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closeness everywhere else in our lives, here in God's Word we finally find it: a Shepherd who lowered himself to our level, a Shepherd who wishes to comfort us against his chest, a Shepherd who sacrificed himself to the sin that attacks us.

Dear friends, find the closeness you long for this year. You need a shepherd. Jesus is *your* Shepherd. He is the Savior for his people.

O Lord, too often the closeness we long for during the holidays fails us, and we forget that you have already given us what we desire. Pull us close to Jesus, our Shepherd and Savior. In him, grant us a spirit of peace during these holidays. Amen.

Rev. Nate Walther (MLC '10, WLS '14) serves at Grace-Minot, North Dakota.



The Good Shepherd

"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd." (John 10:14-16)

They are the perfect couple. You've seen them before in the movies: madly in love, a match made in heaven, able to finish each other's thoughts. Is it a realistic relationship? Maybe. Maybe not. But it's what we all want. During the holidays, in which so many of these love stories are set, we want to know someone better than we know ourselves, and we want to love everything that we know about that person.

It's a relationship our God already has. When Jesus says, "the Father knows me and I know the Father," it's the classic understatement. The two are both one God, perfect and unmarred by sin. Their knowledge has no limits. They have known each other for an eternity. They are the perfect couple of an entirely different sort. There is no way we could ever have what they have!

Or is there?

It makes what Jesus says stunning: "I know my sheep and my sheep know me." We cannot know Jesus in the way the Father knows him, but Jesus still uses this language to describe his relationship with *us*. How could this be? We are helpless lambs with powerful enemies! We are the exact opposite of everything that is God! This is not possible. But what did we hear yesterday? We are close to God because God pulled us close to him. We know God because God chose to come to us. We have the relationship we have always wanted because Jesus *is* our Good Shepherd.

Jesus made the impossible possible. Who else could do it? We needed a shepherd strong enough to help us, yet one who understood our weaknesses. A shepherd who knew God intimately, yet also knew his sheep intimately. A shepherd who was perfect, yet could still take all our sins on his body. It is what the Advent season is all about: *God* came into the world as a man, because no one else could have such a perfect relationship with God.

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Jesus is your Good Shepherd. But he's more than just *your* shepherd! There are other sheep out there who want what you have. These sheep don't know God like you know him. What does your Good Shepherd want? To gather them also into his flock. He would not be the Good Shepherd if he did not feel this way! From that comes a humbling opportunity: You know Jesus. Do you know people who don't know Jesus? What better Christmas gift could you give them?

Dear friends, the world comes together during the holidays and craves that perfect, harmonious relationship. Only members of Christ's flock have such a relationship. Be joyful that you know the Good Shepherd! Make him known to others.

O Lord, you alone can give us the perfect relationship we crave, because you are our perfect God who became one of us. Help us to see how well you know us, and help us to know your perfect love for us. Amen.

Rev. Nate Walther (MLC '10, WLS '14) serves at Grace-Minot, North Dakota.



The Savior Will Strengthen the Weary

He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. (Isaiah 40:29-31)

“Spare us from the stress of deadlines and the frenzy of commercialism.” So says the seasonal prayer of the church for Advent in *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* (p. 123). It seems that the writers of this prayer had their finger on the pulse of modern Christians living in a hectic world. How many projects have been put off for weeks or months, but now need to be finished before we flip the calendar to January? How’s your shopping list looking? How about your party planning? It’s enough to tire you out, to make you wish the Advent and Christmas season weren’t so busy. You’ve tried your best to keep pace, but you’re weary and have fallen behind. Maybe you’ve attempted to run ahead, only to find it brings frustration and fainting.

Did you catch what was noticeably absent from the previous statements about the Advent and Christmas season? How about the entire purpose for Advent—to prepare for Christ’s coming? And the entire reason for Christmas—to rejoice that Christ comes to save? Now it’s becoming clear why we’d ever pray, “spare us from the stress of deadlines and the frenzy of commercialism.” The tendency in my human heart is to look at my time as exclusively my own: *I need those precious moments to finish up commitments at work, school, and home! Frankly, I’m too busy to prepare my heart for Jesus’ coming—whatever that means.* If I look to myself for needed strength to keep up in life and Advent preparation, I’m going to falter, faint, and fail.

Look again at what Isaiah says about the Savior: “He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.” The best part about this promise of the Savior? He’s not talking about helping you keep up with a hectic pace of life—he’s promising spiritual strength and power as you live in a world that tempts you to crowd out your Savior with anything and everything else. He promises that though you might feel like you’re weary, weak, and

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faint, when your hope is in the Lord, you'll soar like an eagle upheld by his perfect promises. He'll give you strength to run the race marked out before you and not grow weary. He'll call you by his Spirit to rely on his perfect power for you, which he gives fully in his Son, Jesus Christ, and the forgiveness he won for you.

This Advent, as you prepare your heart for Christ's coming, don't get caught up in the stress and frenzy. Instead, rejoice in your Savior's saving strength and pray, "Prepare a bed, soft, undefiled, within my heart made clean and new—a quiet chamber kept for you."

Lord God, heavenly Father, in your Son you give strength to the weary, and you increase the power of the weak by giving your perfect strength. Renew our hearts as we watch and wait for Christ's coming. Drive sin, doubt, and despair far from us, and fill us instead with peace, joy, and the sure hope of our salvation. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Rev. Matt Scharf (MLC '09, WLS '13) serves at Hope-Manhattan, Kansas.



Come to Me, You Who Are Weary

"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. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."
(Matthew 11:28-30)

"Come to me." Your Savior's invitation is so simple, yet infinitely profound. Wrapped up in that simple imperative is the promise that in Christ we will surely find rest. We will find a place for unshouldering the burdens that weigh us down.

What burdens you? Stress, worry, a schedule that won't quit? At a time of year when a thousand different commitments pull us in a thousand different directions, sometimes we don't mind the stress, the worry, and the schedule. Because those things keep our minds off of what really burdens us—something we can't shake, no matter how hard we try to distract ourselves. At the end of every day, it's there, hiding in the dark corners of our heart where no one else can see, sometimes spilling out in anger at those around us, sometimes seeking to seduce our

thoughts away from God. What is it that really burdens us? Sin—and the guilt that goes along with it.

Guilt is truly a heavy burden to bear. Advent preparation calls us to examine our hearts and prepare for the coming of Christ, but when we do, we see in stunning clarity our deplorable condition. We see the glory of the coming Lord and how far short we've fallen. We hear his demands, we review his standards, and we know we need to be rid of this burden. What can we do? Unfortunately, that's too often the first question we ask. Then inevitably we'll come up with human solutions—I'll try harder, I'll show how sorry I really am, I'll promise never to do that again. But at the end of the day, our man-made solutions are like trying to put a Band-Aid on cancer. It's never going to work.

Listen again to the simple invitation of your Savior: *"Come to me."* Advent preparation doesn't focus on what I can do, but on what Christ has done for me. Consider what your Jesus promises: a place for removing burdens and rest for your soul. Jesus promises rest—true rest—

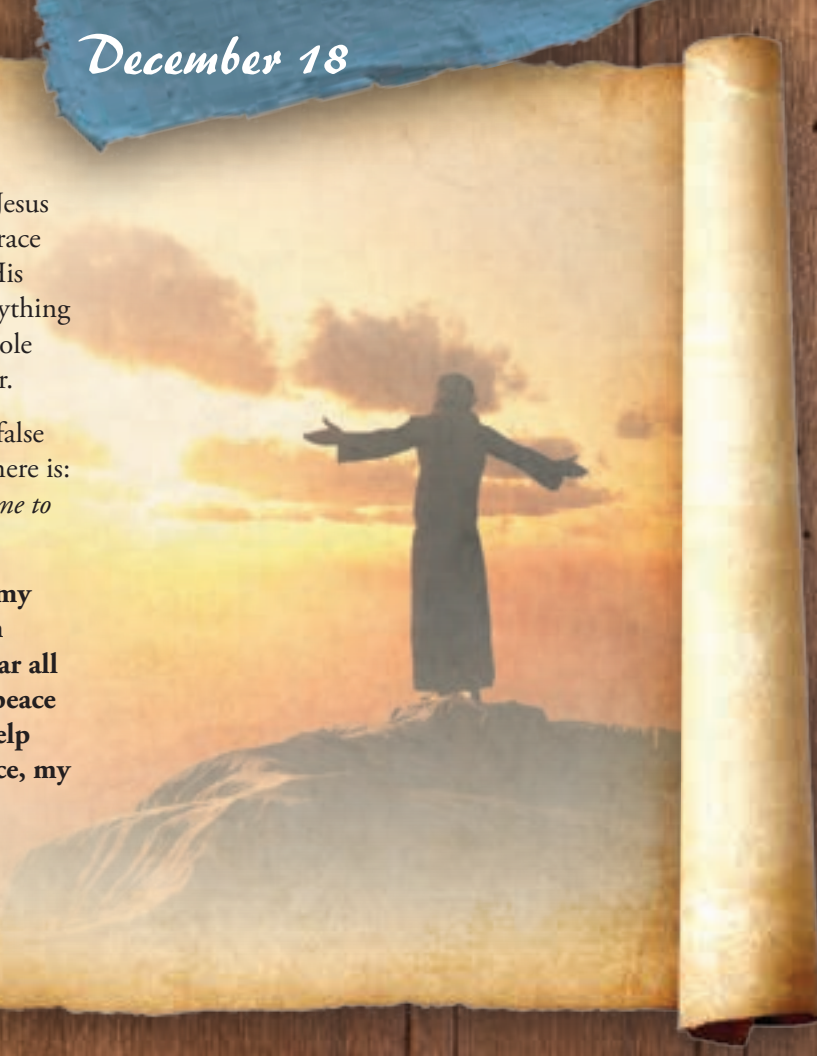
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because he's taken your burden of sin and shame upon himself. Jesus gives you true rest with his forgiveness for your every sin. And grace upon grace, what does he leave in place of your burden of sin? His own yoke of Christian life in a world gone wrong, and this is anything but burdensome. It is light because of who's by your side the whole way—Jesus. In his grace, Jesus keeps you right by his side forever.

This is what Advent preparation is all about—turning from my false sense of security and comfort, and fleeing to the only true rest there is: Christ. By the Holy Spirit's power, hear your Savior's voice: *"Come to me . . . and I will give you rest."*

Lord God, heavenly Father, I confess that I am burdened by my many sins, and weary from trying to carry them and fix them myself. Thank you for sending your Son into the world to bear all my sins and win for me true and eternal rest. Give my heart peace and rest as I anticipate the celebration of your Son's birth. Help me see in the manger of Bethlehem your gift to me—my peace, my forgiveness, my rest. Through Jesus Christ my Lord. Amen.

Rev. Matt Scharf (MLC '09, WLS '13) serves at Hope-Manhattan, Kansas.



The Savior Will Establish Justice

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his teaching the islands will put their hope.” (Isaiah 42:1-4)

“What we really need is a leader we can believe in. Someone who will serve honestly and do what is right. Someone who has a heart for the underprivileged and won’t just trample on them. We need a leader who is firm in convictions and won’t waiver or flip-flop. We need a leader who gives us hope.”

You might imagine someone saying these words just a few short months ago at a political rally. It sounds like an ideal that many would have, yet very few would expect to actually become a reality. Does such a leader even exist? Has such a leader ever existed? Do *any* leaders have the ability to fully deliver what they promise and give the people what they need?

The Lord was promising such a leader through his prophet Isaiah because God knew what his people needed. People who had wandered after idols with no power to meet their needs needed one who would lead them back to the loving Lord. People who had been bruised and broken needed to be gently restored. People who had been wronged—and had done wrong—needed one who would establish justice. People needed one they could believe in and put their hope in.

God still knows what his people need. God knows what all nations need. God has the power and wisdom to provide it. What do you need that only your Savior can provide? In a world with different voices screaming at you and pulling you in all different directions, do you need a quiet, steady voice to speak words of truth and comfort? That need is met in God’s chosen Servant. When you find your soul bruised and almost broken, do you need a gentle touch to bind it up? That need is met in the Messiah. When your faith is flickering, do you need it fanned back into flames? That need is met in your Savior who pours out the Spirit in abundance.

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God grants all your needs through the Savior who has established justice among all nations. It's a different kind of justice, though. He doesn't rule as other kings have ruled. He doesn't rule by force. He doesn't establish justice in the world by enforcing the law. He rules by grace. He establishes justice by fulfilling the law and declaring sinners righteous. He does not falter, but does what he promises. He is the One in whom we believe. He is the One in whom all nations can put their hope. He is the One Isaiah had foretold.

It was for such a leader that God's people long ago waited and waited and waited.

Lord, grant me the peace of your forgiveness and patience as I wait for you to come again. Amen.

Rev. Justin Gran (MLC '10, WLS '14) serves at Emmanuel-Tempe, Arizona.



Behold, My Servant

Aware of this, Jesus withdrew from that place. A large crowd followed him, and he healed all who were ill. He warned them not to tell others about him. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he has brought justice through to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope." (Matthew 12:15-21)

The wait was finally over. The long-expected Servant of the Lord had finally arrived! After centuries of anticipation, you'd expect the words "Behold, my Servant!" to be heralded throughout the world on the very first Christmas. So why is it that the Savior of all was proclaimed to but a few?

The great news of the promised Servant to be born was so important that it was announced by an angel, but only to a few. The Angel Gabriel announced only to Mary that the Savior of the nations would be born to her. An angel

of the Lord came to Joseph in a dream to assure him that what was conceived in Mary was from the Holy Spirit.

When Jesus was finally born, God again sent an angel to announce the Messiah's birth, and he sent an entire company of angels to praise the Prince of Peace. How far did this praise and proclamation reach? Not to the ends of the earth, but only to a few unsuspecting shepherds in a nearby field.

Once Jesus had begun his ministry, the news about him spread. Some wanted to kill him. Some wanted to crown him as a king of this world. Others wanted only what he could offer. A large crowd came to him and he healed all their sick, but, very strangely, he told them not to tell. Why would the coming of such a king be kept so quiet?

In Christ, we see a king like none other. He's the King who stooped down to be a servant. He very humbly entered the world he created with only a few there to celebrate. He proved he was the Messiah and King of Creation by his miracles, but he didn't want them to be publicized. That's because he came to set up his kingdom not in this world, but in your heart.

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There are so many distractions and worries trying to set up a throne in your heart this time of year. Perhaps there are feelings of regret and remorse that leave your heart feeling bruised or empty, but behold, your Savior! He comes to troubled and guilty hearts like yours and proclaims a most surprising justice: "Take heart, your sins are forgiven!" The One who healed many of their illnesses binds up your bruised heart for eternity with the healing words of his gospel.

When Jesus comes to you in his Word to heal and restore you, he no longer says to keep quiet. He has a new command: "Go and preach the good news to all creation." This December, be a herald of the Christmas gospel, proclaiming to all bruised hearts, "Behold my Savior—and yours too!"

Lord, free me from all that may distract me from your love, and bind up my bruised and broken heart with the soothing words of your gospel. Amen.

Rev. Justin Gran (MLC '10, WLS '14) serves at Emmanuel-Tempe, Arizona.



The Savior Will Serve as a Light for the Gentiles

"I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness." (Isaiah 42:6-7)

Seasons change according to a certain beautiful rhythm. Like other years, this year again we see lowering temperatures and a simpler palette of colors in the scenery around us. The imagery of winter can be uniquely stunning. Winter can also be challenging. With all the ways people fight the harsher elements of winter, one aspect of wintertime remains statistically the greatest struggle for people—greater than all the cold and snow. It is the simple lack of *light*. A commodity normally so dependable and available suddenly becomes painfully rare.

The absence of that precious commodity does things to people. In many, it draws out horrible feelings, feelings of loneliness, of helplessness. These responses to physical

darkness tell a spiritual truth. The darkness of our sin is as stark as midnight and as hopeless as being lost without a light. The cloud of our personal mistakes, weaknesses, and failures blurs our vision and darkens our world. This darkness inevitably alters how we see ourselves and how we view our relationship to our God. How could he love us after all we have done? Our own attempts to light a torch and illuminate our way lead only to a greater sense of helplessness. To escape this darkness is going to take a miracle!

God entered history to deliver that miracle. He appointed his Son to address our personal darkness. The prophet Isaiah describes the divine mission briefing as God speaks to our Savior: "I have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles." Christ's mission is clear: to expel darkness with the brilliant light of God's own righteousness and love. As our God shows us Christ's mission, he explains just how the Messiah was able to fulfill it. Empowered and encouraged

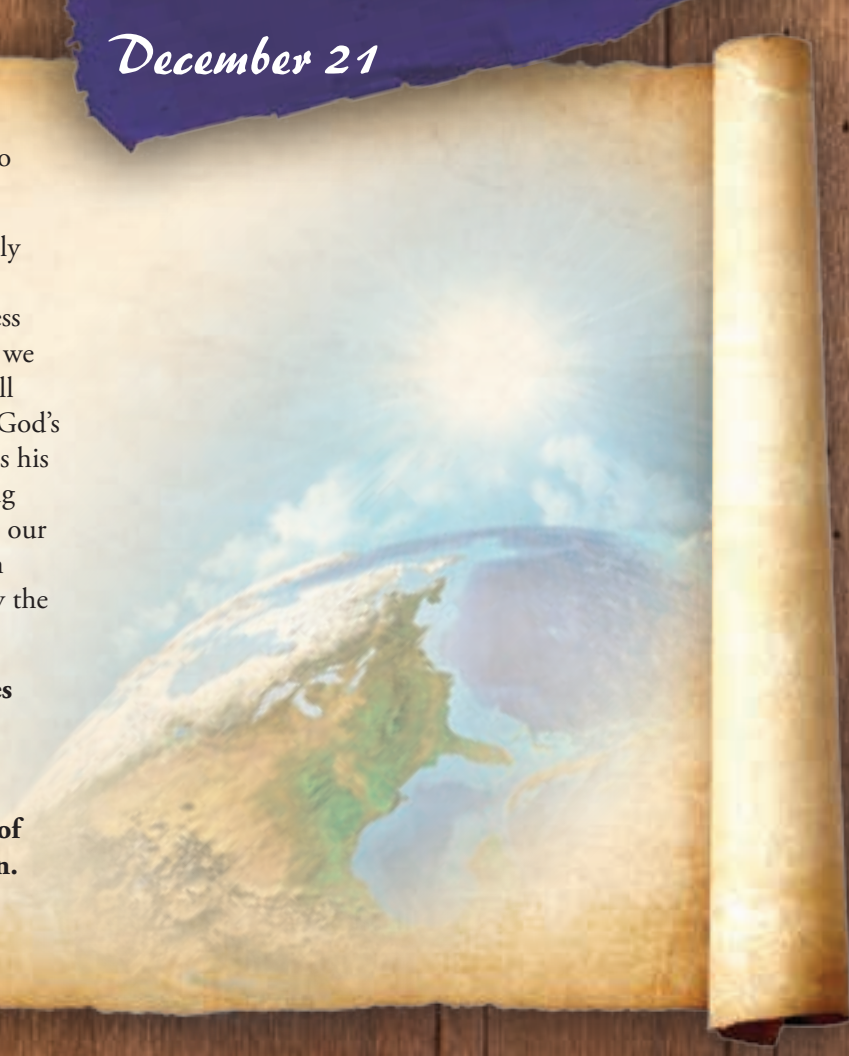
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by the Father and his guiding hand, the Father calls the Son to shine with righteousness to conquer our darkness.

Where we faced mistakes and shortcomings, Jesus miraculously entered our world and led the righteous life to overcome sin's darkness. He led a life full of light, the life that won forgiveness for the sin of all people. And now that light is ours. In Christ we prisoners have become free, we blind have gained sight, and all those suffocating in spiritual darkness are offered the light of God's love. This Christmas season we celebrate our God who gave us his Son, a gift more beautiful and profound than daylight piercing the darkest night. The incredible change from dark to light in our own lives leaves us awestruck and joyful. We serve our God in every season, no matter how dark things may seem, guided by the brilliant light of our Savior.

Dear Savior, Light of the World, your righteousness rescues us from the darkness of sin and death. Give us glad hearts that honor you continually for this great gift. As you were empowered and encouraged by the Father to fulfill your mission, so empower and encourage us to live in the light of your Word and will. We pray this in your holy name. Amen.

Rev. Isaac Cherney (MLC '11, WLS '16) serves at Redeemer-Yakima, Washington.



Jesus Is the Light of the World

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "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)

When is the last time you played Follow the Leader? The question comes off as insulting. Follow the Leader is a game for little children! A game like that can only be challenging or fun when you are working on your early motor skills, the argument goes. Forcing adults to play Follow the Leader would be painfully juvenile and silly.

For adults who feel this way, the simple question follows: "Is it insulting to ask someone to follow Jesus as their leader?" For many walking around in the world today, the logic persists: "Follow Jesus? Don't insult my intelligence! I'm doing fine on my own. To rely on somebody else would be juvenile and silly." People all around us assume that their spiritual motor skills are too developed to be insulted with something as childish as relying on a Savior from their sins like Jesus.

But as the prophet Isaiah explained, a spiritual solution to sin that relies on our own human intelligence, wisdom, or

conventions leads to only one thing: complete darkness. Someone relying on himself for spiritual light will find himself without life or hope. Sin renders us immobile and blind. Who can save us from this helpless state? How can we be rescued?

Jesus answers our every need: "I am the light of the world." Our Savior God came to earth in human flesh to proclaim real, lasting life in him. The truth of salvation coming from our God blasts out with radiant and piercing light to answer in abundance the problems of guilty consciences and weakness. God's light answers the problem of worldwide sin.

There is no patch of Earth where the sacrifice of Jesus and the light he brings to expel sin and darkness do not apply. There's no one too young or too old to hear that Jesus' powerful love applies to them and their weakness. There's no one too rich or too poor to be freed from the imprisonment of their sin-guilt through Christ the Savior.

Follow the Leader is a game that can only be played when the participants recognize they need a leader. Similarly,

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living for our God—following his commandments and will—is only done because Christ leads where we never could lead ourselves. He saves us and gives us light and purpose. Jesus' promise to give us the “light of life” has come true as he works saving faith in our hearts and calls us to the holy task of spreading that light to others living in darkness. This Advent season we thank our God for coming into our world of darkness to rescue us and bring us into the light of his love.

God of light, life, and truth, illuminate our walk with you by your powerful Word. May your joyful message of peace and light be ever on our hearts and lips, that others may find the light of your love and praise your name eternally. Bless us and keep us in the light of life by your grace. Amen.

Rev. Isaac Cherney (MLC '11, WLS '16) serves at Redeemer-Yakima, Washington.



The Savior Will Speak God's Word

Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations: Before I was born the LORD called me; from my mother's womb he has spoken my name. He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver. He said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor." (Isaiah 49:1-3)

How do you make a big announcement? If you have news you want to share with a lot of people, perhaps you turn to social media. Facebook can be a great tool to reach lots of family and friends. Or if your message is fewer than 140 characters, you can just use Twitter. Maybe you can get your message across with a picture, using Instagram or Snapchat. With these websites and apps, your message can reach hundreds, thousands, maybe even millions of people.

Our Lord had a great message to announce. But he didn't want this announcement to reach just a few hundred, thousand, or even a million people. This was an announcement for the entire world to hear. Something big was coming. Life would forever change.

The lives of the Israelites at Isaiah's time were already changing. The northern kingdom of Israel disappeared during Isaiah's ministry. And while Judah enjoyed prosperity at the start of Isaiah's ministry, that quickly went away. Soon the southern kingdom of Judah was under threat from countries much more powerful.

Isaiah urged the people to turn to the Lord for comfort and deliverance, but many wouldn't listen. Instead, they wanted a political savior, someone who could rescue them from the troubles at hand. They couldn't see that they were under attack by a much more powerful enemy than Egypt or Assyria. Their spiritual apathy created a crater in their hearts.

What is causing you stress and turmoil this Advent season? You might not be facing annihilation from an invading army, but that doesn't mean you aren't going through a difficult time. As you see families getting together to celebrate Christmas, maybe you are reminded of the dysfunction of your own family. Television commercials blast the latest and greatest must-have Christmas gifts, but you were on the wrong side of some

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budget cuts in your company this year, and you wonder how you're going to pay the heating bill—let alone afford Christmas gifts.

Listen to the words of Isaiah. Hear the decree that our God wants all of us to heed. There is a Savior, the Servant of the Lord. He speaks the Word of God, and those are words of comfort and hope. That Word is a powerful weapon, more powerful than the enemies of Israel's time and more powerful than the stress or turmoil you are facing this season.

Although it's a busy time of year, make time to simply listen to your Savior. From the beginning, our God had a plan to reveal the Savior to us, and it is through the Word that God makes Jesus known to us. Hear the message of our living King!

Lord God, thank you for revealing our Savior Jesus to us through your Word. Forgive us when we let this busy time of year take our focus off of you. Help us to put away all the distractions and to just sit and listen to what you have done for us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Rev. David Starr (MLC '10, WLS '14) serves Martin Luther College as an admissions counselor.



The Words of Christ Are Like a Sword

In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. . . . "To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. . . . Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth." (Revelation 1:16; 2:12,16)

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Perhaps you used these words on the playground or on the street when you were growing up. Maybe you've even taught them to your children. Name-calling is nothing new for children. So parents have tried to minimize the hurt of those words and names with this trite little poem. But words are powerful. They do have the ability to hurt and tear down. But words can also build and comfort and bring hope. Your God knows that words can be a double-edged sword, especially *his* Word wielded by his Son.

When you look at the work of the Savior, you see him using his double-edged sword throughout his ministry.

One side of that sharp sword is the law. Jesus uses that side of the sword many times. People first need to know they are sinful and in need of a Savior before the other side of the sword can be effective.

The other side of that sharp sword is the gospel. Jesus uses this at just the right time and circumstance throughout his ministry. Even in his last moments, Jesus announces forgiveness to the repentant criminal hanging on the cross next to his. Isaiah had foretold the mighty weapon that the Savior would wield. You see Jesus using that weapon perfectly.

And Jesus uses law and gospel in your life as well. When you go to church, you hear your pastor use both sides of the sword in his sermon. You hear the condemning law and the liberating gospel in the liturgy, hymns, prayers, and lessons. That double-edged sword is just as effective now as it was in Jesus' ministry.

Which side of that sword do you need? Maybe you need a reminder that just because our society says something is normal, that doesn't mean God has changed his mind

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about what's right and wrong. Remember that no matter how good you strive to be (as little kids try to be good to get more presents from Santa Claus), God demands perfection—something no one can attain.

During Advent you are reminded to prepare your heart for the coming of the Savior. Let God's law do its work. Let it pierce your heart because after the law has penetrated your heart, God fills that hole with the sweet gospel. Jesus takes the sword and separates your sins from you. You are now holy and blameless. God remembers your sins no more. There is no end of his bountiful grace for you. That is the greatest Christmas gift of all time. With that double-edged sword, Jesus brings peace to the earth.

Lord God, thank you for showing me the sin in my life. Use the power of your Word to cut that sin from my life and replace it with your grace and forgiveness. Help prepare my heart for Jesus' second coming. Fill my heart with the love of Jesus and the peace of his forgiveness. Amen.

Rev. David Starr (MLC '10, WLS '14) serves Martin Luther College as an admissions counselor.



These Words Are Fulfilled in Your Hearing

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)

And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the

synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:17-21)

It seems like a strange place to celebrate Christmas. We see no manger bed nor an infant swaddled. We see a man with a scroll, reading to hometown acquaintances. On this day when the Christian church celebrates the incarnation of our Lord, come with me to visit a different place than Bethlehem. It is a place where Jesus clearly reveals the fulfillment of an amazing prophecy. Jesus reveals himself not only as the Gift from God, but also the Giver sent by God to bring to you and me precious possessions that never fail to bring our souls joy and excitement.

For a few moments come with me to the synagogue in Nazareth, the boyhood home of the great "I Am." In earthly time, roughly three decades have passed since the angel choir trumpeted the birth of the Messiah. The babe

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is now a man. Silent are the Scriptures about most of those intervening years. Apart from a Passover trip to Jerusalem when he was 12, we know little about the boyhood of Jesus other than *he was obedient to them . . . and grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men*. Imagine living in Nazareth, watching a perfect child who never whined. The child grew into a perfect teen who never displayed attitude. The teen grew into a perfect man, always humble, always helpful, loving in speech and selfless in living. Who from Nazareth wouldn't remember him?

You find Jesus at the synagogue on the Sabbath, as was his custom. Standing to read, he is given the scroll of Isaiah. Intentionally, he turns to a specific text, the verses you read above. The Incarnate Word reads those living words aloud to assembled villagers who have known him as Joseph's son. The sermon he gives is terse and true. *Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing*. Jesus clearly identifies himself as the Messiah long prophesied. As such he is the Gift from God and the Giver sent by God.

Jesus clearly identifies himself as the Giver anointed by the Spirit of the Sovereign LORD to bring to unworthy sinners the gifts that usher us to glory.

How the soul crushed by the guilt of betrayal rejoices to hear the "good news" that the Messiah preaches: *Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven*. How the heart broken by self-inflicted lies yearns to be bound up in the balm of the Great Physician. And to people imprisoned by a sinful nature, there is freedom and release.

Now, in the dazzling radiance of grace, we see in the Christ Child the LORD's favor: Christ sent as the Gift of God, our Substitute. His perfect life lived for me and for you. And God says, *Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes*. His perfect death and powerful resurrection is for you and for me. *He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification*. We have comfort even in our grief and mourning. *I have come that you may have life and have it to the full*.

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These Words Are Fulfilled in Your Hearing

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All these gifts Jesus the Gift carries in his arms of infinite love. Jesus places these eternal gifts of grace into our souls this Christmas. He looks into our eyes and into our hearts and smiles. Though he sees the shameful in our minds and hears the hurtful in our thoughts, still in grace he promises, *I will remember their sins no more.*

The townsfolk of Nazareth sadly turned their back on him that day. Now in Word and Sacrament he comes to us. Pray with me this Christmas and always:

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serves Martin Luther College as president.*

Come, Jesus, holy Child to me.
Close tight my heart to all but Thee.

And with Thy Holy Spirit's grace,
Make me, dear Lord, Thy dwelling place.

And leave me not, Thou heav'nly Guest,
But in Thy favor let me rest;

With Thee alone will always be
All joy and blessedness for me.

With joy and love I wait for Thee
To come with Thy good gifts to me.

Stay close to me all through my days;
Then let me sing in heav'n Thy praise.
Amen.

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Prepare
the
way
for the
Lord





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